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Case study: France

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Reporting on gender gap trends in French education produces an intrinsically paradoxical picture of the situation today: an "over-representation" of girls in full-time education (Terrail, 1995, p.586) combined with the reproduction of gender inequalities.

On one side, girls at every level of education are repeating their year less frequently than boys. Assessments at primary and secondary levels¹ prove them to be faster learners. Larger numbers are leaving school with a baccalaureate and going on to university. At first glance, the tables have turned gender inequality terms.

At the same time, however, girls are still outnumbered in general baccalaureate science subjects. Their access to the cream of the courses in higher education remains an exception to the rule. Those in vocational education are confined to training for work in the fields of aesthetics, health, commerce and tourism. The course and career guidance they receive, no matter how well they perform, continues to reflect and perpetuate traditional gender divisions of labour.

This situation is neither exclusive to France nor new. The contrast is just as great in a good many other OECD countries (OECD, 2001); and it was back in the early 1990s that two books brought the turnaround in France to light and outlined its limits (Duru-Bellat, 1990; Baudelot and Estabiet, 1992). A decade later, in place of the sense of surprise and euphoria felt in the title *Allez Les Filles !* (go for it girls), there is concern on two main fronts.

In the January 2003, *Le Monde de l'Education*, in a survey provocatively headlined "Co-education: save the boys", drew attention to the scale and ramifications of their substandard school performance. Meanwhile, the French education ministry, as part of a wider campaign launched in 2000, is striving to encourage more girls to pursue a scientific calling. The aim of the campaign is to promote equal opportunities, and its overarching slogan is "from co-education to equality". Whichever form of inequality is in the spotlight, the thinking always focuses on the principle governing gender relations in schools: co-education.

When the above-mentioned books were published, they came as something of a revelation. Yet girls had begun catching up with and then overtaking the boys well before the early 1990s. To describe and explain that "silent" yet unfinished revolution (Estabiet, 1998), one must return to the point when the tables turned, which means working through a long period stretching from the post-war years through to the present day. Once the findings are established and incorporated into a network of causal links, attention will turn to the controversial issue of co-education.

1. A silent yet unfinished revolution

Girls began closing the gap on boys from very early on in the history of mixed schooling. Neither premeditated nor planned, the trend has continued through to the present day, growing in strength yet without going so far as to curb the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, as reflected in the subjects that boys and girls choose to study.

1.1 Catching up early

As early as the early 1880s, the renowned Jules Ferry laws established free, secular and compulsory schooling for every French child up to the age of twelve. Article one of the seminal law of 28 March 1882, however, perpetuated the confining of girls to specific subjects. The decree of 25 March 1924 merged the curricula yet stopped short of introducing mixed classes. Its enactment marks the point at which meaningful comparisons can begin to be made between boys' and girls' school results.

Broadly speaking, the catching up process has concurred with a context of the school leaving age being raised and education being democratized. During the twentieth century, the republican State repeatedly put back the point at which pupils were streamed and, of course, left the education system. There have been a number of key decisions: the raising of the compulsory school leaving age to 14 in 1936 and then 16 in 1959; the introduction, also in 1959, of generalized access to secondary education, and the subsequent deferment of vocational streaming from second to fourth year; finally, in the early 1980s, **the extension of the common curriculum to fifth year, which became the stage at which streaming occurred, thereby opening²** the doors of the *lycées* to increasing numbers of pupils.

¹ Note to editor. Cleared with Baudino

² ?????

This quick look at the reforms that shaped the education system brings out a number of pivotal years. Comparing the number of boys and girls in full-time education at those various points will serve to determine when the inequality tables turned.

The consensus view in educational gender gap surveys is that the turnaround came in the 1960s, and that the girls took a decisive lead in the 1970s. In generational terms, it was the girls born immediately after the Second World War that opened up the gap. Their predecessors, however, were already making headway in the first four years of secondary school in the 1940s. It is still surprising to see how quickly they caught up.

The generations of girls entering secondary school before the Berthoin reform had generalized access to secondary education, i.e. those born between 1929 and 1938, were the first to outnumber their male contemporaries. Secondary school access rates stood at 24.7 per cent of girls versus 23.4 per cent of boys.³ Since children normally started secondary school at the age of 11, the first signs of the girls catching up emerged in the 1940s. The gap, far from a statistical glitch, would further widen by up to five percentage points for the generations born between 1954 and 1958. The same trend subsequently emerged at fourth and then fifth-year levels. The gender balance in regard to access to those years levelled out between 1950 and 1960. In both cases, the gap was at its widest – close to 15 percentage points – for the generations born between 1959 and 1963, i.e. in the 1970s.

The advantage that the girls had gained over the boys in primary then in secondary education was crystallized, of course, in their results in the flagship baccalaureate examination. In 1969, the number of girls passing the baccalaureate exceeded that of boys. The sociologist Catherine Marry sees this as the surmounting of a “highly symbolic barrier in the French schools system” (Marry, 2001, p.32). It has plainly borne fruit in higher education, with the proportion of women university students having risen from 25 per cent in 1930 to 55.2 per cent in 2001.

The fact that the girls have taken the lead is an indication not only of their success at school, but also of their having been oriented primarily towards general education streams or, to put it another way, away from vocational streams. Yet the latter, in spite of their lower social status, offer a wealth of job openings that boys are finding it easier to access. Examining contemporary statistics, in addition to helping confirm the perpetuation of a gender gap – albeit compacted by the effects of democratization – also serves to reveal the other side of the success.

1.2 Turnaround in inequality and enduring stereotypes

Many indicators show the gender inequality tables to have turned. Yet the winners, the girls, are struggling to capitalize on their success.

The existence of a gap in favour of the girls, in a society with close to 100 per cent of all children enrolled in full-time education through to the age of 16, boils down to two assertions.⁴

First, girls adapt better to the demands of school than boys. They are performing slightly better in assessment tests at the start of third-year primary and first-year secondary. The gap narrows from a few percentage points in French to a few tenths of a point in mathematics, but it always remains in their favour.⁵ So fewer girls than boys are repeating their year. As early as first-year infants, 92.2 per cent of girls have not had to repeat versus 90.4 per cent of boys. The gap is at its widest – eight percentage points – in first-year secondary, narrowing to around seven points in the fourth and upper sixth years, as weaker pupils are moved into the vocational streams.

³ The source of all data on the catching up process is, unless otherwise stated, Duru-Bellat, Kieffer and Marry (2001).

⁴ Figures here come from the French ministry of education's forecasting and development department (DPD) and may be found on the ministry's website or in the publication, *Regards sur la parité* (INSEE, 2003).

⁵ 67.6 per cent of girls are passing French assessments both in third-year primary and first-year secondary; meanwhile the pass rates among boys at those levels are 63.3 and 59.9 per cent respectively. Pass rates in mathematics assessments are 69.4 per cent of girls versus 69 per cent of boys in third-year primary, and 60.6 of girls versus 59.6 per cent of boys in first-year secondary (1998 data from the ministry of education's forecasting and development department).

Second, girls are producing better results than boys. Fewer are failing. Out of the 60,000 youngsters leaving school without qualifications in 2001, only 40 per cent were girls. They are brighter, more consistent, achievers. Their pass rate at baccalaureate level, all streams considered, was 80.9 per cent in 2001 versus 76.1 per cent of boys. What is more, while the gaps may be narrower in general education subjects, the girls are ahead in terms of the grades. In science subjects, the pass rates stand at 81.9 per cent of girls versus just 77 per cent of boys; and in terms of grades, 15.3 per cent of girls are getting As or Bs compared to just 12.6 per cent of boys.

In regard to the gender balance in the science baccalaureate streams, however, only 44.2 per cent of pupils in 2000 were girls. In other words, while they are over-represented among general baccalaureate pupils (58%), the reverse is true when it comes to science subjects. Yet evidence of their ability to keep up in the science stream can be seen in the full sweep of data ranging from first assessment results at primary level to their consistent progress through a system where selection hinges on an aptitude for mathematics, and their brilliant science baccalaureate grades. Such a finding may be surprising at first, but it introduces us to the other side of the girls' success in general education. Generally speaking, they are finding it hard to turn that success into a ticket to the vocational or prime academic courses with the most promising job prospects.

Vocational education – as, indeed, the world of work for which it prepares its students – has historically revolved around the figure of the workman. It has provided many generations of boys with varied and interesting prospects. The diversification of courses and the creation of new diplomas for services sector trades have led to a gradual influx of girls. But at the start of the 2000-2001 academic year, boys still accounted for 54.4 per cent of learners at the vocational *lycées* and were still in the majority when it came to passing technical baccalaureates.

What is remarkable about this area of the education system is not so much the slight gender imbalance in overall enrolment as the strong gender divisions in the choice of courses. Girls account for 73.6 per cent of vocational *lycée* pupils training for the services sector but just 12.5 per cent specializing in primary sector-related subjects. They fill over 60 per cent of places in business and accounting and virtually all of them on secretarial and office automation courses. Boys, on the other hand, hold the industrial bastions, which, notwithstanding the rapid expansion of the services sector, continue to offer the best opportunities for entering the labour market.

In further education, where the Sections de Techniciens Supérieurs (STS) and Instituts Universitaires de Technologie (IUT) definitely do lead to better job openings than university studies, the proportion of girls is growing yet still some way short of the boys. Indeed, while the majority of students enrolled at the faculties, from undergraduate to postgraduate level, are girls, most of the baccalaureate holders going on to study at an STS or IUT are boys. Girls account for 60 to 70 per cent of students in law, the humanities, social sciences, natural and life sciences, even medicine, but just 40 per cent of those accepted for places at the IUTs. The gender gap is wider still in the more selective *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* (CPGEs), the courses leading to the most prestigious openings. Among general baccalaureate holders, 9.9 per cent of girls enter a CPGE versus 17.6 per cent of boys. Overall percentages are lower when holders of a technological baccalaureate are taken into account, but the gender ratio remains 2:1 in favour of the boys. The imbalance is confirmed at the top engineering schools where women have been growing in number for some time yet still make up less than 25 per cent of the student body.

Even more remarkable is the fact that girls have overtaken the boys in law and political science – now making up two-thirds of the student body – but account for just 25 per cent of candidates passing the École Nationale d'Administration entrance examination. Female student numbers, in other words, are lower not just in the sciences and technology but also, more generally, on all of the very best courses. The fact that girls are struggling to use their success at school to gain access to the cream of the diplomas takes the gloss off reports that marvel at their integration into the education system. Gender parity in education, i.e. equal access for boys and girls to the education system, has long since been achieved in France. But as this report shows, achieving gender equality – a wider-ranging indicator encompassing how long they stay in the system, how they perform and their comparative grades – remains an objective yet to be met.

The gender inequality revolution in education, having gone unnoticed, is described as a silent revolution. Sociologists, not to mention the education system actors, have long been too focused on tackling social inequalities to be able to notice the dominated gaining a relative advantage over the dominant in terms of gender inequalities. In the social sciences, this social change has come to light – and is being interpreted – within the framework of wider efforts to devote greater and justified attention to gender differences. Producing statistics with a gender breakdown is at once both a *sine qua non* of those efforts and evidence of their continuing progress. Such work must be done bearing in mind that in education, social inequalities are more pronounced than gender inequalities. Duru-Bellat, Kieffer and Marry (2001) show that ease of access to the baccalaureate differs according to social background far more than to gender, although the inequalities do tend to dissolve over time. Their precise comparative analysis of the inequalities produces no evidence of a double handicap: class and gender. For while social inequalities may have more markedly affected the prospects of girls born in first half of the last century, in the following generations those bearing the brunt were the boys. Beyond its factual input, that analysis also raises a number of questions. The resurgence of the secular schooling debate in France has come as a reminder that a considerable proportion of pupils in some parts of the country are of foreign origin. What influence do

cultural or ethnic roots have and how? Efforts to find a reliable answer to that question are still hampered by a lack of subject-specific statistics.⁶

Comparing studies focusing on the different types of inequality, a fruitful exercise in itself, also reveals an interesting paradox. Education policies are explicitly made out to be equality-oriented yet social inequalities continue to persist. Yet gender inequalities have narrowed and even inverted without any political planning. The relationship between public policies and social change is not the rule in the field of education. Other factors, beyond the political will, are responsible for the contrasted picture vis-à-vis the gender gaps in schools.

2 The socio-economic context pushing girls to apply themselves to their studies

Generalized access to the classroom and the raising of the school leaving age are the key factors that have enabled girls to catch up with and overtake the boys. The increase in state education, made compulsory for both sexes, has given them the framework and the means they need to prove themselves.

The republican State's action played a decisive part in the changes, but only in combination with a number of other, structural, transformations. The turnaround in gender inequalities happened in the post-war boom period, when the economy underwent structural changes of both a quantitative and a qualitative nature. The creation of jobs has been indissociable from the profound upheavals in the composition of the working population.

During the course of the twentieth century, the French working population expanded by nearly 30 per cent, i.e. an additional six million people. The share working in the primary sector has steadily declined from over 40 per cent to under five. Yet ever-increasing numbers are going to work in the services sector. Service companies currently employ more than two-thirds of the French workforce. Gauvin (1995, p.562), underscoring the proportion of women contributing to the expansion of the services sector, recalls that "women make up half of the workforce in the services sector and less than a third of those working in industry. They have filled nine-tenths of the four million extra posts created over the past twenty years. The feminization of employment has grown from 38 per cent in 1975 to 45 per cent in 1992". While the massive influx of women into the labour market has helped pave the way towards a service society, the changes in the production structures have also played a part in bringing about a lasting change in women's attitude to employment. Market needs have given them the ability to achieve their collective demand of access to economic independence. Economic needs combined with egalitarian aspirations have contributed to making women's labour outside of the domestic sphere the norm.

This social change is confirmed by the increase in the women's employment rate. While little over half of all women aged 25 to 49 years were working in 1975 (58.9 %), today, in 2002, eight in ten (79.8%) either have or are looking for a job. What is more, the number of women working and bringing up children is on the rise, confirming that being a mother no longer constitutes an obstacle to employment.⁷

These transformations, which have come into effect over a relatively long period of time, have in turn changed how girls perceive the importance and meaning of a commitment to school. With primary, secondary and even higher education no longer a privilege of the few, they have gained access to qualifications. What is more, employment opportunities in the services sector have turned those qualifications into a lucrative passport to the job market. With the support of their families, and on the back of their collective demand for economic independence, girls have applied themselves to their studies as a route to a career. For those from an agricultural or working-class background, school has provided the means to realize a legitimate desire to move up the social ladder. For those from a more privileged milieu, qualifications have ceased being a mere asset in the marriage stakes.

Terrail (1995, p.587), recalling how these changes have unfolded against a backdrop of the switchover from domestic to tertiary education, underlines the intricate relationship between the changes in the labour market, the adaptation of the

⁶ The lack of reliable statistical data has stymied all of the work appearing on the subject of immigrants and school. It is a pity that the French education ministry **has not** decided to publish the general survey produced by L.A. Vallet and J.P. Caille (1996, 2000).

⁷ The case of women with three or more children is especially interesting in that this number has long been seen as the **dividing line between whether they go out to work or not**. Yet for those living in a couple, the rate of working women with three or more children, including one aged younger than three, rose from 29.9 to 34.2 per cent between 1990 and 2002; as for those with children aged older than three, the rate soared from 47.9 to 63.4 per cent, i.e. an increase of **over** 15 percentage points in 12 years.

education system and the improving performance of girls in the classroom. In his view, “the rapid development of female education is part of the same irrepressible trend of women entering and, against all the odds, keeping their place in the employment market: a trend reflecting their determination to seize the new life-changing opportunities created by the growth in paid employment.” In current context of unemployment and instability, set against a convergence of male and female employment models, a commitment to education and training is all the more important.

Economic development and action on the part of the republican State have combined to facilitate women’s integration into the worlds of education and work. The synergy has been effective yet unorchestrated. So the temptation is great to credit both the positive and negative results of comparative analysis of boys’ and girls’ school performance to co-education, the only apparent gender-specific dimension of education policy. A look at the history of co-education, however, will serve to cut through the controversy and determine its true role.

3. Questioning co-education

Co-education, which came too late to take the credit for closing the gender gap, has proved incapable of fostering equality. Should it necessarily be scrapped, then, or would it be more reasonable to query the conditions of its implementation?

3.1 A tardy reform

Contemporary input into the co-education debate draws on the semantics of illusion. Women researchers, whether challenging its “shams” and “ambiguities” or describing the case in its favour as “false” and “deceptive”, are always using those sorts of words to underscore the misleading and ultimately disappointing nature of the reform (Baudoux and Zaidman, 1992).

Co-education is misleading. Idealized as the fruit of May 1968’s libertarian thinking, it is imagined to be the route to an egalitarian blueprint and, hence, credited with how girls have been performing in the classroom. A brief foray into the past, however, reveals that the reform was originally designed to address material rather than ideological factors and, above all, that it was introduced after the turnaround in gender inequality had occurred.

In the nineteenth century, compulsory education for all boys and girls was already making it increasingly difficult to maintain separate schools. The idea of democratizing education had been far easier to conceive than to put into practice. The growth in the enrolment rate gave rise to an increasingly acute material problem. A good number of small towns found it not just irrational but downright impossible to maintain two primary and even secondary schools. Called into question in the early 1960s, single-gender schools – primary and secondary – were gradually phased out over the rest of the decade. Every new secondary school since 1959 has been mixed. Co-education effectively came into being on the back of the school building boom of the 1970s.

Prost (2003) subtly underlines the fact that the introduction of co-education tallied with “major social and cultural changes the reality and scale of which were driven home by 1968”. That said, the co-education’s convergence with an emergent youth culture and the women’s liberation movement may make sense after the event, but at the time the reform stemmed first and foremost from material necessities. What is more, if it had to be embedded in a chronology, Prost prefers that of youth culture, as symbolized by unisex jeans, to that of women’s liberation, which was geared to asserting a specific identity. In other words, its introduction had more to do with a drive to erase differences between the genders than with a movement striving to promote a particular one. Anyway, girls were already well on the way to catching up with and even overtaking the boys by the time that co-education actually came into effect.

It would not be so bad if co-education had, in spite of its history, unquestionably played a positive role. But questions have been raised as to its capacity to foster equality.

3.2 The failures of co-education

Liliane Kandel was already flagging the potential dangers of co-education in the mid-1970s (Kandel, 1975). A proliferation of studies has since shown education, in spite of co-education, to have been drawing on and helping perpetuate gender-biased stereotypes. Beyond its shortcomings, co-education is held directly responsible for the upsurge in sexist violence in schools.

Meanwhile, a significant amount of gender bias has been noted in the interactions of actors within the school environment (pupils and teachers). Some studies have highlighted a gender-differentiated use of space and right to speak;⁸ others have

⁸ Cf. Bachelet in Baudoux and Zaidman (1992).

shown how teachers have gender-differentiated expectations of their pupils;⁹ and experience has underscored the influence of the gender variable in grading (see the pioneering research of Mireille Desplats). In every case, the egalitarian potential of co-education has been destroyed.

Teaching materials have been called into question too. A recent official report on gender portrayal in textbooks (Richert and Rignault, 1997) recalls how efforts to combat sexism in the education system, although ongoing for quite some time, have still to bear fruit. Feminist groups first drew the authorities' attention to the often discriminatory way in which women were portrayed in textbooks in the early 1970s. The Government addressed the issue by publishing, on 12 July 1982, a decree stressing the need to take "educational action to combat gender prejudice". The decree placed that requirement at the heart of the school curricula. The implementation notes urged teachers to select their teaching materials very carefully. But it all came to nothing for want of any genuine political will. Textbooks gradually came to be modernized – as a result of the awareness-raising campaigns carried out by Catherine Valabrègue's *Pour une éducation non sexiste* organization or at the sole initiative of the publishers Nathan – but the stereotypes remained. At a more general level, the two members of parliament in charge of the above report noted how women were underrepresented and reduced to the social role of mothers and wives; and thus found themselves worrying about the paucity of role models on offer to young girls.

Fraisse (1995), while asserting that streaming "underscores and even fosters the differences", recalls that the system's intermediary role, in the face of the myth of egalitarian co-education, actually acts as a brake. The figures prove it. "At every stage of streaming, there is a gender rift running between the girl-dominated tertiary, social science and literary streams on one side, and the boy-dominated science and technical streams on the other. The division in streaming is known to do nothing to ensure equal opportunities for girls and boys at the time of integration" (Vouillot, 2002, p.486). In individual cases, career decisions may confirm the path followed through school. But in the round, they confirm the perpetuation of stereotypes hinted at in the textbooks and surveys; they confirm the failures of co-education.

The line between stating the limits of and indicting co-education has been crossed. Beyond the provocative tone of its title, the *Le Monde de l'Éducation* survey presents papers that illustrate the radical nature of this theory yet also hint at its flaws.

The indictment of co-education is underpinned by the idea of a causal link between the poor performance of boys and the upsurge in sexist violence in schools. The simple explanation is that girls are increasingly being subjected to the violent backlash of boys unable to stand being beaten in the classroom. So the need to ensure that the boys catch up with the girls in order to protect the latter's physical integrity would justify a return to single-gender schooling. This intellectually stimulating idea can be examined from a number of different angles.

First, though, a few comments are in order with respect to the opening premise. While the school results of boys are causing alarm throughout the OECD countries, they are markedly poorer among those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Questioned on the subject, Nicole Mosconi, an educational sciences expert, points out that "there is little difference between the results produced by boys and girls from privileged homes, and even then it is the boys that are doing better due to the enormous pressure they are put under to choose the "right" streams. Where the gaps really open up is among boys and girls from working-class homes" (Mosconi, 2003). As for the violence, there is, once again, a statistics problem. Is it really on the increase? Are the media stories of sexist violence in the *banlieues* (French equivalent of inner-city areas) and the surveys of vocational and technical education¹⁰ exposing the scale of a hitherto ignored or a resurgent reality? A few lines from the *Le Monde de l'Éducation* survey serve to illustrate the vague and even misleading way in which the situation is presented: "Gender interactions in the playground and the *cités* alike have become fraught with tension. Evidence of that can be seen in the acts of sexual violence, be they on the increase or better detected" (Barroux, 2003, p.35). Likened to the *cités* (inner-city estates), the school playground is emerging as the setting for sexist violence about which the statistical picture, as reflected in those vague, cautiously phrased remarks, remains unclear. The initial double premise, then, is too sweeping and uncorroborated to stand as a statement of fact.¹¹

In regard to the causal link, what motivates the boys to react as they do is equally unclear. They should have begun feeling the threat over thirty years ago. Why are they only just reacting today? It cannot be because of an awareness that the gap is widening, for that awareness does not extend to a whole generation of pupils. One could well understand their anxiety if

⁹ Bachelet, *op cit.*

¹⁰ Cf. Barroux (2003).

¹¹ Nicole Belloubet-Frier and Florence Rey's report, "Violences sexuelles, violences sexistes" (2002), does not confirm the explosion of sexist violence in schools.

girls were taking over the more selective streams, and their results were benefiting them in the labour market. But girls are still having to struggle to convert their good grades into passage to the top courses and jobs. Moreover, surveys on pupil-teacher interactions continue to show teachers in mixed classes paying greater attention to the boys: “everything [at school] contrives to give prominence to the boys, to make them important” (Mosconi, 2003, p.32). So the case for the wounded male pride theory, though persuasive, has yet to be made. Why should boys want to avenge themselves when they are still, in spite of their very poor grades, commanding the attention of teachers, entering the streams leading to the best job openings and, to cap it all, occupying the key positions of power?

Acts of violence are committed against girls at some schools, but not all. The fact that co-education is being made responsible means that questions are at last being asked about the way in which the education system is organized; but it also means that one cannot take into account that system’s place within a multi-faceted social reality. Gender gaps, like sexist violence, are most pronounced in the *cités* on the outskirts of big cities. The mix of hatred and frustration in those socio-economically troubled *banlieues* is conducive to the spread of religious fundamentalism. Rap music is evidence both of the widespread unrest among youth, and the fact that symbolic and physical violence against women constitutes its main outlet. Endeavours to affirm equality and to cultivate an inquiring mind have been replaced by imposed perceptions and the law of the strongest. The fact that such a model has been imported into the classroom points to the failure of co-education. It underlines its weakness, not its culpability.

From the questioning to the indictment, every study stresses the urgent need to find solutions. The French education ministry has had a wide-ranging plan of action in place since the turn of the century. Its aim is to endow co-education with egalitarian content. The plan, with its wealth of promise, may reflect a fresh sense of awareness, but it does not guarantee results. In other words, it stresses the need for thinking on gender relations in schools yet lacks the capacity to put gender differences at the heart of education management policy.

4. From co-education to equality

There now seems to be unanimous agreement as to the veracity of Geneviève Fraisse’s assertion that “co-education is no guarantee of equality” (Fraisse, 1999). Progress from the diagnosis to the solutions, however, is still obstructed by political and cultural obstacles.

4.1 Promoting equality or avoidance tactics?

On 25 February 2000, five government departments signed up to a charter on Equal Opportunities for Girls, Boys, Women and Men in Education.¹² That document, which now serves as the authorities’ framework for action in this field, is evidence of the will to promote gender equality right the way from basic education through to graduate transition to employment.

The order of priorities at the heart of the charter, however, questionable. There are three main thrusts: improving streaming for girls and boys; incorporating thinking on the respective roles of men and women into curricula; strengthening the tools for promoting equality and training the actors. Education community-wide equal opportunities training, then, does not figure until item 3.2. How can gender-biased streaming be challenged, sexist violence prevented and equality placed at the heart of school planning if the education system’s actors remain unaware of the structuring nature of gender in interactions within the school environment?

A good many studies have underscored how many education community members are blind to gender differences. The Universalist benchmark - indifferent to differences and upheld as a safeguard against all forms of discrimination - still carries weight in the French education system. The number one priority for any action aimed at promoting equality should be to train the actors, for the main challenge ahead is to bring about a change in the system of values, especially in regard to the acceptance of differences.

On a wider scale, every institutional action plan in this field seems to avoid calling the system’s founding principles into question. The report on gender portrayal in textbooks, while recalling the inefficiency of earlier systems based on mere recommendations, explicitly abandons any interventionist measures. Imposing, grading or even approving textbooks is

¹²The original five signatories were the ministry of employment and solidarity, the department of education, research and technology, the farming and fisheries department, the **department in charge of school education**, and the **junior minister for women’s rights and vocational training**. They have since been joined by the departments of justice, culture and **transport and amenities**. The charter’s expiry date, originally set for 2003, was extended to 2006 by an amendment passed on 8 March 2002.

ruled out in the name of freedom of choice, a principle that takes precedence over combating discrimination in gender portrayals.

The *Bulletin officiel de l'éducation nationale* adopts an original approach in its special edition on co-education, using scenarios to illustrate each case under review and presenting recommendations. In regard to health education, sex education and education geared to the prevention of sexual and sexist violence, however, while the text recognizes that “different educational work [is needed] depending on the pupils’ gender”, the solution it recommends is to strengthen the gender mix at education team level. Clearly, then, co-education takes precedence over the establishment of peaceful dialogue guaranteeing that each and every stakeholder has a say.

The authorities have acknowledged the need to introduce egalitarian¹³ content into co-education. But the solutions they recommend smack of avoidance tactics. So there might be room to consider better suited and at times more radical solutions, beginning with the scrapping of co-education.

4.2 Should co-education be scrapped?

One of the key missions of school is to prepare younger generations for successful integration into society. Given that men and women interact in every area of life in a modern society, mixed schooling is quite obviously a must. One can understand people equating it with modernity and resisting attempts to call it into question. But the stakes are high enough to warrant at least the temporary removal of a taboo.

In the nineteenth century, the German economist Friedrich List was arguing for a form of temporary protectionism, i.e.¹⁴ the reestablishment of customs barriers in developing countries that would give their fledgling industries a chance to grow, sheltered from the competition of more developed countries. His thinking caused a considerable stir because it made it possible to bring together what had previously been seen as two conflicting strands of options. Protectionism here¹⁵ was not so much a matter of abandoning free trade than one of paving the way for its introduction.

Separating boys and girls in schools is as artificial as erecting frontiers between countries. Separate social lives, like autarkic economies, seem to fly in the face of the facts of complementarity. Yet even though violence in schools remains a marginal and far from widespread scourge, mixed schooling does sometimes cause problems both for girls and for boys. In efforts to tackle those value conflict-related problems, school’s strength lies not in resisting changes to its modus operandi but in being able to come up with original solutions to enable it to fulfil its overriding mission: republican integration. The value of co-education is only as great as the egalitarian virtues with which it is endowed; the assertion and learning of equality must remain at the top of the agenda.

So why not consider a sort of temporary split, with boys and girls learning basic social values in separate classes? In addition to avoiding conflict, it could lay the foundations for their potential coexistence or even for co-education of the kind envisaged by the early twentieth century idealists.

From the critique of the charter to the conjuring up of such a drastic solution, the one real sine qua non to emerge is that the underpinning values of school be worked on and affirmed. Playing on perceptions is a potentially effective way to meet that challenge.

4.3 Playing on perceptions

Recent insight into the successes achieved, against all the odds, by girls from disadvantaged families or studying in the “male” streams, has revealed the importance of perceptions of gender through role models. Ferrand, Imbert and Marry (1999), bypassing the conventional interpretative split between social determination (Baudelot and Establet, 1992) and the concept of the actor-cum-strategist (Duru-Bellat, 1990), show how girls inherit family traits.

Their book, *L'excellence scolaire: une affaire de famille* (excelling at school: a family affair), sets out to “penetrate the secrets behind the manufacturing of the most emblematic symbols of excellence in French schooling: the science pupils at the École Normale Supérieure on the Rue d’Ulm”. One of their opening premises, of course, is that mothers play an important role in the success of girls. This is not new. Other researchers have shown how a mother’s level of education has a significant bearing on their children’s success (Héran, 1994; Terrail, 1992). Being more present in their day-to-day development,

¹³ Cleared by Baudino

¹⁴ Cleared by Baudino

¹⁵ Ditto

they have a greater influence over them. The interviews with *École Normale Supérieure* pupils and their parents confirm this relationship. What is more, they provide unprecedented evidence of the transmission of whole "fields of study and employment" (p.174). For the girls, having a woman scientist in the family as a role model has proved a crucial factor of outstanding future success. Beyond fostering a positive attitude to the work - together with a degree of ambition - the *École Normale Supérieure* pupils' mothers and even grandmothers have passed on freedom from any "antinomy of women and science" (p.177).

This survey challenges preconceptions. The family has traditionally been presented as where the gender division of social roles is reproduced. School, for its part, has often been credited with a power to reform. But sometimes, as the above would seem to suggest, the family can also undo the traditional models that school continues to reproduce. If, of course, so few women opt for a career path in the sciences, they will only be able to promote the access of girls to the science streams to a very moderate degree. As well as stressing the power of role models, the survey also indicates a number of courses of action.

The *Femmes et mathématiques* association has come up with the idea of a travelling exhibition showing fifteen portraits of women mathematicians and challenging the rules of French grammar by presenting their jobs in the feminine gender: *chargée de recherche, ingénieure, maîtresse de conférences*, and so on. It is an interesting initiative in that feminizing the jobs serves to rework vocational perceptions. It underlines the extent to which the French education system, beyond the publishing of a guidebook, has been slow to make progress in this domain.

If people are to be made to think about gender, however, if the actors are to be made aware of the structuring nature of gender differences and, hence, persuaded to genuinely promote equality, the differences and discriminations must be made visible, i.e. they must be named and counted. Working on the perceptions, the statistics and the use of language may be a starting point from which to question the republican State's indifference to differences; and to challenge the neutrality that has reigned over the establishment of co-education. If the actors are encouraged to think about gender differences and to place them at the heart of the education system, they will also be driven to championing the values of equality and combating discrimination. In a nutshell, it will give them the tools with which to prepare generations of girls and boys for coexistence.

The signs may be promising, but mainstreaming gender into republican education policy is, as Fraisse (1999) puts it, iconoclastic. In other words, the road to achieving bona fide gender equality in schools is obstructed by the Universalist lodestar of French political culture. So there is room for thinking not just on the necessary economic development and compulsory schooling for all, irrespective of gender, but also on the action to take to foster gender equality in the underlying system of values; and for playing on the intricacies of gender relations.

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