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Review of recent literature on gender inequalities in teaching methods and peer relationship management in the French-speaking area

Claudie Baudino

The studies conducted throughout the French-speaking area reveal contrasts between the countries of the North (France, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada (Quebec)) and the countries of the South (French-speaking Africa). Analysts continue to note a paradoxical situation in the North, where the figures show that girls enjoy equality with boys or even dominate them, despite pervasive stereotypes, whereas the statistics confirm a continuing lack of gender equality at school in the South. Whereas, in the North, school enrolment rates up to the age of 16 are almost 100%, in the South, completion of primary education is a goal yet to be attained.

Overall, “nine out of 10 African children currently go to primary school. Of these nine children, only six complete the primary education. Of these, only three actually master the basic skills” (ADEA, January-February 2006, p. 4). This worrying situation also reveals gender inequality among pupils. In the French-speaking African countries, the gross primary school enrolment rate for girls is generally 10 percentage points lower than that of boys; moreover, the rate for girls in rural areas falls further by 5 to 10 points depending on the country. Completion of primary education and access to secondary school are consequently goals to be attained for African girls.

The attention given to the whole of this area marked by such contrasts is, of course, justified in view of what the countries of the South can learn from the experience of the North. It is clear that, with regard to gender equality, the challenges seem to follow similar stages and patterns. In addition, in the debate on the goal of equality in education, the interest shown in the French-speaking area reveals a number of constants.

In all cultural areas, measures to combat gender-based discrimination are taken concurrently with action against other forms of discrimination or other forms of inequality. The socio-economic level of the groups concerned, their cultural or ethnic background and their rural or urban character are often considered to be stronger determinants than gender.

Whereas in France, the Republican heritage impedes acknowledgement of differences, whatever their nature, in other countries of the North, the interest taken in pupils’ ethnic origins and the discrimination to which they give rise clearly compete with the gender perspective. In Africa, although inequalities often endanger the physical integrity of girls, military conflicts, unstable political situations and public health problems affect the relative importance attached to gender-based discrimination.

1. Teacher training curricula and methods

The studies carried out on pre- and in-service teacher training reveal a recurrent concern to promote awareness of the need to combat gender inequalities and sexist behaviour. This rather positive finding must, however, be seen in a relative light. Acknowledgement of the need to develop teachers’ awareness of gender issues does not always mean that a gender perspective is incorporated into the training provided or that the experiments conducted are successful.

The need to train teachers to adopt egalitarian practices and also to combat stereotypes in their teaching is recognized and asserted. In France, one of the goals set in the first version of the “Convention for equality between girls and boys, women and men in the education system”, signed on 25 February 2000, is training for “all members of the educational community in equality of opportunity”. The new version of this contractual document, signed on 1 February 2007, takes up
this goal in its various forms. Concretely, these texts recommend the introduction of specific courses into pre- and in-service teacher training modules. They also encourage the dissemination of educational resources and aids to increase teacher awareness.

In Switzerland, in 1996, a paper advocating teacher training in equality was published on the initiative of the Conference of Cantonal Directors of Public Instruction. *Egalité des chances à l’école* (“Equality of opportunity at school”) (CDIP, 1996) starts from the premise that the education system reflects existing social relations and thus restricts opportunities for development and training available to girls. After noting this fact, it calls for appropriate training to be provided for teachers and for educational materials to be redesigned. This call has been followed up through a large number of experiments.

In Belgium, more recently, the “Programme of action for the promotion of equality between women and men, interculturality and social inclusion”, adopted in 2005, contains a section on “Gender mixing and gender equality in education”. The goals set by this programme include “pre- and in-service training of teachers and support staff in gender issues”. The ways and means of pursuing this goal were discussed at a round table on teacher training for a non-sexist education in 2005.

That discussion provided an opportunity to strengthen partnerships with the voluntary sector. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and associations have played a vital and often pioneering role in putting this aspect of teacher training on the agenda. As early as 1987, the “Women and Mathematics” association was established as a forum for teachers and researchers and, first and foremost, as a forum for exchanging good practices. In Belgium, the publication of a directory of thematic resources attests to the wide range of programmes proposed by associations (Department of Equal Opportunity, 2006).

In Africa, the work of the “Forum for African Women Educationalists” (FAWE), a pan-African NGO, merits special mention. Far more than simply contributing to the enrolment of girls in education, the FAWE promotes the inclusion of a gender perspective in all areas of education. Thus, for instance, within the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), the FAWE has integrated the gender perspective into the debate on distance education. Its members stress how much the development of such modern technology may widen the audience of teacher training modules on gender equality (ADEA, January-March 2005).

There are however substantive hurdles to the implementation of these ideas. In French-speaking Africa, the shortage of qualified teachers jeopardizes the goals of children’s enrolment. Teacher training is considered essentially in qualitative terms. The need to train large numbers of qualified teachers is a priority goal. Even before instilling awareness in teachers of gender-based discrimination, people need to be drawn towards a profession that carries little prestige and low pay. Particular attention is paid to women in the drive to encourage people to take up this profession. Only 25% of teachers in French-speaking Africa are women, whereas they are in the majority in the English-speaking sub-Saharan African countries (data collected between 1990 and 2000, Jallade, 2006). The situation of women in the teaching profession is the result of the situation of girls in education. Equally cross-cutting as gender issues and as vital as literacy, public health problems such as AIDS loom large in educational practice and compete with gender concerns.

As it is given lower priority in countries of the North too, teacher training in gender equality is seldom compulsory in training curricula. The many courses offered are often optional. Switzerland, which already has long-standing guidelines and a multifaceted experience derived from the country’s administrative and cultural diversity, has learnt from these practices. While noting a regrettable lack of systematic training in this aspect of diversity, the review also stresses
that these courses are followed primarily by those who are already aware of the issues. As to the trainers, convictions and personal commitment can sometimes result in discourse and normative practices that run counter to the original goals (Grossenbacher, 2006, pp. 22-23 and 65-68).

The appraisal of the activities carried out, in France, in university teacher-training institutes (IUFMs) emblematically reflects these trends: “Although the goal of systematically introducing a module in the training of future teachers in the IUFM has not yet been attained, the Department of Formal Education has identified awareness-raising activities in two thirds of teacher-training institutes. Between 2001 and 2005, 18 IUFMs introduced the gender equality issue into their curricula. The measure was a modest one, with the students receiving an average of three to six hours’ training a year. Its implementation has not been problem-free and often depends on highly motivated stakeholders. Awareness is raised in a variety of ways: compulsory modules (in seven IUFMs), optional modules (in 11 IUFMs) and a cross-cutting theme in course development, citizenship education, violence management or professional ethics, conferences or symposia, practice-based essay work and trainer training” (French Ministry of Education, Research and Higher Learning (L’égalité filles garçons, Une mission pour l’enseignement scolaire Bilan 2000 – 2006, Mise en œuvre de la convention pour la promotion de l’égalité entre les filles et les garçons, les femmes et les hommes dans le système éducatif du 25 février 2000, 2006, p.12).

In view of the theoretical complexity of the subject and the resistance shown by the public, the most recent work advocates practical action subject to regular assessment from an academic perspective. The Lyon IUFM, at the cutting edge in this area, has introduced “good practices” that include a gender monitoring course (SOAG) aimed at sharpening young teachers’ perception of the effects of gender and thus build their awareness of classroom interactions that could go unnoticed. Keyed to teaching practice, this method helps to speed up awareness and to overcome initial ideological resistance. Mindful also of developing research in this area, the Lyon IUFM has called for proposals for teacher-training research projects. One of the priority themes on which proposals are invited is “Gender in education”.


To supplement and provide training on a day-to-day basis, appropriate educational tools and materials must be available. The attention given to teaching materials is a crucial aspect of the debate on educational methods and processes.

2. Educational methods and processes

In regard to educational methods and processes, all of the studies show that discriminatory stereotypes, chiefly in respect of girls, are persistent in different ways and at different levels. Notwithstanding differences in context, the universality of stereotypes is so patent that a thematic, rather than a geographical, approach to the issue must be taken.

The first avenue of research concerns educational materials. School curricula and the related textbooks have long been under scrutiny, with researchers and activists pointing out that school textbooks transmit values as well as knowledge. The recent controversy in France over educational content on the colonial period attests to the political implications of the issue.

The sexism of school textbooks has been demonstrated and denounced. In the light of the work done in this area, it is clear that the representation of girls and boys, women and men in educational materials is not balanced. The official report submitted to the French Prime Minister in 1997 shows that there is an imbalance but does not, however, suggest genuine solutions to reduce it (Richert, P., Rignault, S., 1997). Giving precedence to educational freedom over action to counter
sexism, the authors, in their recommendations, argue against any binding measures. Researchers have since refined their approach and, rather than merely acknowledging the facts, suggest operational solutions. Two lines of approach merit attention: one in favour of studies focusing on a particular discipline, the other in favour of quantitative surveys.

At the request of the French Economic and Social Council, the historian Annette Wieviorka has produced a study on the place of women in history as currently taught. Her work is one of the most recent contributions to the study of sexism in education. Focusing on the discipline of history, it first notes the three main forms of discrimination against women and girls. From a quantitative point of view, women are under-represented in school textbooks. The author gives a striking example of this, noting that “in about 50 biographies (from Aristotle to Voltaire, and including Copernicus, Krupp and Verdi), offered by the publishing house Nathan for the fourth year of secondary education, not a single woman is featured, not even Joan of Arc” (Wieviorka, 2004, p. 19). From a qualitative point of view, the few female figures who feature in school textbooks reproduce stereotypes. Martyrs or shrews, women suffer and sacrifice themselves (Joan of Arc) or bring harm or suffering to the people around them (queens and queen regents). Lastly, in addition to its content analysis, this study has the further merit of taking into consideration the target readership of such textbooks. Very much to the point, the historian stresses that textbooks are aimed mainly at boys. This is borne out by the introduction to a primary school book, which refers to its readers as potential historians in the male form of that noun (historiens) (quoted by Wieviorka, 2004, p.19).

In addition to reviewing and illustrating forms of discrimination, the study on the teaching of history from primary school to university links school textbooks to curricula and to the instructions given to teachers. Wishing to show how inequality is perpetuated at all levels of the education system, Annette Wieviorka does not merely denounce the sexism of school textbooks. She explains it by showing that it is generally consistent with a system that is blind to gender differences. Unlike studies focused on textbooks alone, which merely criticize an existing situation, her work contains a number of recommendations aimed at achieving improvements.

For primary and secondary education alone, she lists the action that should be taken on all fronts by stakeholders, ranging from the Education Inspectorate-General to the Ministry, and including the publishing houses. Aware of the lack of a proactive approach on the part of the public authorities, she recommends the establishment of a “Supreme Council for School Textbooks” mandated to “ensure that school textbooks give a more balanced picture of the respective place of men and women in history. Its opinions would be made public” (Wieviorka, 2004, p. 27). Rather than admit, all too hastily, that it would be difficult to apply any coercive measure, the author suggests that a committee of wise men and women act in that regard. Her proposal is consistent with a mechanism introduced in Switzerland.

To promote balanced gender representation in educational materials, Switzerland has tested a solution that consists in “giving clear instructions to authors […] or to commissions that select educational materials. These instructions generally include a list of pre-defined criteria”. Drawn up on the initiative of offices entrusted with the promotion of equality, these handbooks on the production of educational materials have been introduced in seven cantons (Grossenbacher, 206, p. 21). In other words, both Annette Wieviorka’s report and the Swiss experiment suggest that ad hoc bodies should draft and disseminate clear guidelines, upstream and downstream. Far from being a form of prohibition or censorship, these mechanisms are incentive-based. While requiring a minimum of proactive resolve on the part of the public authorities, they are technically easy to put into practice and seem especially desirable for, as shown above, teacher training on the subject is not provided systematically. In other words, owing to the lack of training to combat sexist discrimination in teacher-training curricula, the guarantee that school textbooks transmit egalitarian values could constitute a very useful safeguard.
What may prove useful in the North becomes crucial in an African context. Indeed, as noted by Sylvie Cromer and Carole Brugeilles, in poor homes in which there are no books, school textbooks are often “the only introduction to the written word and to knowledge” (*Administration et éducation*, No. 2, 2006, p. 95). Yet, here again, the burden is heavier on girls. “On the one hand, for reasons of availability and cost, girls have fewer textbooks than boys; and on the other, the portrayal of the two genders as contained in textbooks and disseminated through interaction with teachers is unfavourable to girls” (p. 95). This finding was made in a 2003 study on gender portrayal in mathematics textbooks in Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Togo and Tunisia. This piece of research has proved innovative on two accounts.

First, it consisted in a quantitative approach to gender portrayal. The researchers have sought, in contrast with existing studies, which are based on qualitative methods and limited sets of material, to make an exhaustive inventory, in written materials and pictures, of the persons portrayed by the authors of textbooks. The conclusions drawn are particularly interesting because they are based on mathematics books, which are reputed to be neutral. The findings generally confirm and enrich those of the studies conducted in the North.

The authors first note that “a far larger number of human protagonists are featured in written material than in illustrations” and that “the proportion of female characters featuring in written material does not attain 30% in any country”. Moreover, it becomes clear later in the analysis that “a chosen figure emerges gradually as the medium for the legitimate transmission of mathematical knowledge and also as a representation of the future citizen performing a social role. Irrespective of the country, in written material as in illustrations, the preferred protagonist is male”. At the end of this highly interesting research work, questions are raised about the inequalities noted in real life and in the statistics: “School, the custodianship of knowledge and the transmission of mathematical learning are, in the textbooks, the prerogative of the male sex. Is this because of a desire to appeal more directly to male pupils? Is it considered more useful, important and legitimate for them to learn mathematics?” (pp. 98-100).

Over and above the questions raised, the adoption of a quantitative method has the advantage of laying the foundations for a truly international comparison. Designed to pinpoint the pressure exerted by discrimination, this study must be regarded as one of the likely means devised to encourage the public authorities to take steps. Even though the scale of the problems differs from one cultural area to another, the similarity of the findings and of the questions is such that one can only applaud the suggestion made by the authors of the study. In conclusion, they suggest that the same type of work be undertaken in France where, in their view, the quantitative approach would clearly highlight the gap between ideal and the views that people actually hold.

The concern to provide statistical evidence of discrimination was particularly suited to the African context. The fact is that, while the shortage of textbooks is a factor that puts the unequal representation of the two genders into perspective, the goal of producing textbooks in African languages also points in the same direction. To illustrate this goal, reference may be made in particular to the ADEA newsletter (October-December 2004) reporting on a regional workshop on school textbooks in African languages. Once again, gender difference competes with another form of difference. In other words, in a context of limited resources, care must be exercised since the wish to acknowledge cultural differences may push the need to write textbooks that convey egalitarian values into the background.

In different ways, the research conducted on teaching practices reveals a tendency to focus on boys. Teachers are much more interested in the male component of their audience than in the female component, and this is true regardless of course of study, whether arts or science, the girl/boy ratio in the class and the teacher’s gender.
This assertion is based on classroom observation attesting to the indulgence and admiration shown by teachers towards boys and, conversely, their lack of feeling for girls (research in educational science carried out by Mireille Baurens and the IUFMs of Lyon and Grenoble). Paradoxically, however, it was the cries of alarm at the scholastic failure of boys that triggered a resolve to take the necessary proactive measures.

Analysis of teaching methods and practices has often been based on disciplines in which there are and continue to be differences in the girl/boy ratio and in the results of girls and boys. For a long time, the situation of girls alone gave cause for concern. Many studies were conducted on science classes, towards which girls were less often guided, and they have shown that girls were not favoured by teacher interaction and thus dropped out (Duru-Bellat, 1995). Associations bearing names such as “Women and Mathematics”, “Women and Science” and “Women Engineers” were established with the aim of encouraging girls to follow courses and careers in science.

More innovative work has been done more recently on disciplines in which girls reputedly excel, namely the arts, or on a slightly borderline discipline in which however the body has pride of place, such as physical education and sports. Mireille Baurens’ observations of language classes confirm the details of the patterns highlighted in science classes. Although the subject, English, has a “female connotation”, the researcher notes that the teachers – most of whom are women – pay scant attention to the girls and that the few questions put to the girls are shorter and less detailed. Within the class, girls are overlooked by the teachers and ridiculed by the boys. Their relative good behaviour works against them. One image captures in a nutshell the role that teachers expect girls to play: “the priestly mission of serving as teachers’ assistants” (Baurens, 2006, p. 83).

In the light of the comparatist approach, it may be said to be that, whatever their discipline, as in mathematics textbooks studied in French-speaking Africa, teachers basically consider that they are primarily to teach boys.

Another avenue of research lies in the study of the differential performance of boys and girls in physical education and sports. A paper on work done in Quebec and several unpublished theses cast interesting light on a discipline in which the results of girls remain lower than those of boys.

The paper calls into question the values that inform curricula. The need to be the strongest or the spirit of competition work to the advantage of boys. Reference is also made to gender-specific social demands. A boy’s social status is enhanced when he is athletic, but this is not so much the case for girls, or not in the same way. In this straitjacket of gender-specific values, teachers reproduce stereotypes. They have prejudices about the weakness of girls, they encourage boys and girls to make choices in keeping with their gender characteristics, they make greater demands on boys to whose performance they are more attentive (Vigneron, 2004, and Lentillon, Trottin in Education et francophonie, 2005, pp. 57-72).

In contrast to the conclusions repeatedly drawn in these studies, the haste with which action has been taken to “rescue” boys in Quebec is striking. In response to the male-oriented discourse in the media, initiatives have been undertaken in Quebec schools. In the early 2000s, the premise that boys were victims of the school system was in the ascendant and was thus taken up and developed by pressure groups and invoked in support of hasty experiments. Discontinuation of co-educational practices, organization of sports activities for boys alone, modules to promote motivation and self-esteem led by male role models (priests, policemen…) are but a few examples of such initiatives. Most are based on an essentialist conception of male identity and none has been evaluated. Apart from the criticisms that may be levelled at these initiatives, the urgency that has characterized them plainly confirms that it is socially unacceptable for boys to fail. In a system designed for them, their
failure is seen as evidence of a social dysfunction and demands prompt action by the authorities (Bouchard, St-Amand, *Education et francophonie*, 2005, pp. 6-19).

Whether the concern is with educational materials, classroom interaction, the values that permeate curricula or initiatives to counter gender effects, everything seems to strengthen stereotypes that place boys at the centre of the education system. It is particularly important to recognize this because studies in France, Switzerland and Quebec all show how much teachers are reluctant to admit that they behave differently according to student gender. Generally speaking, teachers “assert an egalitarian indifference to gender” (Baurens, 2006, p. 87). Moreover, pupils do not perceive a difference in treatment that is however borne out by objective, outside observation. (For a well-argued account of teachers’ and pupils’ failure to perceive differences in treatment, see Lentillon, Trottin in *Education et francophonie*, 2005, pp. 57-72; Grossenbacher, 2006, p. 63.)

3. Peer relationship management

Research on the training and attitudes of teachers calls directly into question their portrayal of the two genders and of their respective roles in society. The school is clearly not an island in society. It is permeated by values and prejudices that shape those it serves.

The Quebec study highlighted society’s concern at the failure of boys. Despite undeniable progress in equality in that part of the French-speaking world, the “rescue” plans for boys suggest a resurgence of repressed instincts. More optimistically, the same researchers clearly link family values to girls’ success. When families subscribe to feminist values, “education is effectively regarded by girls as a prime tool for their emancipation as women and as a path to independence and adult autonomy. In this context, girls maintain high educational aspirations and make the requisite efforts to achieve the goals that they have set for themselves, while their mothers contribute actively to this effort” (Bouchard, St-Amand, in *Education et francophonie*, pp. 8-13). The studies on physical education and sports and the surveys conducted in progressive families show that social expectations of boys and girls alike have a decisive effect on their educational achievement.

In the South, the same rationale holds, but to the opposite effect. Research emphasizes the benefits that African societies could derive from girls’ education, described as a “high-potential investment” (Jallade, *Administration et éducation*, 206, p. 103), while stressing the extent to which social values and representations are obstacles to equality. Lucila Jallade’s work on French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa elaborates on this point and outlines solutions. First, she notes that the “educational fate” of girls in Africa is sealed at primary level. The difficulties of access to school, prevalent in developing countries, are compounded by the problem of “survival” in the education system: “Once admitted into school, girls generally have a lower survival rate at the end of primary education than boys, often because of more frequent repeats among girls. Even though, as might be expected, the degree of disparity lessens through the educational process, overall, gender disparities continue to become more marked throughout the period of schooling” (Jallade, 2006, pp. 106-107). However, “this vicious circle is strongly rooted in the economic and sociocultural environment. The family environment in the broad sense, the family and the local community have a determining influence on decisions on girls’ education”.

“Two major factors – low income and traditional patriarchal structures that determine women’s place in the family and in society – together discourage the enrolment of girls: the financial burden of school attendance, child labour, life prospects of girls often destined essentially for an early marriage, negative social perceptions of girl’s education, and doubts as to their ability to succeed. This socio-economic environment encourages families to respect the traditional distribution of roles between boys and girls, with preference being given to sons” (Jallade, 2006,
p. 104). This says it all. The effects of this combination of factors are of course felt in secondary education, entailing, to quote the author, the “evaporation” of girls. In addition to the obstacles mentioned earlier, fears of sexual violence and pregnancy tend to keep girls still further away from school.

Researchers and educational actors have suggested substantive measures to combat these general trends. Needless to say, it is essential to improve the status of women and their rights within the family. Public authorities must also give evidence of a proactive approach by formulating an education strategy for girls. Such a strategy may entail the launching of public campaigns to raise awareness of the necessity and effectiveness of education. The involvement of the public authorities is crucial, since efforts to change people’s attitudes require substantial budgetary support. Once again, as always, poverty is the root cause.

The case of Burkina Faso has been examined in a pre-doctoral dissertation on “international evaluation and comparison in education” at the University of Bourgogne (see Anne Guison, 2004). In that country, a ten-year plan for the development of basic education has been put into effect. While education is seen as a means of improving the occupational integration of girls, poverty reduction measures are also regarded as a tool for improving their educational prospects. The author of this study points beyond cultural factors to the high cost of education: poverty and sexist values together cause girls to drop out of school.

Throughout the French-speaking area, it is clear that ideas about the respective roles of boys and girls in society determine the level of parental ambitions, the resources that they are prepared to devote to the education of each child and, finally, the level and direction of the personal ambitions of the young people concerned.

Notwithstanding differences in their ambitions and in the courses consequently followed, boys and girls sit in the classroom and, yet again, the interaction between them reveals and heightens inequalities. Among the most recent studies on the subject, Mireille Baurens’ work is particularly instructive. Based on observations in language and culture classes, in which girls are supposed to be in their element, her work confirms and details the usual analyses of pupil interaction. They attest to the predominance of differences of behaviour between the sexes and the perpetuation of patterns of discrimination.

In the classes in which she made her observations, the researcher distinguishes significantly between three zones. “Zone 1, with the girls”: The teachers take little interest in them, demand less of them, congratulate them less and even blame them for transgressions they have not committed. Nevertheless, although the girls do not rebel, they do not succumb to victimization. The author notes that girls “take the back seat” (Baurens, p. 94). In other words, they work in silence, fall in with the norm. Impervious to slights, they obtain better results than the boys.

“Zone 2, with the boys”: Echoing the pioneering work done in science classes, the author attests to the invasive and transgressive behaviour of the boys. They are the first to speak and monopolize the teachers’ attention. “They invade the educational space” (Baurens, p. 84). Surprised by the persistence of such disparities, the researcher sees their origin in the behaviour of the teachers. “Zone 3, with the teachers”: It is they who distribute roles in the class; it is they who orchestrate the domination of the boys and the “low-profiling” of the girls. This discriminatory behaviour springs from their blindness to gender issues: they do not see the sexism in textbooks and deny that they treat boys and girls differently.

The remarks made by the pupils confirm this analysis. On the occasion of a round table organized by education officials, girls and boys acknowledged that the former are more attentive
and the latter more often unruly. One interesting factor stressed by the young people is that gender relations are often affected radically in the middle school by puberty. In practical terms, co-education is a problem when bodies begin to change (Administration et éducation, p. 137).

In fact, the values that permeate society seem decisive. Not only do they perpetuate inequalities in behaviour, but they also make teachers draw distinctions and think themselves egalitarian in doing so. Unfavourable to girls, the management of classroom interaction does not lower their achievements. If girls succeed, it is also because they feel that they are in the right.

In addition to identifying factors, educational actors have taken practical measures to combat discriminatory standards and social representations. Vocational guidance has been an appropriate area for experimentation for, of course, the making of such choices brings into play the mechanisms that reproduce inequalities.

For many years, education papers and official instructions have called on all those who provide vocational guidance to pupils – from parents to teachers and, of course, including guidance counsellors themselves – to combat sexist stereotypes. A novel feature is the adoption of practices designed to be interactive.

An assessment of action taken in Switzerland to promote educational equality shows that top priority has been given in most cantons to preparing students for occupational choices. The CD-ROMs, booklets and other publications typical of today’s media that have been disseminated seek to deconstruct prejudices as to the gender-suitability of occupations. More original is an annual event known as “Girls’ Day”, which consists in arranging for girls to spend a day at their fathers’ place of work. The aim is to make them aware of, and thus combat, their preconceived ideas. This event has been so successful that it has been extended to boys. In the canton of Vaud, boys now spend one day with a designated person in their family circle who exercises a “woman’s” profession (Grossenbacher, 2006, pp. 23-25, 29-33 and 69-70).

Associations such as “Women and Mathematics”, “Women Engineers” and “Women and Science” have for many years now been conducting campaigns in France to encourage girls to seek jobs in science. In the same way as the days spent at the parents’ work place, the aim of these endeavours is to help girls to identify with scientific and technical occupations and then to feel a calling for such work. In 2006, the three associations joined their forces to publish a booklet designed to combat preconceived ideas (Les femmes, les sciences. Au-delà des idées reçues, available at the http://www.femmes-et-maths.fr/documents/Livret_fe_sc_2006_2.pdf site).

The booklet is interactive and intended for teachers, pupils, parents and potential employers. It contains a quiz that, here again, enables the player to face up to his or her own preconceived ideas. This educational tool, which may be called up easily on the Internet, is available on request as a CD-ROM and should thus be disseminated widely in the French-speaking world.

4. School and classroom environment

School infrastructure and, generally, material teaching conditions are matters of particular concern in Africa. While the high cost of schools is a recognized obstacle to the girls’ enrolment, girls are clearly endangered by the parlous state of school facilities. Here too, co-education is a central issue. Both the lack of separate lavatories and the existence of mixed-gender classes create a real problem for girls and their families owing to the resulting promiscuity with male peers or with male teachers who do not always respect the girls’ physical integrity. Parents are obviously all the more reluctant to send their daughters to school when they are in danger of being harassed or even
sexually assaulted (Jallade, 2006, p. 105). Investments would, of course, be required to make schools safer, but organizational improvements may also be an effective answer.

In Mali, since 2002, the “children’s government” experiment has proven instructive. It consists in entrusting the material management of the school to the children. Self-management and gender equality are two of the principles that are put into effect under this initiative. Cleaning tasks are in fact performed by both girls and boys. As a result of sharing such tasks, the children question the rules laid down and applied by the family. Furthermore, owing to the development of the children’s sense of responsibility hygiene has improved, the school area has been fenced in and the lavatories have been enclosed. In other words, the school has been made safer, which is a precondition for the schooling and “survival” of girls in the education system (ADEA, July-September 2004). This type of experimental initiative deserves to be extended.

Owing to the dangers to which girls are exposed in the school environment, researchers and stakeholders call for the adoption of a gender perspective, in sharp contrast to the neutrality of the French approach. This is illustrated by the issue of school violence, which also characterizes these dangers and highlights the gender issues involved.

The recent United Nations Report on Violence against Children (2006) contains a precise definition of school violence. The author, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, notes that schools as a general rule afford children protection. However, in all too many countries, children are still subjected to corporal punishment by their teachers. They also fall victim to verbal and physical violence from their peers in the playground. The author notes that sexual or sexist violence is directed mainly against girls (United Nations, 2006, pp. 16-17) and is perpetrated both by teachers and by classmates. These analyses were based on data from all regions of the world and are confirmed by the facts and the figures in the case of France.

Although field surveys confirm that gender is a relevant variable in the analysis of violent behaviour at school, the measures devised to combat such violence are not gender-based. An INSERM study (Choquet, Hassler, Morin, 2003) offers a 20-point checklist of violence in lower and upper secondary schools. Of these 20 points, four are explicitly gender-based: “3. Boys more violent and more likely to repeat violent behaviour than girls; 11. No reduction in gender gap over time, quite the contrary; 14. Girls (increasingly) victims of sexual violence; 15. In the family, it is mainly girls who are spanked”. These statements all point to a worsening situation.

In quantitative terms, proportionally more boys than girls have always been involved in violence: 38% of boys have engaged in verbal violence, as against 29% of girls; 42% of boys have been in a brawl, as against 18.4% of girls; 28% of boys have committed battery, as against 9.5% of girls; 28.6% of boys have committed theft, as against 25.2% of girls; 2.4% of boys have engaged in racketeering, as against 0.9% of girls; 5.5% of boys have committed racist acts, as against 3.3% of girls; 3.4% of boys have struck a teacher, as against 0.7% of girls; and 5.6% of boys have used a weapon, as against 1.2% of girls.

Turning to the victims, the proportions are reversed in the case of sexual violence only: 1.9% of boys have been victims of sexual violence, as against 9.4% of girls. Moreover, between the ages of 14 and 18, while the proportion of victims remains stable among boys, it is twice as high among girls.

To sum up, on average boys are three times more likely to be perpetrators and victims of violence than girls. This is true for all forms of violence (from verbal to physical) with the exception of sexual violence, of which girls are the prime victims.
Statements by stakeholders confirm and provide a crude and caricatural illustration of the statistical reality. At a round table organized by national education officials, one woman principal strongly emphasized the gender-based character of school violence: “Verbal and physical violence, committed by a clear majority of boys (90% of the cases of suspension by a disciplinary board for acts of violence concern boys), covers a more complex reality: girls who are treated roughly, but also boys weakened by the need to respond to the demands of the group, repeated acts of humiliation and sexist taunts ultimately degenerating into acts of violence” (Claudine Rault, Administration et éducation, pp. 119-121). A member of the “Femmes debout” association, for her part, reports the words of an immigrant boy. When questioned about the need to protect girls, he explicitly mentioned the risk of rape by classmates (Yassia Boudra, Administration et éducation, pp. 123-127). Facts, figures and witness accounts point to a situation in which the gender of the social players is determinative, but it is a situation that is difficult for the public authorities to take on board.

At the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, the French Minister of Education gave priority to the prevention of school violence. However, no appraisals or gendered solutions were provided in the educational documents issued on that occasion. The practical guide, memorandum and “Questions and Answers” (Ministry of Education, 2006) address the issue in an interactive and practical, but never in a neutral, manner. Only “ethnic group, nationality and sexual orientation” are explicitly recognized as root causes of violent acts. The gap between the assessment and the solutions proposed seems to be quite wide and calls into question the relevance of those solutions.

This failure to take gender into account is all the more surprising in view of the priority given to the prevention of sexist violence since 2000, pursuant to the Convention for equality between girls and boys, women and men in education (revised on 1 March 2007). With regard to the organization of school life, the convention also provides that parity in pupils’ representative bodies must be promoted. The idea that the school may be a place to learn about parity in decision-making and gender equality has been put into practice most remarkably in Switzerland.

School life in Switzerland is organized specifically to enable mothers and fathers to exercise their profession: “compact timetables, midday meals, supervised homework, adjustable drop-off and pick-up times, all-day courses and flexible terms and conditions for teachers”. Of course, by definition, these measures are not designed to serve pupils, even though they have immediate effects on their lives. In addition to facilitating the parents’ lives, however, they are conceivably factors in winning acceptance of mothers’ professional activity and in enabling daughters to plan a future professional career for themselves (Grossenbacher, 2006, pp. 71-72).

Whatever angle from which it is addressed, the gender perspective is relevant to the analysis of the problems. Gender inequality informs values and social standards. It determines the behaviour of teachers, the content of educational materials, peer relationships and the overall organization of the school. Yet, although it takes the form of discrimination, mainly against girls, gender inequality is seldom the main item on the agenda of the education authorities.

As this survey of innovative analyses and practices in the French-speaking world comes to a close, it is clear that the highly vocal criticisms of co-education through the media have not led to any drastic changes but, on the contrary, seem to have helped to open up an area for fruitful discussion on the subject.

So far as solutions are concerned, the pragmatism and interactivity of the initiatives undertaken are such as to ensure that solutions found will be effective. While the resourcefulness and flexibility of NGOs contribute to change, nothing however can replace the adoption of proactive measures by the public authorities.
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**Theses and dissertations**

Most of this work is listed on the site of the National Institute of Educational Research of France (www.inrp.fr).


