# Gender stereotypes and hidden education programs in education in France. A literature review on hidden inequalities ${ }^{1}$ 

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#### Abstract

The proposed article consists of a review of general literature and some specific and original studies on the issue of gender equality at school in France. It proposes a theoretical delimitation of the concepts of gender and sex, in particular through gender roles. Then, after a fairly rapid historical overview, it shows how the co-educational system introduced in 1976 in all French schools does not correspond at all to equal opportunities or equal treatment of girls and boys. Gender prejudices and stereotypes are still very numerous in schools in this country. The article summarizes some facets of these prejudices and stereotypes at different levels of schooling and in most subjects, but also through issues such as the transgression of school rules and punishments.


## Keywords

Gender. Equality. Girl-boy. School. Education.

## Estereótipos de gênero e programas educacionais ocultos em educação na França. Uma revisão da literatura sobre desigualdades ocultas

## Resumo

O artigo apresenta uma revisão bibliográfica ampla e alguns estudos especializados e originais sobre o tema da igualdade de gênero nas escolas francesas. Inicialmente, propõe-se uma delimitação teórica dos conceitos de gênero e sexo através dos papéis de gênero. Em seguida, após uma breve análise histórica, mostra-se como o sistema de coeducação introduzido em 1976 em todas as escolas francesas não corresponde à igualdade de oportunidades ou de tratamento para meninas e meninos. Os preconceitos e estereótipos de gênero ainda estão muito presentes. De forma sintética, apontam-se facetas desses estereótipos nos diferentes níveis de escolaridade e na maioria das disciplinas, explorando inclusive questões como a transgressão das regras escolares e a punição.

## Palavras-chave

Gênero. Igualdade. Menina-Menino. Escola. Ensino.

[^0]
# Stéréotypes de genre et programmes cachés d'éducation dans l'enseignement en France. Une revue de littérature sur les inégalités occultées 


#### Abstract

Résumé L'article proposé est constitué d'une revue de littérature générale et quelques études spécifiques et originales sur la question de l'égalité filles-garçons à l'école en France. II propose une délimitation théorique des concepts de genre et de sexe au travers notamment des rôles sexués. Ensuite, après un parcours historique assez rapide, il montre comment la mixité mise en place en 1976 dans tous les établissements scolaires français, ne correspond pas du tout à l'égalité des chances ni à l'égalité de traitement des élèves filles et des élèves garçons. Les préjugés et stéréotypes de genre reste très nombreux dans les écoles de ce pays. L'article en montre de manière résumé certaines facettes à différents niveaux de la scolarité et dans la plupart des matières mais aussi au travers de question par exemple, de la transgresion des règles scolaires et des punitions.


## Mots-clés

Genre. Egalité. Filles-garçons. Ecole. Enseignement.

## 1 Introduction

Coeducation has been a reality since 1976, as were the decrees that implemented the Haby Law. However, this context didn't necessarily mean equal treatment and importance for both sexes.

If about forty years ago boys largely dominated school space and positions, today the situation has changed significantly. Girls outnumber boys in the number of high school diplomas by approximately seventy thousand and tend to become better than them in most school subjects. Nevertheless, in PISA ${ }^{2}$ surveys $(2018)^{3}, 15$ years old girls show that they are one year ahead of boys in reading, but this difference tends to increase in reverse in mathematics, a subject in which boys are three months ahead. Moreover, that gap narrows very slowly. On the other hand, all PISA research, since its beginning in the 2000s, shows that girls are more "schooled" than boys are. Coeducation in all cases is not, therefore, equal success.

While girls are doing better and better at school and boys are doing worse, the resulting social positions in adulthood are the other way around. After leaving school,

[^1]women's full-time wages are 16.7\% lower than men's (and 31\% lower in part-time wages, and therefore $25 \%$ in full-time equivalent) ${ }^{4}$. Above all, it's the "glass ceiling" (BUSCATTO; MARRY, 2009) that prevents women from reaching the most prestigious positions in society, such as the boards of directors of the largest private or public companies or even in government agencies (for example, scientific or medical university careers) and, of course, in the political sphere.

It could probably be possible to attribute this to natural inclinations. But works in the Humanities and Social Sciences and Education Sciences lead to a completely different conclusion: cultural factors are the predominant explanations for those inequalities. This has been demonstrated for several decades in France (BELOTTI, 1974; BOURDIEU, 1999; DURU-BELLAT, 1990; MOSCONI, 1989;). In Brazil and elsewhere (CAMPONAR et al., 2020; RODRIGUEZ, 2020; SOUZA RIOS, DE MELO CARDOSO; FERREIRA DIAS, 2018), there are also many long-term studies, however, this isn't the object of this article.

Therefore, we can imagine that, if socio-cultural elements play a role in this process, the school can probably participate, like parental education, in creating inequality between girls and boys, and inequality meaning inequality in how they are treated. This is known as the hidden curriculum. We will return to this subject later on.

## 2 Gender and sex: an epistemological and methodological approach

First of all, it must be explained, before addressing the issue of gender in school, that sex is natural and biological, whereas gender is social, cultural, and historical. These two elements have implications in terms of behavior and individual psychology.

In either case, a person is born male or female. This dichotomy is shared by many animal species. In other words, for humans, we have twenty-third pair of chromosomes - XX (female) or XY (male), which generally determine the sex of an individual. Females have with vagina, uterus, tubes, ovaries, vulva, and clitoris, and males have testicles and penis. There are, however, a very small number of intersex people (about one in a million in France) whose sex cannot be clearly identified at birth,

[^2]either because of a lack of definition of the apparent sexual attributes or because of an incongruity between the sexual organs and genetic inheritance.

Gender is related to the feminine and the masculine. This concept is different according to societies and times. It's evidently cultural. In social psychology, there are scales of masculinity and femininity that, although they have long been opposite or engaged in a reverse dynamic, seem to be increasingly considered cumulative (Bem Sex Role Inventory, BEM, 1974). In other words, it's possible to be very feminine and very masculine on the same scale or less feminine and less masculine. This means that these components are no longer considered exclusive or antagonistic. In general, however, it's possible to socially identify what is known as social gender stereotypes. Williams John E. and Susan M. Bennett in a 1975 article, Sex Roles: "The definition of sex stereotypes via the adjective check list' (WILLIAMS; BENNETT, 1975) listed the qualifications most often attributed to men and women with a pertinent meaning, although carried out in a restricted sample. The following two tables describe these stereotypes:

Table 1 - Stereotypes for men

| Affirmative | Désordonné | Indépendant |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Aggressive | Dominant | Inexcitable |
| Ambitious | Élégant | Logique |
| Autocratic | Endurant | Masculin |
| Adventurous | Énergique | Rationnel |
| Loud | Enjoué | Réaliste |
| Audacious | Entreprenant | Rigoureux |
| Confident | Excitable | Robuste |
| Constant | Ferme | Sans-émotion |
| Brave | Fort | Sévère |
| Cruel | Grossier | Vantard |

Source: Williams e Bennett (1975).
Table 2 - Stereotypes for women

| Affectionate | Sweet | Whiner |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Attentive | Praiseful | Concerned |
| Attractive | Emotional | Cautious |
| Capricious | Excited | Dreamer |
| Enchanting | Weak | Sentimental |
| Seductive | Feminine | Sensitive |
| Complacent | Futile | Sophisticated |
| Soft hearted | Humble | Submissive |
| Delicate | Nervous | Volatile |
| Dependent | Persistent | Inconstant |

Source: Williams and Bennett (1975).

This same stereotyped structure is described, always using attributive adjectives, in a later article, which has the goal to establish a global view of the phenomenon, since it's about pan-cultural gender stereotypes. The table, which no longer relates to a single country, as before, but twenty-five, reveals relatively similar stereotypes. Here is the document from the article by Williams, Satterwhite, and Best (1999):

Table 1 - Pancultural Gender Stereotypes: Samples of Highly Stereotypical Items*

|  | Male Stereotypes |  |  | Female stereotypes |  |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| Item No | Adjective | M\% | Item No | Adjective |  | M\%

* $\mathrm{M} \%$ = average score $\mathrm{M} \%$ (see the original article for explanation about the average score M\%).

Source: Williams, Satterwhite and Best (1999).
Notice that gender stereotypes today are very similar to those presented 24 years ago. In other words, this means that the male and female roles change over time slowly. However, when we observe changes in the appearance of clothing, for example, or hairstyles, we see significant changes between 1970 and today, both in the West and the East. In the West, where femininity was associated with short hair and an androgynous appearance, today it is more associated with long hair and suggestive shapes. In regards to masculinity, the same happens, if long hair was the prerogative of rock stars of the 70s, today, on the contrary, short hair dominates with a five o'clock shadow.

The same analysis could be carried out both in the Middle East and in the East, but with other perspectives based on religious beliefs or socio-political changes. Stereotypes would therefore be transient and changeable.

We conducted a study with 850 master's students, one for each secondary education and management profession (62\% women and 38\% men: secondary education has more and more women). Participants were asked to point out the 5 qualifications that best corresponded to a girl or boy in the 6th grade of elementary school (this level was chosen because the gender component is less apparent). Among the 15 qualifications that were said most often, the following stand out:

Table 3 - Qualifications said in the study

| Girls | Boys |
| :---: | :---: |
| Diligent | Agitated |
| Talkative | Rowdy |
| Emotive | Sporty |
| In pairs | Non scholarly |
| "Victims of fashion" | Direct |
| Move softly | In groups |
| Literary | Test the boundaries |
| Mature | Videogames |
| "intolerable" | Scientific |
| Chatty | Defiant |
| Know themselves | Dirty |
| Wise | Quarrelsome |
| Scholarly | Loud |
| Studious | Immature |
| Serious | Competitive |

Source: Author's own.

It can be said, briefly, that girls are generally placed in "care", caring for others, and boys more in acting. Girls are generally described as scholarly and boys as nonscholarly. This stereotyped position of care is reflected today in the fact that professions linked to care (including medical studies, in which $56.3 \%$ of students are girls) and education, and even legal assistance (in the bar and law, $65 \%$ of the professionals are women) women are generally predominant, and men dominate the technological and industrial professions. In any case, it remains to be seen whether the education of the parents and, above all, from our point of view, whether school education decreases or increases gender stereotypes, whether or not it's one of its vectors.

## 3 Equality and difference: the need for a theoretical distinction

Equality is one of the founding principles of the French Republic. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity appear in front of city halls, which, in fact, often split, at the beginning of the century, schools for boys and girls, in villages and hamlets. The concept of equality, however, in itself doesn't mean anything. In general, it refers to equality in rights, duties, and dignity ("men are born and remain free and equal before the law"). But concerning schools and various other spaces, equal treatment must be added. Are boys and girls treated equally in their education, in general, and at school, in particular? This is far from obvious, as we have demonstrated on other occasions (GLEYSE, 2020).

In another perspective, it must be clear that equality is opposed to inequality and not, as a mistake frequently made on this subject, to difference. We can be different and equal in terms of treatment, rights, duties and dignity.

The difference is opposed to uniformity or similarity, not to equality. However, the question that has been imposed on the school system for some time, around the 2000s when the first official actions started in France, is the unequal treatment of students in the context of coeducation relatively widespread.

Gender stereotypes, as well as certain hidden curricula transmitted in schools, can be at the root of unequal treatment, but also, as a consequence, in the roots of inequalities in the rights, duties, and dignity of girls and boys. Even in areas such as punishment or interaction, which will be discussed later, girls and boys aren't treated equally.

## 4 The history of the school: girls long absent from secondary education

It wasn't possible, in an article, to develop this issue at length, but it should be noted that girls - in the words of Antoine Prost - have long been educated "in the lap of the church" (PROST, 1992), being discriminated against in their schooling. And even in the bourgeois and aristocratic spaces around the French Revolution, intellectuals such as Olympe de Gouge, Anne-Catherine Helvétius, Sophie de Grouchy Voltaire, or Condorcet were associated with schools and later with lyceums were reserved for boys. It was only

[^3]in 1882, due to the Jules Ferry and Camille Sée laws, that primary school became secular, mixed, and compulsory for both sexes. In 1888, however, Jules Simon, Minister of Public Education, Fine Arts and Religious Affairs, considered that "only the mind of a mature man can study practical chemistry" (SIMON apud PROST, 1992, p. 45).

In reality, classes with different levels of education, for primary education, in villages or hamlets where only one teacher was appointed, were necessarily mixed (we know the example, dated 1938, of the Rogues class, described by Adrienne Durand Tullou, in: Le Pays des asphodèles or the lessons of Célestin Freinet in Bar-sur-Loup, 1928). In the same logic, the Complementary Courses for primary education, which usually bring together the best students from a school for girls and a school for boys, were mixed.

In secondary education, Primary Schools, and Teacher Training Schools, however, the situation is very different. There were lyceums for girls, generally literary, and lyceums for boys, generally scientific, which were tightly closed for the other sex, and the bachelor's degree itself was different for both sexes until 1924. The curricula for girls and boys weren't identical over the early 20th century.

Under economic restrictions, the merger began around 1957 (boys prone to literary subjects attended lyceums for women and scientific girls attended lyceums for men). In 1959, coeducation became legal in lyceums and so did schools after the Fouchet-Capelle reform in 1963. Finally, as we have seen, it was the Haby law that introduced mandatory coeducation. However, even today, in professional or technical lyceums, many specialties aren't yet mixed because of the choices made by students. Therefore, coeducation has only really existed for about forty years in the French secondary system (and Physical Education wasn't mixed until the 1990s). But does coeducation mean equal treatment for girls and boys and equality in terms of rights, duties, and dignity?

Currently, girls do much better at school in almost all subjects, but 70\% of them obtain a literary bachelor's degree and $60 \%$ of boys obtain a scientific or technical bachelor's degree. In preparatory classes, $74 \%$ of girls are enrolled in literary subjects and only $30 \%$ in scientific subjects. Eight out of ten boys choose a scientific career when they consider themselves very good at math. In the same situation, only six out of ten

[^4]girls make this choice. It is, therefore, appropriate to ask ourselves also about the determinants of those choices that may be in schools.

Since 2000, two interministerial conventions for equality between girls and boys, women and men in the educational system have attempted to implement an equality policy common to several ministries. In 2013, the so-called ABCD of equality was implemented, which consist only of sequenced school records organized by teachers or teacher-researchers to restore equal treatment for girls and boys at school. Finally, the Education Code states: "Schools, colleges, and high lyceums [...] must contribute to promoting co-education and equality between men and women, particularly in the area of vocational guidance. They [schools, colleges, and lyceums] provide training in knowledge and respect for human rights, as well as in the understanding of concrete situations that are harmful to them".

This is the 121-1 of the Education Code that reproduces article 5 of the Law for the Orientation and Program for the Future of the School, of April 23, 2005.

## 5 The hidden curricula on gender: a late 20th century discovery

In the feminist environment of before and after the events of 1968, the work of Elena Gianini Belotti, Du côté des petites filles (1973) - which, in a way, although not belonging to the same feminist current, extends the work of Simone de Beauvoir in Le Deuxième Sexe (1949), but looking only at family education - acts as a bomb in a world where the naturalization of gender remains a widely shared fact. The ethnologist from Italian families shows that a girl isn't treated in the same way as a boy as soon as she leaves the womb. It also reveals that these repeated behaviors create a "weak woman" and a "strong boy".

All the actions, gestures, words, and techniques used show that family culture treats girls and boys very differently. This suggests that differential treatment isn't based in any way on nature but on the cultural foundations of a patriarchal society. These treatments could now be considered as "hidden curricula", in that they aren't explicit and have never been made explicit. In any case, Belotti's work allows both to start reflecting on the idea of gender and to dissociate it from sex in the educational process, although the words aren't so explicit.

[^5]In the 1970s, the publication Feminist studies (created just in 1970) clearly pointed out the inequality of representation existing in school reading manuals and even in Science, History, and Geography. As a general rule, men are always presented in a dominant way and women in a dominated way. They are often assigned to household chores and men to so-called "noble" jobs. Behavioral patterns that show active boys and girls often passive, but also confined to the use of dolls, cleaning, ironing, etc., are also described. (GLEYSE, 2020). Other works, in this perspective (BOURDIEU, 1999), show that parents' expectations are very different according to their children's genders. Some studies have pointed out, moreover, that parents expecting their first child, in most cases, would rather have a boy.

There is still more. When analyzing history textbooks, it's noticiable that only men have a central place in them, with women disappearing in much of the historical process, with some notable exceptions, such as Joan of Arc, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Catherine de Medici, Louise Michel and, more recently, Marie Curie. Women's roles are often discovered when she "replaces" men in factories (women have been working in the textile industry for a long time and even in mines) during the 1914-1918 war, for example. Veremos a seguir um exemplo de dois manuais escolares de leitura dos anos 50 que permitem identificar claramente o currículo oculto em ação.

Figure 1 - Image of the 1952 reading manuals.


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https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/redufor/index

Figure 2 - Image of the 1952 reading manuals


In this regard, we'll begin to understand that in France, coeducation is not equality. The Journal of Gender Studies, created in 1991, highlighted more tenuous and subtle elements in educational processes that lead to unequal treatment of girls and boys.

A few years ago, a thorough study (DORIGNY, 2009) of educational software present in the documentation center of the former University Institute for Teacher Training in Montpellier showed the presence of innumerable gender stereotypes in these software. Of 13 of them, 11 had a boy as a hero; 1 a robot and 1 a girl, but many other unequal treatments for boys and girls have been identified in school and education over time.

In the late 1980s, Nicole Mosconi, recently deceased, published a book entitled La Mixité dans l'enseignement secondaire: un faux-semblant (1989). In it, Mosconi showed that secondary education is based on the foundations of a "masculine-neutral". In other words, although coeducation provides the appearance of equality or at least neutrality, boys or men dominate the school space in different ways. Male students interact more with teachers and are more often requested by them. They occupy and dominate the school space in terms of word and space. They speak more often without being asked. To such extent that Mosconi describes a " $2 / 3,1 / 3$ law": in a parity class, whether a woman or a man teaching, boys have $2 / 3$ of the interaction and girls only $1 / 3$. However, when we later go into the details of the interactions, we will be able to see,

[^6]from this early work by Nicole Mosconi, that other hidden curricula are implemented by teachers without their knowledge or in a relatively unconscious way.

## 6 The multiplication of academic productions on the subject

Subsequent works by Nicole Mosconi (2009), but also by other researchers, such as Marie Duru-Bellat (2004, 2005); Thierry Terret, Geneviève Cogerino and Isabelle Rogowki (2006) (on the subject of Physical Education at schools); Isabelle Plante (2010) (on stereotypes related to Math and French teaching); Julie Thomas (2010, 2013, 2018) (on physical activity in vocational training); Stéphanie Rubi (2009), Corinne De Boissieu (2009), Cendrine Marro and Isabelle Collet (2009), in Recherches \& Educations magazine. They all reveal the research on gender and education is an ample field.

In addition, it's necessary to highlight the report of the General Strategy and Projection Commission, published in January 2014, written by Marie-Cécile Naves, Vanessa Wisnia-Weill, Marine Boisson-Cohen, Frédéric Lainé, Sylvie Octobre, Mathilde Reynaudi, Sarah Sauneron, Mona Zegaï; the recent studies by Karine Isabelle (2010) (on early childhood education); the investigations of Séverine Depoilly (2014), Gaïd Le Maner-Idrissi, Laëtitia Renault (2006); Annette Jarlegan (2009); Paul Fontayne (2002); Eveline Daréoux (2007) and Amélie Seidah (2004). This ensemble of works shows, in a clear, precise, and, above all, objective way how several hidden curricula are implemented from the kindergarten onwards, conditioning the different behavior of male and female students. Evelyne Daréoux speaks, in fact, of the "manufacture of student girls and student boys", just like Corinne de Boissieux.

For example, among many other hidden curricula and in order not to tire the reader, it can be seen that in a math class the teacher asks boys more complex questions than girls (LEGRAND, 2016). They test girls' memories and the understanding of boys. Statistically, it leaves more time for boys to respond than girls. Generally, teachers make more disciplinary, but also cognitive, observations for boys than for girls.

Physical Education teachers who, in their volleyball classes, organize groups by level, usually form a strong group composed mainly of boys and a weak one composed

[^7]mainly of girls, but it is especially interesting to study the medium group, often mixed. In this situation, teachers make more comments about the reception, driving, and passing to girls and more comments about attacking and countering boys (TERRET; COGERINO; ROGOWSKI, 2006).

In all school subjects, when teachers are asked to establish gender equality, they find that they interact more with boys than with girls. And in that space, if you ask students how they feel, the boys complain about being neglected or left out (DUTEILDEYRIES, 2020).

It's possible to describe the fact that school teachers (GLEYSE, 2020) believe that, in the age group between 5 and 8 years old, boys are superior in mathematics and girls in literature (which is true for the latter), while in reality, at this age, studies show no difference in the mathematical performance of girls and boys. This difference only becomes apparent later. Therefore, it's believed that the teachers' belief acts as a selffulfilling prophecy (ROSENTHAL; JACOBSON, 1966).

In fact, the examples are infinity, from the use of spaces for games and play in early childhood education (often strongly stereotyped), to the actions of teachers at all levels of education aimed at valuing boys and devaluing girls, or at least to induce certain types of behavior according to gender.

Even regarding punishments, Sylvie Ayral (2011) showed very well, as well as Sophie Duteil-Deyries (2014, 2020), that children aren't punished in the same way or for the same types of behaviors. A girl is often punished more severely than a boy under the same conditions. Furthermore, teachers don't equally punish at all. In agreement with the study carried out by Sophie Duteil, when teachers declare to be equal in their punishments, as soon as they're asked to verify objectively if they were effectively equal, they discover, within two weeks, that they absolutely weren't. School's files show a higher number of notifications from boys in the records of students who have had any sanctions.

In short, multiple hidden curricula are being implemented that manufacture a female student and a male student, but don't establish equal treatment between them at school. This, of course, has important consequences in terms of professionalism in adulthood.

## 7 Conclusion

Increase the freedom of girls and boys at school to provide better tools of analysis for the subjects of this institution: this is the objective of the work on gender equality in education and, specifically, on the hidden curriculum and gender stereotypes in schools. It's about opening the field of possibilities for each student, allowing them to not be content with a position attributed by history, memory, traditions, society, and culture in general.

The investigation, which is now being carried out relatively systematically on these issues, is increasingly revealing practices that are almost invisible, subtle, hidden, or at least difficult to perceive for those who aren't paying attention, and which are implemented, among others, by teachers and administrator, leading to unequal treatment of students, girls and boys.

According to research, this process starts within the family. However, since early childhood education and, therefore, from the development of gender identity, the school no longer forms a student individual or a student person, but a boy who is a student and a girl who is a student. More clearly, the institution trains a male student who bears male stereotypes and a female student who bears female stereotypes.

Stereotypes are generally inherited from a patriarchal past and lead to inequalities in the rights, duties, and dignity of girls and boys at school. Such an unequal process then creates situations of discrimination and, above all, difficulties for women to access certain areas. And, on the other side, it creates difficulties in accepting certain professions to be carried out by men, but also violent and/or dangerous behaviors. The field of possibilities is limited and restricted for children by the painful school conditioning. They are, in part, probably responsible for several degrading behaviors and treatments directed at women and for certain macho positions assumed by men.

The knowledge, by teachers and the school, of these stereotypes and hidden curricula, leads to the implementation of research programs that often result in new training courses for teachers, technicians, and school administrators. Its results will probably appear in the medium term.

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    ${ }^{3}$ Available in: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa2018\%20 resumés i-ii-iii.pdf

[^2]:    ${ }^{4}$ More about this, cf. https://www.inegalites.fr/Les-inegalites-de-salaires-entre-les-femmes-et-les-hommes-etat-des-lieux

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