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# Gender Identities and School Success

A new phenomenon has appeared recently in education: In most industrialized countries girls perform better academically than boys in schools and universities. In the province of Quebec, for example, boys are retained more frequently than girls in the primary grades, and fewer boys than girls complete high school. Female students now constitute a majority in universities. How do we explain this phenomenon?

The explanations vary according to country. Researchers in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have addressed the issue mostly by questioning coeducation in the schools. The old model of single-sex classrooms or programs was given a new life on the assumption that coeducation is shortchanging boys. In Australia, France, and Canada some researchers have linked the phenomenon to gender identities.

This latter approach refers to social conformity. In the gender reproduction process, girls submit to stereotypes attributed to feminine identities such as docility and passivity, and these give them an edge in school: more self-discipline in class, greater respect for authority, and more hours invested in study and homework. School norms and expectations would be carved on this docile-little-girl model, and they should be changed to fit boys' identities. In this framework no space is made for the evolution of gender identities.

Our team is leading a research program on the topic. In one project we had two questions in mind: first, what role if any do gender stereotypes play in school success? And second, do gender stereotypes help explain the advance taken by girls?

Our first step was to identify current gender stereotypes—masculine and feminine—and to build a questionnaire that would be easily accessible to 15-year-old students. From an extensive review of literature about differentiations between boys and girls, we devised an 82-item questionnaire where students could disagree or agree with each statement on a scale of 1 to 4. Examples of such statements are "It's better for a boy like me/a girl like me, to be tough rather than sensitive" and "Girls/boys need a lot of help to learn at school."

The boys were given a masculine version of the questionnaire and the girls a feminine one, but apart from this the statements were identical. Following the use of a sampling technique that ensured appropriate representation of groups,

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the questionnaire was completed by third-year students of one of 24 high schools. The sample consisted of 985 boys and 980 girls. This particular project was supplemented with focus groups. We interviewed 24 boys and 24 girls in Quebec City and environs.

The results show a greater agreement by boys to masculine stereotypes (88%) than girls to feminine ones (44%). On the whole, the boys in our sample showed more social conformity than did girls. The responses were then compared with school achievement. Analysis shows that the more one agrees with gender stereotypes, the lower one's school achievement is. This finding is valid for both boys and girls: there is a statistical association between resistance to gender stereotypes and greater achievement. Only 44% of girls surveyed conformed to feminine stereotypes, but the female group attained higher grades. At the same time, 88% of boys conformed to male stereotypes, and the male group attained lower grades.

Conformity to gender stereotypes was also related to the parents' level of education. Again the conclusion is valid for the two groups: students whose parents have a higher level of education (postsecondary) tend to resist gender stereotypes, whereas those whose parents have a lower level of education (high school at the most) tend to conform to gender stereotypes. Conformity to traditional gender identity is greater for students from a family background where parents have less education. This may be related to the already established fact that boys and girls coming from such backgrounds also generally experience more difficulty in school. Such students are more readily defined as being at risk.

Faced with these findings and the social conformity interpretation, what can we conclude? On the whole, more than their male counterparts, girls resist gender stereotyping and show less social conformity. They refuse to define themselves as docile or submissive and tend to achieve better in school. In other words, girls who show less social conformity are more successful.

To understand these results fully, schooling and education must be viewed in the larger context of gender relations. Greater school success by girls is then seen as the transformation of gender relations between men and women. This process has led girls—and women in general—to invest in education for themselves in order to attain greater access to financial autonomy and self-support. This quest for equality is by no means an indication of social conformity. On the contrary, the pursuit of school achievement, perseverance, and access to higher education constitutes resistance to conformity.

Inasmuch as a higher level of education of the parents and greater school success by their children indicate a certain acquisition of knowledge, it then becomes apparent that gender stereotyping is a substitute for knowledge. It furnishes a ready-to-think concept of reality that is inconsistent with school success. In this sense gender stereotypes do help to explain the greater school success by girls.

What would constitute the opposite of gender stereotyping? In the light of our results the answer leads to the path we have followed for effective interventions to promote greater school success for all. We conclude that this is critical thinking about gender relations. Critical thinking leads one not to accept without due scrutiny associations between a specific characteristic and

one's sex. It leads one to ask, "Are men really like this, women really like that? Are they all like that?" It is then easy to understand that for both boys and girls critical thinking is a particularly useful tool in school—or for that matter in society in general.

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