11 Equality or discrimination? The consequences of co-education in Switzerland

by Elisabetta Pagnossin

11.1 Introduction

The debate on co-education rose again a few years ago[1] as a possible solution to problems such as underachievement of boys and violence at school. Very often, girls' achievements are greater than boys: girls score higher than boys in indicators such as scholastic success, interest, or conformity with school norms and school attendance.[2] Many authors assume that boys react to girl's achievements by developing aggressive attitudes demonstrated by actions of violence.[3] In the school environment, girls are often affected by the increased violence of boys, and, therefore, physical separation seems to be a quick and a radical solution. Yet, as I discuss in this paper, such fundamental problems may not be so easily solved.

A thorough discussion on the pedagogical aspects of co-education in the Swiss context has probably never taken place. In the past, this option was chosen on the basis of the democratic principle of equality, which demanded that boys and girls learn the same subjects together. Nonetheless, organisational and financial reasons were also put forward to accept this change. The consequence of sharing the same classroom is that pupils are expected to follow the same programs and adhere to the same timetables. This recognition represents an important aspect of the realisation of formal equality in education. However, the attainment of formal equality doesn't imply that actual equality will automatically follow. It is not yet the case in education, nor is it the case in other fields such as that of labour market.

In the first part of this paper, I will recall some stages that have contributed to the implementation of formal equality in education. I will focus on Switzerland, but some tendencies and remarks can probably be applied to other countries and contexts. In the second part, I will discuss the application of the principle of equality in education as well as other legal

207

decisions. How has formal equality in education been translated into the real life experiences of school children? Is the physical presence of boys and girls in the classroom sufficient to consider that equality is reached? What does co-education imply for the Swiss educational system? What are the relations and interactions among the different actors in terms of pedagogical contents? What are, therefore, the representations of gender, created or reinforced at school, at the time when children must construct their intellectual and professional future?

11.2 Going back to the past: The slow integration of girls into the educational system

Switzerland is a federal state formed by 26 cantons. Responsibility in education is divided among the Confederation, cantons and communes, but on the basis of the cooperation and not on a strict separation of responsibilities. According to the Federal Constitution (art. 62), the cantons "provide for adequate basic education, available to all children". At the cantonal level, the departments of education are responsible for these tasks. At all other educational levels, the competences of legislation, financing, and implementation are variously shared. Inter-cantonal cooperation and school coordination are the responsibilities of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK-CDIP).

Not until recently have Swiss girls gained nationwide access to all levels of education,[4] and it can be argued that the widespread implementation of co-education is the primary reason for it. Changes have been slow despite the recommendations[5] of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK-CDIP), which stated the importance of abolishing all sources of discrimination against girls. For instance, still in 1979, during the first 9 years of compulsory schooling, girls had to attend 200 additional hours of schooling due to sewing and household teachings (Commission fédérale pour les questions féminines 1999: 10). The Constitutional article (art. 8, al. 3) on equal rights for men and women in the field of education was first adopted in 1981. To quote, "Men and women have equal rights. Legislation shall ensure equality in law and, in fact, particularly in family, education, and work. Men and women shall have the right to equal pay for work of equal value" (art. 8, al. 3). A few months later, the Federal Tribu-

nal declared unconstitutional curricula that differed according to the sex of school children. It took a position of principle following up on the parental complaints against the application of more strict criteria for girls at the entrance to secondary schools in the Swiss canton of Vaud.

In 1991, only 12 of the 26 cantons ruled out the formal disparities among boys and girls that could be found in the curricula. In the others cantons, the differences continued to persist in the field of sewing, household keeping, geometrical drawing and physics (Commission fédérale pour les questions féminines 1999: 10). Consequently, 15 years ago, in more than half of the Swiss cantons, boys and girls were acquiring at school the traditional gender roles they were expected to play in society. Precisely this was the strongest argument used to oppose the idea of co-education. It was believed that if the school adopted the same programs for boys and girls, the national projections of their future social roles, traditionally clearly differentiated, would be put into jeopardy.[6] The equalisation of curricula raised doubts about their application as girls were perceived as having less intellectual skills than boys, and were, therefore, considered incapable of following the same scholastic programs. Last, but not least, co-education was seen as threatening to moral values.

On the one hand, arguments in favour of co-education were advanced on the basis of organisational and financial reasons and often reflected classroom arrangements which had long been the reality. In fact, for some rural areas, the economic burden of having different classrooms and teachers for groups according to gender was simply too high. The actual separation of students, such as a simple division in the form of 'dividing doors', was usually ineffective and did not prevent them from meeting during breaks and playtimes (Commission fédérale pour les questions féminines 1999, Mosconi 1998, Marry 2003). Removing the partition seemed to simplify things for everyone. On the other hand, the institutionalisation of co-education required the standardisation of curricula, at least in their formal content, as well as in the number of teaching hours. Therefore, a large portion of the Swiss population experienced different educational regulations (Grünewald-Huber 1997). Of course, their rights and lives differed also in other fields. For instance, women obtained the right to vote and be elected at the federal level in 1971. However, the implementation of these political rights at the cantonal level did not take place until 1990, when a decision of the Federal Tribunal obliged the last resisting canton to adopt it. And it is pre-

cisely at the same cantonal level that decisions on compulsory education are made.

Other economic and social rights defining the equality between men and women, such as the right to equal wage for equal job, continue to be of theoretical nature. It is important to remember these and many other aspects of the Swiss working culture while examining the issue of co-education. On the one hand, changes at the legal, formal level are quite recent, and are not yet fully applied. On the other hand, changes in values, attitudes and behaviours are usually very slow to be implemented and internalised. Therefore, if a political or legal decision (as that of political or educational equal rights) can be seen as a source of change, these changes are not immediately translated into practice, as they also affect other aspects of Swiss traditional agenda. The gap between theory and practice, and between formal and informal levels on equality matters, differs depending on the fields of application. For instance, Swiss women are politically eligible since the beginning of the 1970s, but the proportion of the actually elected women has not yet reached parity.

11.3 The realities of co-education

Consciously or not, the assignment of pre-established gender roles to boys and girls begins usually at home (Carrefours de l'éducation 1997, 2004). Children are often confronted with the traditional division of labour by models embodied by their parents. For instance, the number of women without post-compulsory education is proportionally higher than in the case of men, and this situation occurs across all age levels, not only amongst the elder generations. The differences are quite important at the superior professional levels, especially in the technical fields. Changes are in progress, but the gap persists in various fields and levels (OFS 2003). Actually, in Switzerland, only 59 % of women work (in comparison to 77 % of men), and 56 % of them work part time, especially if they have small children, bearing numerous consequences of their work arrangements: precariousness, low social insurance, lack of continuing education, absence of a professional career and lower wages (Staub 2003). The difference is particularly strong in the age group of thirty to thirty-nine year old women who stop working temporarily in order to take care of their children, and

their workplace is categorized as a "feminine profession". This is particularly the case in the service sector, however, the difference is also present in medical professions, sales and teaching jobs, especially at the preschool and primary levels.[7] Generally, women do not occupy leading positions in their professions and the "glass ceiling" is a pervasive reality in Switzerland. Women are still earning less than men, and these wage differences, often reaching 20 %, cannot be explained by objective elements (OFS 2003). Finally, nine out of ten Swiss women with children are entirely responsible for household activities, and they spend double as much time on these tasks as compared with men. The Swiss social organisation continues to be differentiated on this basis of gender, even if changes have already begun.

The transmission of gender stereotypes is continually reinforced at home by family members, at school by teachers and peers, or during free time activities by friends. These stereotypes are mostly unconsciously conveyed, as is the case in the classrooms. Many authors observed that teachers do not treat boys and girls in the same way. Their verbal interactions and gestures are often clearly differentiated if addressed to a boy or a girl. Most of the teachers, male and female, speak, explain, behave, and judge school children depending on their sex, following a mental structure of attribution of roles still dependent on the traditional division of labour.[8]

Expectations on future status, roles, needs, identities and preferences are primarily based on one homogeneous sexual criterion, male or female, (AAUWEF 1998) that, in an interplay with citizenship, ethnicity and status, ties the two groups of school children in order to differentiate their social dimensions. Therefore, what children learn at school today is not only the 'official curriculum' but also the 'hidden' one, which clearly determines their skills and future professional choices and trainings.[9] These decisions are reinforced by socialisation processes at home as well as in the society in general, and bring about long term consequences for their future adult life.

The currently emerging question is as to why curriculum continues to be gendered even though children of both sexes occupy the same classroom. It seems that the underlying message that teachers (but also parents) transmit to their children is that of re-valuing and perpetuating the traditional (read: patriarchal) organisation of society. If this is the case, my concern is that any formal change in the curriculum (such as co-education) will have marginal impact on societal changes. In fact, if boys and girls are not given equal opportunities at school, it does not matter if they share the same

classroom or not. In other words, if co-education is taken only as an organisational, formal measure, it cannot be seen as a determinant element in transmitting new visions to the society. However, if co-education is posited and charged with real pedagogical options, then the 'content' of the teaching strategies and materials are clearly in need of revision. Only then would the formal (physical) presence of boys and girls in the same classroom be actually constructive.

A significant body of traditional research on the better performance of girls in reading and languages versus those of boys in mathematics and scientific fields[10] continues to determine their occupational and professional choices, differently charged by prestige and value. But are those choices and preferences 'natural' or are they clearly resulting from curriculum mechanisms at play? Changes in the cultural understanding of gender roles are slow, and obviously cannot be expected to result from the modifications of the organisational aspect of co-education. Real effects of co-education have to be approached from the side of the curriculum content, as it is the 'content' rather than the formal structure that profoundly influences the educational and professional choices of boys and girls.

11.4 Concluding remarks

Current research on the effects of co-education does not provide any clear conclusions as to the benefits of choosing one mode or the other. For instance, the arguments against co-education state that stereotypes are reinforced in a mixed classroom, where girls become less self-confident in certain subject areas. However, the evidence supporting this argumentation arrives essentially from private schools, mostly confessional, with a strict selection criteria at the entrance level, and based on a competence and fee system. Access to such schools is clearly reserved for children coming from families with a high socio-economic status.

Other studies also indicate a reinforcement of stereotypes, due to a strong focus on a persisting, although informal, separation of so-called boys' and girls' activities and preferences.[11] Partiality, bias, and incomparability prevent both researchers and administration from reaching positive conclusions.[12] As stereotypes prevail, the formal organisation of the Swiss classrooms does not seem to be crucial to the problem. What

212

matters is the actual equality of contents, behaviours, values and attitudes that must take place in order for co-education to be effective.

Notes

1 This debate started in the US and Australia, reached Europe, precisely UK and Germany, and finally arrived in France and Switzerland (Le monde de l'éducation 2003, Ernst 2003, Fize 2003, Diversité 2004).

2 The literature attests these statements, i.e. OCDE 2004, UNESCO 2005.

3 Cf. i.e. Epstein 1998, Conseil Supérieur de l'Education 1999, Charlot, Emin 1997.

4 Cf. Commission fédérale pour les questions féminines 1999.

5 For example, "Les principes relatifs à la formation des jeunes filles" (2.11.1972), "Principes et recommandations: Mêmes chances de formation pour les jeunes filles et les garçons" (30.10.1981); "Recommandations en vue de l'égalité de l'homme et de la femme dans le domaine de l'enseignement et de l'éducation" (28.10.1993). It should be noticed that, more than 25 years ago the EDK / CDIP officially recommended the application of the principle of co-education at all levels of the school, but not all the decisions of this Conference are compulsory (CDIP 1992).

6 For a general discussion, see Abrahms, Sommerkorn 1995, Mosconi 1999, Duru-Bellat 1999: The literature on the stereotypes transmitted by the textbooks is very important (i.e. Guillaume 1999, Lelièvre, Lelièvre 2001, Rignault, Richert 1997).

7 Coradi, Vellacott, Wolter 2004. For an analysis at the university level, cf. Helsinki Group 2004.

8 I.e. Wilkinson, Marrett 1985, Bressoux 2003, Troilloud, Sarrazin 2003.

9 Baudoux, Noircent 1997, Baudoux, Zaidman 1992, Duru Bellat 1998, Hatchuel 1997, Mosconi, Loudet-Verdier 1997.

10 Coradi 2003, Alaluf et al. 2003, Roy 1995.

11 Cf. for instance, Marry 2003: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUWEF) (1998).

12 For instance, the both Baumert 1992 and Jacobi 2001 confirm that co-education reiterates polarisation of the fields of interest.

Work cited

Abrahams, Frederick; Sommerkorn, Ingrid 1995: "Promoting Gender Awareness in the Classroom : An Example from Germany". In: Bos, W. et al. Reflections on Educational Achievement, www.waxmann.com/index-e.html.

Alaluf, Mateo et al. 2003: Les filles face aux études scientifiques. Réussite scolaire et inégalité d'orientation, Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUWEF) 1998: Separated by Sex. A critical Look at Single-sex Education for Girls, Washington D.C. AAUWEF.

Baudoux, Claudine; Noircent, Albert 1997: "L'école et le curriculum caché". In Collectif Laure Gaudreault, Femmes, éducation et transformations sociales, Montréal, Les éd. du Remue-ménage, 105-127.

Baudoux, Claudine; Zaidman, Claude 1992: Égalité des sexes. Mixité et démocratie, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Bressoux, Pascal 2003: "Jugements scolaires et prophéties auto réalisatrices: anciennes questions et nouvelles réponses", Les dossiers des sciences de l'éducation, n. 10, 45-58.

Bouchard, Pierrette; St-Amant, Jean-Claude 1999: Garçons et filles. Stéréotypes et réussite scolaire. Montréal, Les Éditions du Remue-ménage.

Bouchard, Pierrette; St-Amant, Jean-Claude 2003: "La non-mixité à l'école: quels enjeux ?" Options CSQ, n. 22, 179-191.

Carrefours de l'éducation 1997: "La socialisation familiale différentielle des enfants, garçons et filles: Une synthèse de la littérature européenne et anglo-saxonne", 3. janvier, 93-107.

Carrefours de l'éducation 2004: Dossier "Éducation et genre", n. 17, janvier-juin.

Charlot, Bernard; Emin, Jean-Claude 1997: Violences à l'école. Etat des savoirs, Paris, Ed. Colin.

Commission fédérale pour les questions féminines 1999: Femmes, pouvoir, histoire, Partie II: Formation, "Éducation des filles et mixité", Berne.

Conférence des Directeurs de l'Instruction Publique (CDIP) 1992: Filles – Femmes – Formation. Vers l'égalité des droits, Rapport VERA, dossier 22B, Berne.

Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation 1999: Pour une meilleure réussite scolaire des garçons et des filles, Avis au Ministre de l'éducation, Québec.

Coradi, Maja et al. 2003: Les maths et les sciences n'ont-elles plus la cote? Centre suisse de coordination pour la recherche en éducation (CSRE), Rapport de tendance n. 6, Aarau.

Coradi Vellacott, Maja; Wolter, Stefan 2004: Equity in the Swiss education system: dimensions, causes and policy responses. National Report from Switzerland contributing to the OECD's review of "Equity in Education". Aarau: Swiss Coordination Centre for Educational Research.

Diversité 2004: Dossier "Filles et garçons sont-ils éduqués ensemble?". Centre national de documentation pédagogique (CNDP), n. 138, septembre.

Duru-Bellat, Marie 1998: "La mixité, un aspect du 'curriculum caché' des élèves", Enfance et Psy, n. 3, 73-78.

Duru-Bellat, Marie 1999: "Une éducation non sexiste, une gageure", Cahiers Pédagogiques, n. 372, mars, 11-13.

Epstein, Debbie et al. (eds.) 1998: Failing boys? Issues in gender and achievement, Buckingham, Philadelphia.

Ernst, Sophie 2003: Femmes et école. Une mixité inaccomplie, Paris, INRP.

Fize, Michel 2003: Les pièges de la mixité scolaire, Paris, Presses de la Renaissance.

Grünewald-Huber, Elisabeth 1997: Koedukation und Gleichstellung: eine Untersuchung zum Verhältnis der Geschlechter in der Schule. Rüegger, Chur.

Guillaume, Denise 1999: Le destin des femmes et l'école. Manuels d'histoire et société, L'Harmattan, Paris.

Hatchuel, Françoise 1997: "'Dis maîtresse, comment tu me vois?' Assignation et étiquetage en situation d'enseignement collectif". In Claudine Blanchard-Laville Variations sur une leçon de mathématiques, L'Harmattan, Paris 151-193.

Helsinki Group 2004: Women and science. Review of the Situation in Switzerland. Bern, Federal Office of Education and Science.

Lelièvre, Françoise; Claude 2001: L'histoire des femmes publiques contée aux enfants, PUF, Paris.

Le monde de l'éducation 2003: Dossier spécial "Les ratés de la mixité", janvier.

Marry, Catherine 2003: Les paradoxes de la mixité filles-garçons à l'école. Perspectives internationales. Rapport pour le Programme incitatif de recherche sur l'éducation et la formation (PIREF) au Ministère de l'éducation Nationale, miméo.

Mosconi, Nicole (Dir.) 1998: Égalité des sexes en éducation et formation, PUF, Paris.

Mosconi, Nicole 1999: "Limites de la mixité laïque et républicaine", Cahiers Pédagogiques, n. 372, mars, 8-10.

Mosconi, Nicole; Josette Loudet-Verdier 1997: "Inégalités de traitement entre les filles et les garçons". In: Blanchard-Laville, Claudine. Variations sur une leçon de mathématiques, L'Harmattan, Paris 127-150.

OCDE 2004: Regards sur l'éducation 2003. Les indicateurs de l'OCDE. OCDE, Paris.

Office fédéral de la statistique 2003: Vers l'égalité? La situation des femmes et des hommes en Suisse, OFES, Neuchâtel 3e éd.

Rignault, Simone; Richert, Philippe 1997: La représentation des hommes et des femmes dans les livres scolaires, La Documentation Française, Paris.

Roy, Marie-Françoise 1995: "Femme et mathématicienne". In: de Manassein, Michel (Dir.) De l'égalité des sexes, Paris: Centre National de la documentation pédagogique, 251-262.

Staub, Silvia 2003: Le travail à temps partiel en Suisse. Berne: Bureau federal de l'égalité entre femmes et homes.

Trouilloud, David; Sarrazin, Philippe 2003: "Les connaissances actuelles sur l'effet Pygmalion: processus, poids et modulateurs", Revue française de Pédagogie, n. 145, 89-119.

UNESCO 2005: Recueil des données mondiales sur l'éducation 2005. Statistiques comparées sur l'éducation dans le monde. Montréal: Institut de statistique de l'UNESCO.

Wilkinson, Louise Cherry; Marrett, Cora B. 1985: Gender Influences in Classroom Interaction, Academic Press, Orlando.

Zaidman, Claude 1995: "Ecole, mixité, politiques de la différence des sexes". In: de Manassein, Michel (Dir.) De l'égalité des sexes, Paris, Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique, 219-232.