THE CONSTRUCTION OF PREFERENCES AND REPULSES IN SCHOOL: BOYS AND GIRLS “SUBJECTS”?

Adla Betsaida Martins Teixeira¹
Marcel de Almeida Freitas²

ABSTRACT
The paper discusses gender discriminations on access to school syllabus and its social impacts, for example, the “natural” preferences of boys to hard sciences and girls to social ones. Although these are real phenomena, they are not natural, but rather social constructions; therefore, the access to knowledge is unequal. This asymmetric access is not deliberate, hiding in micro-political practices. Its effects outline what individuals will learn or not in concordance with the sex. Data presented come from a study with elementary school teachers and from an observation in a laboratory of a Physics class. It concludes that the construction of “preferences” about certain areas is a pedagogical phenomenon, influencing the upcoming participation of individuals in society.

KEYWORDS
Scholar Knowledge; Gender Discrimination in School; Scholar Subjects and Practices.

Introduction

Scientists such as Psychology or Neurology still do not explain the differences in academic performance between men and women. Nevertheless, there is a persistent overestimation of males in the western culture that was initially philosophically considered as “dominant”, superior and, later, by biology, a paragon of perfection. Thus, “(...) men and women are differentiated, identified as anatomically and physiologically complementary, inserted in different places and roles, standardized according to their ways of relating to each other” (Teixeira, 2010). Finally, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the ideas of “equal rights” and social movements exposed the reality of gender inequality (Negreiros, 2004).

The term gender originated in that context, learning the differences and similarities between men and women as social constructions and not as a result of their biology (Scott, 1990). However, very little attention has been paid to those questions in educational contexts. Therefore, what Robert Connell argues in relation to masculinity can be extended to women and, for that reason, to the gender relations in general in school situations:

Though schools have been a rich site for studying the reproduction of masculinities (...) and though most of the people doing research on masculinity work in education industry (...), there is surprisingly little discussion of the role of education in the transformation of masculinity (Connell, 1995, page 238).

Thus, this text reflects, in some ways, on how gender discrimination occurs in schools and how in the field of school education there are few proposals for questioning this reality.

1 Associate Prof. Dr., University of Education, UFMG, Brazil; adlaufmg@gmail.com
2 Ph.D Student, Education, University of Education, UFMG, Brazil; marcel.fae.ufmg@gmail.com
It is understood that there is no neutrality in the teaching and learning process, i.e. in the access boys and girls have to the syllabus. Nowadays, what is called science is the historically selected content, product of prioritized investigations in the last centuries in the scientific core from industrialized countries. So, it is the result of human judgment and some certain power relations. Throughout civilization, many moments were withdrew from history; because of that, currently, individuals’ access is different from the knowledge which is produced and released according to the interests of influential groups, whether they are from the market, politics and/or religion.

Similarly, the school, in its micropolitics, also works with permitted knowledge, making differentiated accesses to education according to the individuals’ race/ethnicity, gender, among other cleavages. School micropolitics is defined as the sphere of action in which groups or individuals dispute the power (Ball, 1993). From those struggles for power a process begins and, in it, representations and expectations of the teacher are used as tools of persuasion, knowledge and even of disempowerment, in short, a strong currency in negotiations and territory achievements (Teixeira, 1998).

Discriminated access to knowledge in general does not occur consciously, but it can be easily hidden in “good action”3. Its negative implications impose imaginary boundaries about which contents individuals are supposed to learn, influencing their behavior, faith in themselves and in opportunities within the group they fit in. This way, school practices are also the results of the perception that schools make about those who will or will not have access to certain information. There is no neutrality in the teacher-knowledge-student interaction. The differentiated way of having knowledge access in school for boys and girls may, then, influence behavior patterns in their academic trajectories and who will achieve school success or who will fail.

**Social and educational production of affinities and performances**

Considering that it is previously discussed by society, one should not disapprove schools to confirm and / or encourage certain behaviors (respect for the ‘differences’, for example). However, the fact is that the effort to encourage some behavior patterns in the teaching and learning process can induce short and long-term losses to those who are in the school environment. Regarding gender discrimination in education, these have already been discussed, but are still actively present in pedagogical practices.

For this reason, the theories on this matter should consider the actions of teachers (men and women) as powerful elements in the propagation of behavioral patterns. The faculty are the ones who present conservative and narrow-minded views of masculinity and femininity to children (defining restricted possibilities for men and women in public and private environments). As a consequence, schools provide gender requirements for boys and girls from an early age, not only with regard to the technical and scientific aspects, but also with regard to their attitudes towards life.

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3 For example: from the assumption that girls are “fragile”, certain practices of Physical Education are not offered to girls or otherwise, the belief that bearing pain is a “man thing” some children are submitted to violent practices.
It is common in the school professionals’ speeches to find, at first, a modern tone of equality between genders, but then it contradicts itself when compared to everyday observation (Pereira and Mourão, 2005). Men and women’s segregation in the school environment is justified by a pseudoscientific speech (generally focused on the reproductive function or complementarity between men and women), sometimes, for the sake of the children and their “innocence”. This speech makes use of scientific speculation to dictate how to be a man or a woman. This view is still unstable from the scientific point of view, but when called science, they gain enough authority in the speeches and practices, leaving little room for debates and differences. This is a “scientific inquisition”, i.e. science becomes a prescriptive dogma.

In pedagogical routines the existence of male teachers is accepted provided that they have “feminine” characteristics common to female teachers: “kindness”, “affection”, “attention” (SANTOMÉ, 1995). In other contexts, the presence of men is identified as important to replace the father figure or contribute to a model which the youngsters should follow, as there are “a lot of women” in the schools. Yet, the acceptance of this male model is frustrated when teachers are “effeminate” men, a priori, questionable individuals to socialize with children.

On the other hand, even the so-called “normal” men are restrained from direct interaction with children because they fear their “male nature” (in this case, they would be seen as violent, impatient to deal with children). Those characteristics, considered innate in men and not results of socialization, are seen as responsible for the absence of men teaching (EU-GÊNIO, 2008). In rare moments, there is trenchant defense of equality between men and women in those contexts.

Interestingly, when we speak of teaching work in universities and in the scientific field, the speech changes: women are seen to be inadequate, unstable, childish, unfit for the “serious” world of work, “gossipers”, “non-professionals”, “sentimental”, “emotional”, “diffused”, among other disqualifying characteristics (Teixeira, 1998; Silva and Ribeiro, 2014). This view endorses a traditional professional model, an androcentric version of what universities should be like. Thus, male teachers are seen by the faculty as more “serious”, “objectives” and “focused”.

Although criticized for their unconventional positions as professionals in education, contradictorily, teachers are encouraged to play the role of “general caretakers” in these environments. That role alleviates the administrative staff of schools, parents and also the government of other social responsibilities towards children. Such induction comes in various forms. The text below, for example, was distributed by a school supervisor to teachers of public schools in the commemoration for Teachers’ Day in 1996; it reveals images that are valued in an exemplary teacher:

... Let me be more maternal than a mother to love and defend children as much as the mother of a child who is not flesh of my flesh... Shed, in my democratic school, some light on the barefoot boys that once surrounded you. Make me strong, even though I am a woman, especially a poor one; make me despise all impure power and all pressure that does not represent the flames of your desire upon my life...May my hand be light on punishment and even softer in caresses. May I reprimand with regret knowing that I corrected with love! Grant that I give spiritual form to my brick school building. May your flames involve the poor
lobby and naked rooms... And finally, that from contemplating the paleness of a Velásquez canvas I remember that teaching and love intensely on Earth is to reach the last day with the spear of Longinus through one’s heart!

On October 15th it is celebrated “Teacher’s Day”. With Gabriela Mistral’s page, we seek to honor those to whom this country owes so much. Thank you, teachers from Minas Gerais, for teaching us how to handle the most powerful weapon in the universe; the weapon of knowledge (Teacher’s prayer, Gabriela Mistral, apud Teixeira, 1998, page 159).

Similarly, the school governing body also has its professional routines influenced by gender. Female directors report experiencing ambiguous demands to perform their duties. Thus, they feel compelled to take a “male model” of leadership, which means: “rationality”, “authoritarianism”, “objectivity”, greater control etc. (Teixeira, 2001). Such characteristics are seen as “proof” of competence to lead just like a man. Although, at the same time, they are compelled to interpret the “command of a great family”, i.e. their work routine includes several tasks that surpass the pedagogical and administrative areas, for they are supposed to care for the others. This implies an exacerbated emotional affective involvement with the community. This model, which has been identified as an important school demand, pleases mainly neglectful parents, for they are released from affective responsibilities toward their children.

A process of “de-intellectualization” comes from those ambiguous demands and almost amateurism of teachers and other school professionals, falling into what is commonly called spontaneism. In this socio-cultural and educational dynamics, the emotional aspect is the central concern in schools, neglecting their teaching functions, theoretical and formal education techniques (Santiago and Santos, 2010).

On the contrary, the efforts to meet the expectations when a position is taken, in this case, women’s efforts in school organizations, are also related to the organizational survival. In this regard, the election for the direction position can be cited as interesting examples when the same gender issues are used as persuasion, manipulation and seduction instruments of the school community.

For those who forcefully rebel against such stereotypes, the school patrol over those who dare to challenge the school established patterns of behavior culminates in exclusion or denigration of the professional. In some cases, colleagues make use of intrigue with parents to put “rebel” teachers in their “place”. Those attitudes show typical forms of micro-power. On this subject, this is the story of an interviewed director (Teixeira, 1998, page 162):

 [...] female teachers... they are more thoughtful. They have this ability specifically because of their female side... They are like mothers. Most of them are so... patient. In the Brazilian society... women are responsible for it (caring for children). Even now, when many men help, it is not the same. When things get difficult, women are the ones who are there for you (laughter) ... Even though I think that the presence of men in schools... is interesting because we would have a male interaction... It would be interesting because the boys would have the two sides ... But women are more sensitive. Men are more pragmatic... They don’t worry if the kids cry...

As well as the lives of the professionals in schools, children’s lives are affected by gender. During school routines, boys and girls are exposed to direct and indirect messages about
how to behave, what is expected from them and of them, what they are allowed or prohibited to, and especially about what is “normal” for every gender to like (Teixeira, 2001).

Indeed, in the school micro-organization, teachers have an important role in the realization of what is called, here, the “gender-based teaching” (Louro, 1997). Thus, expressing themselves orally or in writing, or even only by gestures, behaviors and manners, teachers legitimate models (male or female), and they act in such way to restrain the behavioral patterns considered inappropriate according to gender.

That points to the fact that the school is still being guided by conservative values regarding gender issues. Conservatism is expressed in the school dynamics, starting from monitoring students’ appearance (clothing, behaviors said to be appropriate for boys or girls, haircuts) to the control of what they may or may not talk and think, even including the division of school spaces (lines, toilets, games). The children are routinely reminded about their differences. The policing of conduct is extended from the images and messages that adorn the walls of the schools to the images and texts of textbooks (Louro, 1998).

Almost everything in the school context conspires to a standardization of different behaviors for them. The same occurs in the curriculum to which boys and girls are exposed, but not necessarily, have equal access. This inequality occurs silently, sometimes disguised in “kind” interactions between students and teachers and emphasize different “virtues” and skills for boys and girls (Teixeira et al, 2002).

After so much exposure and several penalties regarding what students may or may not do throughout time, children start to control themselves and they even exercise control over colleagues regarding possible gender-related behaviors:

> School culture makes stable responses to be expected and teaching facts becomes more important than understanding intimate issues. Moreover, in this culture, authoritarian manners of social interactions prevent the possibility of new questions and do not stimulate the development of some interest that can lead teachers and students to directions that may prove to be surprising. All this makes sexuality issues to be relegated to the category of right or wrong answers (Britzman, 2003, page 85-86).

Through practices such as bullying, there will be a real “inquisition of genres”. Thus, guided by their teachers, the student body learns, over time, to exercise control over colleagues, defining, encouraging and criticizing deviations of standards regarding being a boy or a girl.

The case below illustrates an enhanced reinforcement of this model. It is from boys during a lesson in the physics lab (at the Technical School from UFMG). These students resisted developing the activities proposed by the teacher, spending most part of the course pretending to do them and she did not notice the fact. The following tables show how teenagers have already crystallized certain masculinity standards.
Here, the school played the role of teaching gendered bodies and minds. Despite the losses in terms of academic involvement that is established for boys and girls, there are indirect gains. Boys escape schoolwork without being caught and teachers do not realize it, in fact, perhaps many believe that “boys are like that” - indomitable (Santomé, 1995). As for girls, they can negotiate better with the school, because they adopt docility and submission behaviors, so valued by school organizations.

Really, rather than challenging their students about the stereotypes regarding gender or any other prejudices, the school often insists on cultivating outdated rhetoric. Faced with the new (usually a “wrong answer”), the school does not question its contents, but feels questioned. After all, what to do with so many innovations, many new family organizations, many new conditions of gender and sexualities? The school is wrong when it interprets the mismatch of ideas as if it were disrespect. This situation generates an internal crises, triggering feelings of unease and confusion about what to do between teachers and students.

So, what is the role of the school and teachers?

Therefore, after reflecting upon the discriminatory character of the curriculum selection and pedagogical practices, the next step from the teachers’ part should be a change in the educational actions:

A second step is taken when an inclusive curriculum inverts the hegemony that characterized the old dominant curriculum. For instance, instead of requiring working-class students to participate in learning organized around the interests of the middle class, middle-class students are required to participate in learning organized around working-class interests (Connell, 1995, page 239).

There is no single answer to this matter. The school certainly influences the identities of their students and, certainly, of its professionals. However, identities are constructed in interaction with others. If there were no such possibilities, there would not be resistance from students educated by strict rules even if they did not know other ways of “being”. This expansion of the range of possibilities of existing, with respect to gender relations, is only possible with innovative practices, without “pre-judgments” and/or retrograde positions, as indicated below by the same author:

Requiring boys to participate in curriculum organized around the interests of girls, and straight students to participate in curriculum organized around the interests of lesbian and gays, demands a capacity for empathy, for taking the viewpoint of the other, which is systematically denied in hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, page 240).
The case reported below illustrates this transformation. There are, here, children and teachers that contradict the usual and idealized perceptions regarding the relation between childhood and innocence (Teixeira, 1998):

**Teacher:** (...) sometimes, some students come to your class and you feel that their performance is not... really satisfactory. It is an opportunity for him/her to speak out... that his/her father did this or that, you know... A female student arrived to me and asked... how does a man knows if a woman had an orgasm... With teenage students... I have no bonds out of the classroom, you know? I can’t give ‘em exclusive attention (!) I have to give ‘em attention in a general way. And then... It seems to start some sort of dissatisfaction, they get angry... They become aggressive... I’ve already had many problems like this (!)... And I’m not being presumptuous, but it seems that I have some kind of charisma... it is something that gets them involved, but it’s not something I do on purpose... Some girl has even tried to grab me and kiss me... It’s embarrassing. This year alone, I have already received many notes, sometimes they don’t sign them... and put them in the box, in the book... I am aware that I don’t tease them, because when it happens I’m in the classroom, I’m not thinking about myself, I think about the work I must develop. I’ve already been harassed in the hallway, indeed.

**Researcher:** What type of harassment was it?

**Teacher:** The girl has tried to grab me and kiss me... it’s funny, and embarrassing. This year, I received many notes, sometimes, they send anonymous notes, you know, inside the mailbox, and sometimes they wait for me to get distracted to put it in my book... I have this problem, you know. I’m aware that I don’t provoke them, because when it happens, I’m in the classroom, I’m not thinking about myself, I think about the work I must develop. Actually, I was very clear when talking to the coordinator, but then... it is something that... I get that they’re teenagers.

According to one of the interviewed teachers, a fellow teacher told her “(...) I like to teach the youngsters”, revealing that she went out with her younger pupils (teenagers) to initiate them sexually. This report contradicts the perceptions of female teachers as self-sacrificing mothers and asexual beings, devoted to “care” for children and people “above any suspicion”.

It is understood, then, that identity is not an unalterable product, on the contrary, it is exactly its instability that allows changes (Eugênio, 2008). There is no crystallized identity in any individual. There are, but, many identities that merge or disappear throughout life. So, there is the possibility for interventions and consequent changes of these contexts. The construction of identities is performed through learning, without “endpoints”. Such construction is not restricted to the classrooms or to the transmission of systematic knowledge, but also to the indirect, not deliberate, and unconscious acquisition of tactics, knowledge, and behaviors.

In spite of having the commitment to the transmission of a systematic education as its main goal, the school is not only about that (Louro, 1997). Nor it is up to the school to make value judgments, it should give access to other ways of living/existing in the world instead. Therefore, when dealing with systematic knowledge, the school needs to dialogue with common sense, whose references give meaning to the world of individuals when those are challenged by extraneous information. Ignoring it would be like resetting the individuals’ experiences, which is impossible in the learning process. So, taking possession of the individuals’ common sense, beliefs, and practices is an initial step for “certainties” to be decon-
structured, and, thus, other values could emerge. Common sense, when properly perceived, can confront “social ghosts”, nevertheless, it has an intense power over individuals.

Consequently, for the school to occupy a significant position for those who attend it, and also in order to have an education that aims at social change, it is necessary to face discussions, uncomfortable conversations, and sometimes to be surprised/challenged regarding other worldviews.

However, what often happens in school communities is the gender-oriented behavior management, including children, teachers, employees, and even families. This control does not happen from the top down, from a direction that favors segregation of sexes, but among the groups themselves: teachers, classmates, and staff, in short, almost the entire school community. Therefore, male and female teachers have their professional and private lives patrolled within sexual parameters. In fact, several studies observe a different treatment directed to women and men who teach in elementary and secondary education (Teixeira, 2002; Eugênio, 2008; Louro, 1997).

Thus, teachers are submitted and submit themselves to the micro-politics of school organizations, leading themselves to a partial and wrong appropriation of the meaning of teaching. This misconception leads to the adulteration of teaching functions, a process called teaching “de-intellectualization”. As a consequence, pedagogical practices contrary to social equity arise (Nascimento and Villani, 2004). Such practices reproduce misconceptions about genre identities that, once transmitted to students, can generate psychological and material barriers during the childhood. Sexual segregation does not produce the mere belief in “masculine” or “feminine” natures: it also generates power, helping certain groups to maximize their interests and submit themselves to others.

Therefore, one cannot ignore that, as other labor organizations, schools are also built through power disputes (legitimate or not). Powers that may be, more often than not, exercised in non-traditional ways. These power disputes influence the identities and professional trajectories of teachers, and, consequently, of students/pupils. Despite the countless losses, in such situations, some people benefit from ratifying traditional perceptions about sex. Some win elections, others can “escape from the classroom”, and others avoid working, for example. Sometimes, parents also take advantage from this sentimental manipulation of schools and educational institutions to delegate some family functions and household chores.

After all, on several occasions, the school would rather be silent, negligent or conservative than fighting education concepts for boys and girls based on the conception that naturalizes behaviors for each sex. So, according to this perception, sex becomes an “unquestionable object” (given as a pre-cultural fact), which actually announces a range of moral attributes that have no direct relationship with nature (Haraway apud Aguiar, 1997). In addition to that, Louro (1997, page 91) says that:

> From architecture to physical arrangements; from symbols to the provisions on behaviors and practices; from teaching techniques to assessment strategies; everything operates in the constitution of boys and girls, men and women – inside and outside the school, since the institution ‘says’ something not only for those inside, but also for those that do not participate in it.

For instance, in a mixed work group, girls are assigned to write the reports because they have the most beautiful handwriting, since boys are labeled as “sloppy”, instead of being taught how to be more organized, and girls should be taught to have more initiative.
Conclusion

Educational institutions orchestrate, according to its micro-politics, actions that ‘govern’ gender relations, deeply marking the professional/school lives of teachers and students. It prevents, thus, the implementation of equity among individuals and the exercise of a fair education and citizenship, full of opportunities for both sexes. Despite this reality, in most studies on the subject up to now, “(...) education is often discussed as if it involved only information, teachers tipping measured doses of facts into the pupils’ heads; but that is just part of the process. At a deeper level, education is the formation of capacities for practice” (Connell, 1995, page 239).

Then, perhaps the greatest challenge for schools may still be to break with the unilinear and pseudoscientific discourse, in other words, it should go beyond the common sense that seeks to frame us all in just a male or female identity, as if being a woman or a man could be performed under a single cultural/historical landmark.

For this, it is recommended, here, that the first step is to appeal to the awareness of teachers about gender issues, leading them to wonder how the norms about sexual distinctions influenced and influence their own life trajectories. In practice, that means, among other things:

Requiring boys to participate in curriculum organized around the interests of girls, and straight students to participate in curriculum organized around the interests of lesbian and gays, demands a capacity for empathy, for taking the viewpoint of the other, which is denied systematically in hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, page 240).

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that, throughout the text, it has been argued that this self-awareness process allows teachers to denature, and above all, develop certain estrangement in relation to roles, spaces, speech, behavior and specific talents established for men and women and pay attention to the relations of power that pervade the social relations that take place at schools, as it happens in any other social environment. This estrangement is built through dialogue with common sense, with their own prejudices. Those teachers, once aware of the harm of sexual segregation, may become facilitators of changes along with the children and the community, aiming at a more anti-sexist and equal education.

References


