

# Chapter 11

## From the French Republican Educational Reforms to the ABCD de l'égalité: Thinking About Change in the History of Girls' Education in France

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The French republication reformers who pushed through an impressive array of educational laws between 1879 and 1886 emphasized how these laws promoted one of the central ideological cornerstones of the French revolution: equality. In Jules Ferry's oft-quoted speech at the Salle Molière in 1870, he repeatedly emphasized the need to promote 'equality' within the educational system arguing that inequalities in education inevitably perpetuated inequality within society. The equality he described encompassed, in his words, both that between the social classes and that between the two sexes: "Equality in education is the reconstitution of unity within the family", he argued.<sup>1</sup> As this excerpt suggests, equality between the sexes, in Ferry's view, was a highly gendered concept.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the early Third Republic, born out of the defeat against Prussia, introducing equality meant changing a 'system' that was perceived as hierarchical and inherited from an earlier less democratic age. In this sense equality carried with it an imperative to change what existed without envisioning the end of a system constructed around enduring dualities: schools for the rich and schools for the poor, schools for boys and schools for girls.<sup>3</sup>

Although the rhetoric of equality permeated the debates of the 1870s and 1880s, what the Republicans put in place essentially created a network of institutions for girls that juxtaposed those of boys. And while there is no denying the significance of the laws that determined the creation of these new institutions – particularly the

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Ferry, « Discours de la salle Molière », 10 April 1870, in Robiquet (1893).

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship on Jules Ferry abounds. For a thorough examination of his work in the field of education as well as his positions as Minister of the Colonies, see Rudelle (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Michel Chapoulie has recently argued for the ways a broader understanding of equality in education emerged in educational debates after 1900. See Jean-Michel (2010).

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public normal schools for girls and the lycées and *collèges de jeunes filles* – they unquestionably facilitated an understanding of ‘equality in education’ that allowed girls to attend different schools, follow different programs and receive different degrees from those of boys at the secondary level. This vision of ‘equality in difference’ was, of course, widely shared by both men and women of this period, including within feminist circles.<sup>4</sup>

This essay begins with this Republican moment that defined for decades, and arguably for almost a century, the vision of gender equality that the educational system served to promote. By examining the discourses about girls’ education specifically, I call attention along with a few contemporary feminist voices to the limits of this equality in institutional terms. Most feminists, however, failed to question these limits in part because of their concern to support the measures of a frequently contested Republican government. The second part of my essay moves to consider the interwar period when the feminist discourse about girls’ education changed, focusing increasingly on measures that would introduce professional equality between male and female teachers but also equality of opportunity for girls through course programs and diplomas. Finally I will examine the very recent debate about the educational material baptized the ‘ABCD de l’égalité’ that addresses the issue of gender equality in the treatment of young children. The focus on these three moments offers a way to consider the historically contingent definition and usage of an abstract ideal, such as equality, within educational discourse as it applied to the relationship between the sexes. Ultimately I seek to understand why ‘equality’ in education carries such polemical weight in contemporary France, given the ostensible respect paid to the concept. The historical investigation of how this discourse about equality has changed, as well attention to who brandishes this discourse offers a way to understand this conundrum.

## 11.1 The Republican Moment: Debating the Ethos of Girls’ Education

The artisans of the French Republican school system are familiar figures in contemporary France. Schools and streets through French cities bear the names of Jules Ferry, Camille Sée, Ferdinand Buisson and Paul Bert. All French pupils encounter during their schooling the name of Jules Ferry and his educational laws that introduced free, secular and obligatory primary education for boys and girls alike. While his legacy with respect to colonialism has recently been the object of both public and academic debate, his educational legacy remains largely unquestioned. Certainly historians recognize that the ‘equality’ he defended did not involve questioning the existence of a dual educational network, where a vast majority of the population attended a primary school and a privileged few pursued secondary

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Offen (2000), and Scott (1996).

studies. Nor did this equality mean that schooling opened the same opportunities for boys and girls. But, as Mona Ozouf has recently argued, Ferry defended a form of moral equality between men and women that justified a primary school program that was the same for boys and girls, with the same certificate that culminated these studies (although it should be noted these studies ideally took place in single sex schools with a schoolteacher of the same sex as the pupils). The only difference that existed in the law was the nature of manual work. Here, differing gender roles explained the need for different types of exercises: sewing for girls, gardening and woodwork for boys. Indeed, Ozouf has argued, the (unnamed) feminist scholars who criticize Ferry for institutionalizing gender stereotypes and gender inequality sadly miss the point through an anachronistic reading of his educational oeuvre.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, Ferry had feminist contemporaries who read the message of equality differently and who questioned an interpretation that subsumed women into their social role as wives and mothers. Hubertine Auclert, in particular, insisted that women were men's equals, deserving the same rights: "You do not owe obedience and submission to your husband. . . you are his equal in everything" (Hause 1987). While her political efforts were directed toward claiming women's right to citizenship, she did not neglect the issue of education. She argued that women could not count on men to provide them with equal opportunities in education:

Women must vote in order to be educated. Young girls will never have serious instruction, a scientific and rational instruction until women have the right to debate budgets, to introduce a pair of scales in the budget of public instruction, and to establish the principle of equality for all children in these scales, that is to say, the same number of schools, the same quantity of science for girls as well as for boys.<sup>6</sup>

This declaration, published a few months after the Camille Sée law had created a system of public secondary schools for girls, drew attention to the limits of this law. Girls were not given the same quantity of 'science' as boys. She denounced even more harshly the female diploma that girls earned at the end of their secondary studies. This diploma did not open the same doors as the baccalaureate and was worthless in her opinion. For Auclert "An identical teaching for women and men, with the same ideas and the same knowledge, should result in an identical diploma".<sup>7</sup> Auclert's vision of an equal secondary education for girls and boys was only enacted some three decades later in 1924 when girls were finally allowed to study the subjects allowing them to pass the baccalaureate within female *collèges* and *lycées*.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the republican legislators and their allies within the educational administration shared a vision of girls' education based on the conviction that women played a different role in society, thus legitimating the emergence of schools for girls that were in fact quite different. This was especially the case in the secondary

<sup>5</sup> See Ozouf (2014), especially pp. 62–66.

<sup>6</sup> Auclert, *La Citoyenne*, 10 April 1881, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Auclert, *La Citoyenne*, 24 April 1881, cited in Taïeb (1982).

<sup>8</sup> For the details of this struggle, see Mayeur (1977) and Offen (1983).

schools directed toward a middle-class clientele as can be seen in Ferdinand Buisson's monument to republican pedagogy, the *Dictionnaire de pédagogie*, first published in the 1880s and then reedited in 1911. For the authors of this dictionary who wrote about girls' education, 'difference' as an organizational principal was a given, and this extended to the idea that girls and boys should be educated in different, single-sex schools. As Danielle Tucac has recently argued, there is very little evidence in the thousands of pages of this dictionary of a more egalitarian vision of girls' education (Tucac 2006). For republican pedagogues writing about girls, 'equality in education' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century essentially meant wresting girls from the Church, not opening doors for equal opportunities in the school room, and even less envisioning equal access to the workplace.

## **11.2 Questioning Equality in Girls' Secondary Education: In the Interwar Period**

The ability to envision offering the same education to middle-class girls and boys emerged gradually in the interwar period in the context of expanding opportunities of skilled work for women, debates about the necessity to reconsider the social parameters of boys' secondary education, and women's increasing presence within French universities. While historians of women have tended to emphasize French women's failure to win the right to vote after World War I, and highlighted the fragmented nature of the French feminist movement in the postwar period, these years were important for those who defended women's right to an education that would allow them access to higher education or to jobs like those of their middle-class brothers. By exploring more carefully the discourses about the relationship between girls' education and women's work, I emphasize the changing understanding of what 'equality in education' might offer to women. More specifically, I'm interested in charting how debates about women's access to the baccalaureate in public secondary schools led to concern about how an egalitarian educational program would undermine gender identities.

A few highly educated women engaged actively in the debates about the characteristics of girls' secondary education, the certification students should receive, and the careers such studies should open to women. The absence of consensus about whether female programs should be identical to those of male programs, to whether the baccalaureate constituted the primary goal for girls, or about the gendered characteristics of the teaching profession reveal the difficulties contemporaries had determining what constituted an egalitarian orientation in secondary education. Of course secondary education was not egalitarian in this period; it remained accessible only to the privileged few. Still criticisms about the elite nature of the system accentuated during this period, and so it's not surprising that feminists added their criticism of gender inequalities to the voices of those who denounced the social inequalities.

Female secondary school teachers don't have a reputation in France for their combativeness and studies of the interwar period have tended to focus on the Groupes féministes laïques who published a newsletter and campaigned to promote coeducation in primary schools and sexual education for boys and girls.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Société des Agrégées, which was created in 1920, essentially defended their own position as working 'intellectual' women, campaigning for equal pay and equal access to the same professional certification as men. In 1921, they refused to become members of the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises (CNFF) as well as of the Ligue pour les droits de la femme, although by the end of the decade they decided to join the former, considering this represented a sign of 'female solidarity' (Verneuil 2005). Less studied by historians, the Association Française des Femmes Diplômées de l'Université used its international networks to lobby for greater equality for women within the intellectual professions.<sup>10</sup> It is striking, however, when surveying the debates of this period, to see how thoroughly gender inequalities continued to structure the discourse about secondary education.

As early as 1903 the newly constituted CNFF had sought to make the baccalaureate available for women within the public secondary system.<sup>11</sup> Women managed to pass the baccalaureate while studying at home or in private institutions, but at the beginning of the twentieth century, the *lycées* and *collèges de jeunes filles* continued to offer an educational program that was shorter than that of boys, lacking in the classical humanities and philosophy, with a final diploma that did not allow women to pursue studies at the university (the *diplôme de fin d'études secondaires*). As the feminist movement organized in these years this difference was increasingly the object of protest.<sup>12</sup>

The war opened new opportunities for women in the teaching profession as male teachers left for the front (Chanet 2007). But more importantly these years witnessed a large-scale debate among teachers, administrators, and parent-teacher associations about the necessary reform of girls' education that built upon pre-war discussions about the need to prepare young women for the baccalaureate.<sup>13</sup> Unlike previous discussions where decisions were made within the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Instruction publique*, the government appointed an extra-parliamentary commission, which included six women educators, to investigate girls' secondary education and suggest reforms. The commission decided to consult widely on this issue, following the method first adopted at the end of the century when the baccalaureate underwent an important reform. By thus opening the debate, the government

<sup>9</sup> Sohn (1971, 1977). An unpublished dissertation does, however, look at women secondary schoolteachers, see Efthymiou (2002).

<sup>10</sup> This association was first founded in 1920 as the Société nationale féminine de rapprochement universitaire. It took the name Association des Femmes Diplômées de l'Université (AFDU) in 1922. Dominated in these early years by female schoolteachers, it represented the French branch of the International Federation of University Women, founded in 1919. Fouché (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Offen, "The second sex," p. 272.

<sup>12</sup> See Offen, "The second sex," p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> See Mayeur, *L'enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles*, pp. 398–410.

implicitly recognized a coming-of-age of girls' secondary education, which deserved serious consideration. The debates revealed very different opinions about what secondary girls' education should strive to achieve in relationship to boys' education. While the final report of 1919 recommended maintaining the distinctly feminine character of girls' secondary schools, as well as the feminine *diplôme de fin d'études secondaires*, some members defended the creation of a feminine baccalaureate, which would allow girls to pursue university studies. Most of the female commission members energetically refused the creation of such a baccalaureate fearing it would serve to reinforce the idea that girls' diplomas were both different and inferior to those of boys. For the most radical women educators, equality in education meant girls should have the opportunity to study for and pass the same baccalaureate as the one boys passed.

The commission's report resulted in an outpouring of articles in the pedagogical and more general press between 1919 and 1920 that reveal the extent to which gender equality in education was becoming an issue that extended beyond a feminist minority. In fact, families and associations representing families wanted their daughters to be able to pass the (male) baccalaureate and envision liberal careers. Commission member Adrien Veber, for example, introduced a plea for 'equal education' in the Chamber of Deputies, urging his fellow deputies to support a reform that involved lengthening the girls' program of study and adding the subjects required to prepare for the baccalaureate. Proponents of this reform referred to this process as one of 'assimilation' of girls' and boys' secondary programs (but which represented in reality a 'masculinization' of the female program).<sup>14</sup> This viewpoint was also that of the CNFF who had high hopes at the end of the war that women were on the verge of gaining the vote. At a Congress in Strasbourg in October 1919, the issue of a feminine baccalaureate, distinct from the one that existed, was once again a subject of debate. Congress members mostly concurred that such a creation would in reality be a retrograde decision.<sup>15</sup>

In the end Julie Siegfried, President of the CNFF between 1912 and 1922 and one of the participants in the inter-parliamentary commission, issued a resolution in support of 'equality before the baccalaureate'. The prominent feminist Avril de Sainte-Croix argued at this Congress in Strasbourg that "young women have the right to the same culture as that of boys." She pursued by noting, however, that it would be premature to push for coeducation. Hence equality resided in the content of girls' students not in an effort to place boys and girls together in front of the same teachers, teaching the same programs. For Jeanne Crouzet-Benaben access to the same programs and the same diploma were necessary conditions for post-war gender relations: "Everyone agrees that it is necessary to mount an energetic

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<sup>14</sup> Offen, "The second sex," p. 279. See Jeanne Crouzet-Benaben's description of this effort, which she supported wholeheartedly in the *Revue Universitaire* [hereafter RU], 1919, I; 183–86; 379–80; 11, 59–61.

<sup>15</sup> Offen, "The second sex," p. 280.

campaign so that the culture given to both boys and girls be equal. In essence equality for both sexes before the baccalaureate should exist".<sup>16</sup>

In 1924 the Minister of Public Instruction Bérard cautiously opened the way for this vision of equal education. Rather than introducing a law, which would have involved parliamentary debate, he passed a decree opening a track within girls' secondary schools that allowed them to prepare for the baccalaureate.<sup>17</sup> The female *diplôme de fin d'études secondaires* remained in place to assuage conservative opinion.<sup>18</sup> Within a few short years, this diploma withered away as students and their families voted for 'equality' and a degree that kept options opened. The number of girls who passed the baccalaureate increased rapidly, as did their numbers in the university opening another series of debates about women in the professions.<sup>19</sup>

Four years after the Bérard decree, in 1928, Jeanne Crouzet-Benaben instigated a survey among male and female secondary schoolteachers to judge their reactions to what was described as "the identification of masculine and feminine [secondary] programs."<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, given the debates of the previous decade, the responses showed that families and teachers remained very divided about this measure. The teachers who responded noted for the most part that families supported the new organization because it allowed their daughters to pass the prestigious baccalaureate degree. The survey was more focused however on the gendered effects of the measure, asking teachers "Have young women progressed intellectually and morally from receiving the same instruction as boys? In what disciplines does such progress exist and how is it evident."<sup>21</sup> Associated with this question were others asking whether girls had lost out from the change; teacher were asked to describe what they regretted no longer teaching from the female programs. Finally the survey asked whether the 'identification' of programs precluded teaching in a 'feminine spirit' the same subjects taught to boys. Might there be ways of choosing subjects and texts that would allow female education to preserve its initial character?

The nuanced answers of the respondents often came from the female teachers, who had attended schools where they had followed the programs designed for girls.

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<sup>16</sup> "Tout le monde se trouve d'accord pour admettre qu'il faut mener une campagne énergique pour que la culture donnée aux filles et aux jeunes gens soit égale. En somme, l'égalité de tout et de toutes devant le baccalauréat." Jeanne Crouzet-Benaben published articles on girls' educational and professional opportunities in the "Bulletin de l'enseignement secondaire des jeunes filles" that appeared four times a year in the *Revue Universitaire* from 1909 until 1938. She signed her name Crouzet Ben-Aben, but her name was in fact Benaben. See RU, 1919, 2, 370–371.

<sup>17</sup> In the same year, all of the masculine competitive exams, the agrégation, were also opened to women. In 1928 female secondary schoolteachers won the battle for equal salaries with men and in 1932 that of teaching the same number of hours as men. See Chervel (1992).

<sup>18</sup> See Perin (2007). RU 71, April 1924, résultats d'enquête.

<sup>19</sup> For the figures, see Perin, *Le Bulletin*, p. 234.

<sup>20</sup> RU, 1928, p. 300.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

Many entertained regrets about the loss of a general culture and of courses in morals and psychology.<sup>22</sup> Most, however, considered it possible to imprint a feminine character on a ‘male’ program; this was, “a question of psychology and *doigté* (skill), wrote Mlle Dugard”.<sup>23</sup> Mlle Courtin, a science teacher at the Parisian Lycée Molière was among those who wholeheartedly approved the adoption of a masculine science program: “As for the way of teaching, this issue does not exist in the sciences where it is impossible to imagine teaching mathematics, physical or the natural sciences differently according to the sex.”<sup>24</sup> This gender-neutral vision was not, however, universally shared.<sup>25</sup>

The most hostile reactions came from M.J Maillon, a male foreign language teacher and president of the Amicale mixte for the lycée de Toulon, who described the reform as “absurd.”<sup>26</sup> In his view girls clearly suffered intellectually, morally and physically from the new measures which copied the force-feeding and encyclopedic nature of boys’ education. But while boys were able to resist this treatment thanks to their “joyous animality, their taste for sports, the thickness of their muscles, their capacity NOT to pay attention and their general inertia”, girls suffered precisely because they were good students: “more attentive, more docile, more diligent”, they languished under this inhuman “bachotage” and wear themselves out absorbing programs “that for girls’ souls were like feeding a Creole stomach the food designed for Eskimos.”<sup>27</sup> This remarkable argument that associated racial and gender differences to condemn the equality of education between boys and girls suggests the extent to which this equality threatened gender identities.

Another issue that preoccupied secondary schoolteachers during this period was that of coeducation, as increasingly families in small communities petitioned the government to allow their daughters to attend the neighboring boys’ *collège*, when no girls *collège* existed.<sup>28</sup> Only a minority of secondary schools during this period were affected by this practice, but discussions in pedagogical journals reveal that for many female secondary schoolteachers a commitment to teaching girls and boys

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<sup>22</sup> Hélène Guénot who was the secretary general for the *Revue de l’enseignement secondaire* was among the women teachers who feared that the assimilation of the male and female programs would lead to a form of masculine feminism. See her “Féminisme et éducation féministe,” *Le Temps*, 25 sept. 1925.

<sup>23</sup> RU, 1928, p. 309.

<sup>24</sup> “Quant à la manière d’enseignement, elle ne se pose pas en sciences où l’on ne peut concevoir de différences dans la façon de présenter les mathématiques, des sciences physiques ou naturelles à des jeunes filles ou à des jeunes garçons” *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>25</sup> The debates about career orientation in these years reveal the degree to which access to the same course programs and degrees did not translate into a vision of equal opportunity within the workplace, particularly for women with university degrees. See Rennes (2007); Charron (2014). For a study of educated women’s struggle for professional equality, see Clark (2000).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> See Rogers, « La mixité », 173–179 as well as the associated documents in Jacquet-Francillon, Renaud-d’Enfert and Loeffel (2010).



the same subjects did not extend to the idea that they learn within the same classroom. Jeanne Petitcol in particular published several articles on the subject of coeducation, highlighting the pedagogical problems this practice generated. Given the difference in temperament between boys and girls, she feared girls would be relegated to the sidelines rather than rising to the intellectual challenges of a mixed sex classroom. Furthermore, she argued, all sorts of moral problems would inevitably arise.<sup>29</sup> Other women teachers, notably within the *Société des Agrégées*, were less apt to essentialize sex characteristics but nonetheless argued against coeducation, for fear that men would be appointed to direct coeducational schools, thus pushing women from positions as directors (a concern that ultimately proved well-founded).

A year after Jeanne Crouzet-Benaben's 1928 survey on the 'identification' of male and female secondary school programs, women secondary teachers won the right to receive equal wages for equal qualifications and increasingly the debates about girls' secondary focused less on its content than on what it prepared girls to do. Despite the 'victories' that allowed girls to prepare the baccalaureate in public secondary schools, or the achievement of equal wages for qualified female secondary school teachers, most of the actors in these struggles remained profoundly convinced that differences between men and women, whether biologically or socially determined, justified differences in programs, in pedagogy and in the organization of secondary education.

As Mary Louise Roberts has argued, gender was central in the cultural debates of post-war France, and education was an arena where such debates were particularly rife.<sup>30</sup> Secondary school teachers in particular were not inclined to defend positions that might suggest the emergence of a 'civilization without sexes'. On the contrary, the new opportunities for educated professional women were presented in ways that highlighted the complementary attributes of men and women. While most women teachers would have challenged those who argued that the identification of secondary programs would lead toward effeminate boys and masculine girls, few contested the idea that it was best for girls and boys to study in a single-sex environment. For most, equality in education could be achieved without coeducation.

### 11.3 Gender Equality in a Coeducational System: Hopes, Doubts and Contestation

In the post-war period, coeducation nonetheless progressed little by little within secondary schools, as an emerging adolescent youth culture increasingly led boys and girls to spend time with each other.<sup>31</sup> The spread of coeducation, however,

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<sup>29</sup> Petitcol (1925). Yves Verneuil, in particular has studied these debates in the interwar period.

<sup>30</sup> Roberts (1994). See Verneuil's (2014) analysis of the debates concerning coeducation in primary education.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Downs (2002), Bantigny (2007), and Prost (2004).

generated less attention among contemporaries than the process of democratization within the secondary system. As a result, scholars have followed the lead of contemporaries devoting their attention to the effects of the emergence of a common secondary program where rich and poor followed the same programs, while ignoring the fact that boys and girls now followed the same programs on the same school benches (Rogers 2004). The feminist movement that reemerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s also paid little heed to the question of coeducation, focusing instead on women's right to control their bodies.

In educational circles the vociferous debates of this period focused on issues of social equality, resulting in the passage of the Haby law in 1975 that established the 'collège unique'. Far less commented upon, this same law required that all public schools from elementary level to high school admit both boys and girls. For most observers gender equality appeared finally to have been achieved within the schools. A symbol of this achievement was the government's decision to open the prestigious École Polytechnique to women candidates in 1972. Anne Chopinet, one of seven women who succeeded the competitive entrance exam in that year, entered at the top of her class. For most pedagogues in France, sex equality was seen to have been achieved.

As a result, attention to gender differences in schooling was virtually absent from public attention from the mid 1970s until the early 1990s, contrary to the situation in Britain, the United States or Germany where feminist scholarship took the place of the feminist movement and examined the results of reform initiatives that had progressively allowed girls to follow the same studies, attend the same schools and envision the same careers as boys (Rogers 2003). Studies of the history of coeducation appeared in all of these countries and the insights of sociologists and psychologists increasingly drew attention to the limits of coeducation in terms of promoting gender equality in either the workplace or the home. At the same time, scholars also acknowledged what coeducation revealed: girls did better than boys in the schoolroom but then chose orientations and careers that did little to change an established gender hierarchy in society. Equality of opportunity in school wasn't enough.

In France, the newly elected socialist government passed a decree on 22 July 1982 stating that coeducation was intended to create equality between the sexes (*assurer la pleine égalité des chances*), but this of course did nothing to change pedagogical practices and familial strategies that often unconsciously contributed to the perpetuation of gender inequalities within the working world. Recognition of this state of affairs only developed slowly within the academic community despite a few pioneering studies among scholars in education and sociology that highlighted the paradox of girls' superior achievements in school and their difficulty transforming this school capital into economic capital.<sup>32</sup> Historians, however,

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<sup>32</sup> Mosconi (1989), Duru Bellat (1990), and Baudelot & Establet (1992). For a succinct presentation of this scholarship, see Marry and Schweitzer (2005), *Les frontières de l'inégalité*. See the recent issue "La mixité scolaire : une thématique (encore) d'actualité ?" of the *Revue française de pédagogie* 171/2 (2010).

were very slow to enter this debate and even slower to study what the implementation of coeducation meant within classrooms, how it affected professional teaching practices and the ways it influenced students' academic trajectories. As a result, the ostensible equality of the coeducational classroom remained very much a 'black box' for scholars interested in how the school system fashions gender relations over time. Although I count myself among the few historians who have worked on the history of coeducation, my own work tends to end the story in 1975 with the generalization of coeducation.<sup>33</sup> The heated debates in 2013–2014 about the promotion of gender equality within the schoolroom brings attention to the ways this issue remains problematic, unquestioned, and understudied. In the land of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the male of fraternity continues to trump the female in equality.

### 11.3.1 *The ABCD de l'égalité*

In 2013 the Minister of Education Vincent Peillon and the Minister for the Promotion of the Rights of Women Najat Vallaud-Belkacem put in place an experimental program to promote gender equality and non-discriminatory attitudes in pre-school and elementary schools. This involved encouraging schoolteachers to use a set of reading and pedagogical materials baptized the 'ABCD de l'égalité.' Children read or were told stories about families where men and women shared domestic tasks, where men cooked and women worked, and where children encountered families with parents of the same sex. The idea behind this initiative was that boys and girls should dream of futures unrestricted by the constraints of sexist or homophobic prejudice.

The program reflected the results of several decades of gender research in sociology and psychology. These studies showed that despite ostensible equality within the school system, girls and boys internalized very early gender stereotypes that encouraged girls to envision their future in relation to their role as mothers, much like their ancestors of the 1880s. The program directed teachers toward pedagogical materials that did not reinforce these stereotypes, as well as those that emphasized non-discriminatory values. In many ways this program represented the logical pursuit of objectives framed within a series of inter-ministerial accords passed and then prolonged since 2000, known as 'Conventions pour promouvoir l'égalité entre les filles et les garçons, les hommes et les femmes dans le système éducatif.' These conventions drew attention to persistent gender inequalities and encouraged a range of measures that would challenge gender stereotypes. No financial incentives however accompanied the proposed measures.

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<sup>33</sup> In 2010 I published with my colleague Thébaud (2010/2014), a popular book, whose analysis ends in 1975. The recent debates about gender equality in the schoolroom bring home the need to pursue our analysis into the twenty-first century.

The conventions, like the experimental program, no longer sought to change the organization of the school system through legislation, instead they shifted attention to the actors within the school system itself – teachers, administrators, career counselors – who were urged to spread the hope of a more egalitarian society in a discriminatory national economy, which 40 years of coeducation had done little to change.<sup>34</sup> The program in effect recognized both the limits of equal opportunity legislation as well as that of the school system itself. The problem of equality was no longer embedded in the system, rather it was embedded in the minds of French men and women, and even more, some suggested, in the minds of the parents of immigrant or second generation immigrants, who hadn't grown up with the promise of egalitarian schools.

Strategically the government probably made a mistake using the term gender to legitimate the program.<sup>35</sup> While 'gender' had gradually entered French academia in the early 2000s, and existed within the discourse of the European union, the term itself was not widely known within French society. Still it packed a surprisingly subversive message, thanks to the efforts of the Vatican. In France, the more conservative branches of the Catholic Church latched onto what was described as an insidious 'theory of gender' that supposedly encouraged young children to question their sex identity, thus potentially adding to the crowds of homosexuals who had achieved the right to marry with the law of 17 May 2013 known as 'le mariage pour tous.' The ensuing controversy linked in the public eye the school-books that encouraged non-stereotypical and non-discriminatory attitudes to the theory of gender and the end of the traditional family. This explosive combination, which brought hundreds of thousands of French men and women into the streets in the 'manif pour tous' as well as generating a movement by parents to refuse to send their children to school, led to the shelving of the ABCD de l'égalité and the decision to expunge all reference to the term 'gender' in the Ministry of Education's website.<sup>36</sup> In January 2015 a circular to promote equality between girls and boys in the schools carefully avoided any reference to gender in the measures proposed.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> By 2000, it had become clear that despite the fact that women in France now entered the most prestigious science and engineering schools, they remained a very small percentage of such students. Within the world of big business, women also remained a minute percentage at the top, while throughout the working world, women continued to earn 25% less than men. Silvera (2014).

<sup>35</sup> See a soon to be published article in Italian by Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, "Les mouvements socio-politiques en France contre la 'théorie du genre.' Fondements, effets et ripostes." The French debates about gender in both academic and civil society are examined in Bereni and Trachman (2014).

<sup>36</sup> See Delaporte (2014).

<sup>37</sup> *Bulletin officiel*, circulaire n° 2015-003 du 22 janvier 2015.

One hundred and forty years after Jules Ferry's call for equality in education at the Salle Molière, the representation of equality had clearly changed although not its disruptive potential. Still the context was unquestionably different. How can one understand such massive uproar about 'the theory of gender' and the promotion of non-stereotypical messages to young children? Clearly, sex stereotypes were not at the heart of the uproar, rather the challenges to sex identity seen to lie in 'a theory of gender' that encouraged children to question the biological underpinnings of what constituted the masculine and the feminine. And although the rhetoric of the debate was simplistic, one cannot help but recognize that this vision of the potential of gender to disrupt categories of thought echoed the promise of such theoreticians as Joan W. Scott and Judith Butler.

For the feminist historian of education that I am, this controversy highlights, however, the very *longue durée* of the struggle to promote equality within the school system, as well as the changing valences of what equality represents within educational discourses. If in the 1880s it meant offering girls the same opportunities for a 'modern' education without the weight of religious messages, by the 1920s it carried a different message for those, like Crouzet-Benaben, who envisioned the same education, the same degrees and the same professional opportunities. The recent debates reveal, however, that gender equality remains a contested notion, one that the school system in particular manages with difficulty, despite a century of lip service to the cause. While the socialist government's capitulation to the street demonstrations was interpreted by most as yet another example of its' weakness (revealed in numerous other political or financial affairs), I would argue it reveals far deeper hesitations about what gender equality implies. Indeed, I do think one could argue, that despite the socialist left's brief endorsement of the term 'genre,' gender remains a profoundly non-French category of analysis within a universalist republican culture. Despite the existence of a vibrant feminist scholarship in France, where the concept of gender is used critically, within broader society what is non-French is also not useful.<sup>38</sup> The changes of discourse traced here reveal the importance of determining who carries these discourses, what meaning they attach to them, and the historical context within which they have been produced. And here we see the limits of what a critical and feminist reading of the history of education can accomplish in the interests of promoting what appears to be a foundational concept of French culture: equality.

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<sup>38</sup> I am alluding here to Scott's (1986) foundational article.

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