

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA  
FACULTY OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK**

**SUMMARY OF THE  
DOCTORAL THESIS**

**Gender Differences in Education**

**Social factors, school success and the construction of  
gender in the school environment**

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**Keywords:** *sociology of education, gender in education, school success, school environment, social construction, quantitative and qualitative research, factor analysis, correlative analysis, thematic analysis*

Education is a crucial social activity for the individual and society, which makes it a fundamental institution in any society. Sociologists who study education investigate schooling systems and schools as institutions, the various social relationships within schools and the broader social environment that influences school participation and educational achievement as well as the social dimension of school success.

The social experiences resulting from the interaction between the individual and the group within the educational environment and practices are characterized by membership of various social groups. These experiences encourage the construction of gender, ethnic or class identities by interpreting the educational standards and practices and the social interactions in schools. The roles, functions and implications of education in society are, thus, on the one hand, of transmitting knowledge, of harmonizing behavior and responding to demands of society and, on the other hand, of constructing and negotiating social identities.

## **Abstract**

In the first two chapters I briefly presented the *theories of education* and how *gender* appears in the educational theorizing and is manifested in the educational practices, with their theoretical and practical implications.

In the third chapter I presented and analyzed several *policies and education strategies regarding gender*, considered relevant in (and compared between) Romania, the European Union and the United States of America.

In the fourth chapter I proposed a *quantitative research*, in the form of a statistical analysis of nationally representative data, on the perception of social factors in education. I created several statistical indicators (of the social and individual adaptation) and gender profiles (according to area of residence, school level and socio-economic status). They sought to explain the gender differences in terms of school success.

In the fifth chapter, resulting from a *qualitative research*, I looked at the institutional level and type of school environment, proposing an investigation on how gender is constructed within the

school environment. I analyzed the major themes of this construction in the sense of understanding gender differences in the practices, expectations and the academic success.

In the sixth chapter, the *conclusion*, I interpreted the results of research carried out and have recommended several intervention measures to balance the gender gap in education.

## **Chapter 1. Social Theories of education**

Sociologists have studied education in the light of various theoretical approaches and have interpreted its role and influences in society from the perspective of a variety of social problems. Consequently, the sociology of education “has become a vital and expanding field of sociology and has made of sociology and has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the social structures and processes that affect students’ learning and social development” (Hallinan, 2006) as well as to such diverse social issues as poverty, unemployment or crime (Willis, 1977).

Sociology of education, through its interest in the relationships, roles and educational groups, as fundamental and ramified domain of the social (Hatos, 2006; Stănciulescu, 1996), contributes to the understanding of complex structures and processes, regarding the diverse conditions and relations between the modalities of knowledge transmission and the educational roles, between values and social behaviors, between the individual and community, and between social identities and institutions.

The *functionalist theory* assigns education the role to prepare young people to become members of the society and considers it as a form of social control (Durkheim, 2006; Parsons and Bales, 1956). *Social conflict theory* conceptualizes education as a form of perpetuating power relations in society (Waller, 1965; Bowles and Gintis, 1977). *Symbolic interactionism theory* emphasizes the role of interaction between teacher and student in explaining the school relations, processualities and achievements (Merton, 1957; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992). The *theory of social reproduction* considers education a process through which social inequalities are passed on and reinforced (Boudon 1973, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The *social capital theories* examine the role of the social relations in school and of the school environment in the personal and social development, beyond the knowledge taught at school (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1990). The *constructivist and poststructuralist theories* regard the school and the learning processes as modalities through which social practices are negotiated and social identities are constructed (Peters and Burbules, 2004; Berger and Luckmann, 2008).

## 2. Gender in education at the intersection of social factors

In education research, *gender* has become a “category of analysis” (Dillabough, 2001) and an expression of social identity (and social identity construction) which served as an *analytical model* of multiple identity positions revealed by the poststructuralist and constructivist perspectives. At the same time, notions such as “equity” and “equality” in education were conceptualized following a critical model of interpreting gender imbalances and gender identity.

One of the major themes of research on gender in education is the *difference between the educational achievements* of boys and girls, which in literature was called *the gender gap* in education (Epstein, 1998, Francis, 2000, Martino and Meyem, 2001, Barash and Lipton, 2002). Initially this problem was formulated as an advantage that boys have over girls in some subjects (such as math or science), i.e. the so-called “masculine disciplines” (Goldstein, 1993).

It was remarked that the relative advantage of boys is not the result of real difference between the capacities and skills of students of both genders, but the reproduction of socially constructed gender differences (Francis, 2000). Moreover, researches in recent decades have turned to the analysis of the gap in form of the better academic results that girls constantly get (Barash and Lipton, 2002). In interpreting this latter gap, there were suggested, again, socially constructed gender differences which do not relate to the actual capabilities of the two genders, but to external factors such as grading the behavior and the influence of the different expectations teachers have of girls and boys (Skelton and Francis, 2005; Francis and Skelton, 2009).

A decisive approach in theorizing and researching gender in education was the *feminist perspective* (Oakley, 1972; Arnot and Mac an Ghail, 2006; Bank, Delamont and Marshall, 2007). Developed as a critical analysis of the role of women in society, the feminist perspective initially approached education in order to highlight the discrimination that occurs in the educational practices and discourses. Over time, the feminist theory that informed this research has evolved into a modality of theorizing gender and diversified itself ideologically and theoretically (Mirza and Reay, 2000; Skelton and Francis, 2005).

An overview of the main assumptions and types of research undertaken by feminist research on education, including the analyses that have incorporated, along with gender other social factors as well, such as class, race/ethnicity, disability etc. (Berger and Guidroz, 2009; Dill and Zambrana, 2009; Lykke, 2010) identified some major themes of the feminist sociology of education research: investigating the educational systems as gender regimes and the school relations as power relations; investigating school attendance and school success from a gender perspective (together with interpreting the better academic results that girls started to have

constantly as compared with the boys' results), investigating the ways in which gender identity is constructed in schools and through the discourses, practices and social relations in school. This aspect of gender identity construction in education has received two important contributions from black feminism and multiculturalist approach, which have theorized gender as a diverse and complex category, in terms of racial affiliation and intersectoral approach. They both stressed the importance of the relational character of gender identity construction: gender is constructed together with other social determinants such as race/ethnicity, class or age.

Among the issues addressed by the various researches on education that considered gender I mentioned: the academic performance by gender; the school success/failure by gender; educational strategies and policies concerning gender; gender segregation and school orientation by gender; perceptions of school success, educational and professional aspirations by gender; gender influences in negotiating and achieving school success; discipline problems and perceptions of disciplinary incidents in schools by gender; school attendance, social environment and school adaptation problems by gender; school dropout and school disengagement by gender; gender stereotypes in education (Catsambis, 1994; Lloyd, 1996; O'Connor, 1999; Morris, 2007; Jackson and Vavra, 2007; Kaufman, 2010).

The study of these issues have indicated gender differences in favor of boys or girls, and usually the gender dimension was formulated together with indicating other social factors (race, ethnicity, class, disability) in the sense of an intersectional approach.

### **Chapter 3. Education and educational policies from a gender perspective**

In this chapter I presented and discussed several educational practices and policies from a gender perspective in Romania, the European Union and the United States, in the idea of illustrating how the gender issues in education interact with the political, legal, social and cultural aspects. I followed the gender dimension and problematic as they manifested themselves at the level of the education structure, school attendance, educational legislation and specific policies, such as those regarding the gender equality.

In presenting the educational system and education in Romania I referred to the legal and institutional aspects, the educational structure and levels, the school attendance by gender (including the characterization of school population, school dropout or school/level completion by gender) and to some educational policies, highlighting such aspects as: decentralization and the education reform; gender equality perspective; feminization of education and gendered models in education; gender and ethnicity within the educational policies and practices and in



terms of conceptualizing the difference; decreasing and feminization of school population; gender differences in relation to duration, dropout, early leaving, school/level completion, and the international assessment of students.

The data presented (*The Report on the National Education*, MECTS, 2010; *Romanian Statistical Yearbook*, Chapter 8, “Education:”, 2009, *Programme for International Student Assessment*, 2006, 2009, *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*, 2007; *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study*, 2006) suggest that the trend of girls outperforming boys, observed in recent decades in different contexts, is not necessarily generalizable and requires an interpretation/a debate over the evaluation methods/materials/contexts that produce this gap (Arnot and Mac an Ghail, 2006; Bank, Delamont and Marshall, 2007). At the same time, it should be noted that the persistence of gender differences of school results, at national or international level, did not mean, as policy or as educational strategies, further approaches on gender issues and on how gender influences the academic achievement. Basically, the gender gap in school achievement is not a central theme of any educational policy. And, where it was acknowledged in the case of some descriptions of teaching and learning situation, it has not been treated as a problem that would contradict the assertion of “gender equality in education”.

My analysis showed that gender is relevant to all aspects mentioned above and included in Table 3.9

Table 3.9. *The relevance of the gender perspective to specific aspects of the Romanian educational system*

<b>Characteristic aspects described</b>	<b>Relevance from a gender perspective</b>
general characterization of the education system	feminized
educational policies	for minorities and disabled, less related to gender
school participation	feminized
completion rate	higher among girls
dropout rate	higher among boys
early school leaving rate	higher among boys
results in international assessments	better among girls

The presentation of the *educational policies from a gender perspective* was not only a thematic illustration (of gender in education) but also a way of questioning the *gender issues* and of interpreting how they were addressed.

We presented the major ideas and coordinates of the educational policies from a gender perspective in the European Union, including Romania and the U.S. starting from the identification of specific gender issues in education and society. Thus, policies such as those promoting equal opportunities (the main education policy concerning gender), were addressed in

terms of issues such as the poorer achievements of boys, the recurrence of gender stereotypes in teaching and the curricula, the gender discrimination and sexual harassment. In the case of the some “gender profiles” (EURYDICE, 2010) were presented (such as lagging behind in school, school retention, school drop out, gender gap persistence in national and international test results, disadvantaged class and ethnic groups).

Thus, the major problem identified by those who sought to formulate educational policies from a gender perspective is the issue of *gender equality* (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005, 2007, Klein, 2007; Mooney, Knox, and Schacht, 2009 ). At EU level, according to the investigated issues and the educational policies formulated by expert groups of the European Commission, there are two broad categories of issues relating to gender equality: those specifically concerning the educational sphere, and the more general, but coming to influence the educational practices and outcomes (EURYDICE, 2010). These concerns indicate the potential policy directions in the EU countries.

A first set of problems refer to the aims and functioning of the education system. Most commonly, the *policies to promote gender equality in education* aim at gender differences between girls and boys, both in terms of academic achievement and as regards the career options. Consequently, about one third of EU countries focus mainly on *the poor results achieved by boys*, especially in primary and secondary school. There are also identified the gender stereotypes in teaching materials (e.g. school books, textbooks and the curriculum) and their reproduction in teaching and the overall curricula. In higher education, most often, these policies define the problem of horizontal segregation, namely the issue of different options that male and female students make when it comes to choose the study domains (EURYDICE, 2010, p.52).

The second category is related to *gender issues in the broad sense*, but which interfere with the school practices and the educational discourses. Although they do not have an immediate connection with the main objectives of the education system, the general aspects still apply to this specific context (*ibid.*). For example, the cited study noted that in about a third of EU countries there were established policies addressing specific problems such as *the low percentage of women in leadership roles in the decision-making positions* (i.e., what cited study called “vertical segregation”), *the salary gap between men and women, sexual harassment and its incidence in schools*, etc.. Regarding the latter concern, the international treaties and EU directives are important sources of inspiration for national policies. Therefore, these documents are often the basis of national political commitments.

The conclusion of the European Commission, after conducting this research is that, despite the clear articulation of some gender models, which pointed to the gender issues, most countries

developed specific strategies to address these gender issues and their influence on school success: “Attainment policies usually have a general focus on equal opportunities and equal outcomes, prioritizing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Eurydice, 2010, p. 81) and less on the specific and particular issues of gender differences.

In Romania, according to the same research report, the most important educational gap is between rural and urban students, rather than between male and female students. However, it is acknowledged the impact of this gap and of the rural/urban area over the traditional gender patterns. Thus, in the 2006-2007 school year, the girls in the urban areas had the highest rate of completion, followed by urban boys and rural girls. Boys in rural areas had the lowest rates of completion of these groups (INS, 2008, cited in EURYDICE, 2010, p. 87). Together with the students’ place of residence and living environment, a defining factor of assessing school participation and outcomes is *ethnicity*.

The main tool, in terms of gender policies in education in Romania, is the *Perspectives on Gender Dimension in Education* project, conducted by the Institute for Educational Sciences in cooperation with UNICEF Romania (ISE, 2004). Within this project there have been published several guides and information materials, since 2006. They were used in the training programs of school inspectors, who coordinate at the county level the training of teachers in the field of teaching methods attentive to gender. Besides this, teachers are provided with a “*Compendium of gender in education*”, which comprises a set of specific instruments of evaluation and self-evaluation of the educational institutions from a gender perspective as well as a set of indicators for evaluating the school textbooks from a gender perspective. The Compendium also provides a glossary of definitions for some basic concepts related to gender in education (Eurydice, 2010, p. 59).

Other tools have been proposed for investigating gender in the Romanian society, such as the *The Gender Barometer* (Open Society Foundation, 2000) which provided a database for reporting gender topics and issues. Another important moment in building this kind of research was the creation of gender statistical indicators, started in 2000 by the National Commission for Statistics and UNDP, which provided an overview of gender differences in education and from a socio-economic perspective (cf. Balica et al., 2004) as well as various teacher training programs on issues of gender in the school curriculum for various levels and subject areas (Miroiu, 2003; Petrovai and Bursuc, 2004; Balica et al., 2006; Jigău, 2006; Stoicescu, 2006; Stamatescu and Teșileanu, 2006, Singer, Voicu and Leahu, 2006; Ilea and Stoicescu, 2006, Dragomir and Tacea, 2006). Some indicators revealed by these studies and tools are: the access and participation in

education, the internal efficiency and results of the education system, the analysis of school curricula and textbooks, the educational climate and school relationship, the gender relevance of teaching methodologies, the strategies of avoiding gender discrimination education, the practical modalities of gender sensitive teaching, gender biases in student assessment, the development of a constructive learning environment, teaching methods based on gender cooperation and partnership and work in mixed groups (cf. Balica et al., *op. cit.*).

In the next section I provided some characteristics of the U.S. education system in order to contrastively emphasize the specific features of education in the European Union and Romania, presented so far. I described the policy of the multicultural education and two specific educational programs, relevant from a gender perspective, with the contexts of their development and their impact education, *No Child Left Behind* and *Single Gender Education*.

*No Child Left Behind* Program, initiated in 2001, is an example of legislation and implementation of educational policies and strategies that reflects the enduring concerns regarding the inclusion of poor African American students, and exemplifies how the achievement gap between different categories of students can be narrowed. Thus, the effects of this law on the ethnic-racial groups were visible immediately. On the one hand, this program was seen as one that pay more attention to minority populations, on the other hand, as an initiative that has generated pressure on teachers and school students to be successful (Van Acker, 2004), that can generate new forms segregation between white and minority students. A key objective of this program is that of reducing the gaps noticed in the results and performance in schools, firstly at a school, regional or state level, and then between different social/ethnic groups. While initially it was thought that public education system should only provide equal opportunities for education for all, through *No Child Left Behind*, it has established an expectation that all students should have school success.

The basic idea of this program is to create similar expectations for all students. This is done by requiring schools and inspectorates to monitor the improvement of academic achievement (such as getting better grades or passing the exams) for groups that traditionally associated with poor school success, such as students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities or ethnic-racial minority students. This meant a greater attention to the “bottom” segment of the school population, whose results were usually lost behind data of average examination results, and average rates of completion in schools or regions (Wright and Wright, 2003, Grey, 2010).

The *Single Gender Education* Program (SGE) focuses on the intrinsic and defining characteristics of a group (in this case defined by gender) to develop their potential and to have better school success just by virtue of membership of a particular gender, with the characteristics

and experiences of its own (Smyth, 2010; Sharpe, 2000; Riordon, 1990). This program proposed and applied, therefore, a “voluntary segregation”, highlighted a less obvious aspect of school participation and attainment, although revealed by some analyses on gender, namely the fact that the modalities of socialization and cultural treatment are different in girls and boys, and that a socio-cultural antagonism is perpetuated between the two genres (e.g. the expectancy of a certain type of relationship between students belonging to different genres: competition, power/domination relations, conditional friendship, gender roles, etc..). Consequently, it is suggested, a single-gender educational environment would release the social pressure, that otherwise may adversely affect the activity of certain students, both girls and boys.

This educational practice involves teaching the same subjects, following the same standards, but adopting different educational activities and strategies, depending on gender and taking place in classes/schools separated by gender. This is a voluntary option to parents and students.

The arguments for the implementation of this program maintain the idea that it can offer an option for students and parents unhappy with the classic system, in form of an alternative in which students can focus better on the school activities and performance, and can feel more comfortable and engaged in the learning process. In SGE classes, teachers can address the specific needs of boys and girls and can better emphasize the strengths of girls’ and boys’ skills. Moreover, in SGE classes the ecological factors can help improve school performance, as the collegial environment can be considered safer, more predictable and without disturbances, the distractibility during classes being lower (Smyth, 2010).

#### **4. The Social dimension of school success. Gender differences and profiles**

In this chapter we addressed the aspect of school success in terms of reporting to the educational environment that facilitates the achievement of good academic results and, thus, the school success. The chapter presents from an *ecological perspective*, how the social environment and the individual adaptation impact school success. The proposed *quantitative analysis* revealed, firstly, the gender *differences* in the way girls and boys relate to and perceive the social environment and the individual adaptation. These gender differences provide an overview on how the academic results are influenced by the social environment (family, group of friends, community, etc..). Secondly, we built some *profiles* by gender and other determinants (such as place of residence and school level). We determined, through these, the perception of the school environment, the role that the students’ families plays in school education, the self confidence and how girls and boys evaluate themselves how successful they are in school.

According to the proposed research topic, the quantitative research objectives were to *identify the relevance of gender differences in the case of tested social and individual dimensions*, particularly the factors that contribute to *school success*, according to the independent variable of gender as well as the construction of *gender profiles* .

*Quantitative research hypotheses* presumed that girls get better results than boys because they are (or at least they perceive themselves as) more integrated into the social environment and more adapted individually to their social life of students. I also asked myself whether such determinants as *residence, school level* or *welfare state* could determine a different school profile school, with better academic results achieved by girls.

The *quantitative analysis* was based on the data of a national research, on representative sample, within the *The Social Diagnosis of School Performance Using the School Success Profile and The Design of Research Based Intervention Methods* Project, coordinated by Professor Maria Roth of the Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (cf. Roth, Dămean and Iovu, 2009). I proposed primary and secondary quantitative analysis of the data obtained through the national survey conducted within the project. I highlighted the role of gender variable within the school success profile dimensions, namely, I examined how being boy or girl is related to school success and is mediated by students' adaptation to the social and educational environment. Through the general and specific profiles by gender, I examined whether there is a relationship between gender, welfare, residence, school level and school success, and to what extent school success is attributable to the material condition of the family of origin.

From testing the hypothesis that girls get better school results than boys because they are better integrated into the social environment, girls scored higher on most dimensions of social environment and individual adaptation.

Following the application of t test for independent samples I could say with 95% probability that there are gender differences for the following dimensions of the social and individual adaptation School Success Profile (see Tables 4.2 and 4.3).

Table 4.2. *Statistical indicators of social environment characteristics. The results of T-test for independent samples*

Variable	Gender	Statistical indicator			Significance test	
		N	Average	Std. Dev.	t	p
Neighborhood safety	Girl	1346	7.35	1.188	9.39	<10 <sup>-19</sup>
	Boy	1083	6.79	1.741		
Personal safety in school	Girl	1347	35.08	3.492	8.82	<10 <sup>-17</sup>
	Boy	1080	33.60	4.770		
Friend behavior	Girl	1352	23.56	2.932	8.77	<10 <sup>-17</sup>
	Boy	1084	22.42	3.484		
Peer group acceptance	Girl	1346	20.48	2.712	6.49	<10 <sup>-9</sup>
	Boy	1079	19.73	2.958		
School satisfaction	Girl	1355	4.93	2.088	5.23	<10 <sup>-6</sup>
	Boy	1087	4.47	2.279		
School behavior expectations	Girl	1347	27.59	5.160	4.86	<10 <sup>-5</sup>
	Boy	1073	26.52	5.670		
Social support use	Girl	1338	5.50	2.207	4.54	<10 <sup>-5</sup>
	Boy	1077	5.07	2.442		
Home academic environment	Girl	1351	6.54	1.603	4.19	<10 <sup>-4</sup>
	Boy	1079	6.25	1.840		
Neighborhood youth behavior	Girl	1310	7.08	1.820	4.00	0.0001
	Boy	1045	6.78	1.861		
School safety	Girl	1325	24.32	7.561	3.54	0.0004
	Boy	1064	25.41	7.389		
Parent support	Girl	1355	12.76	2.556	3.51	0.0005
	Boy	1082	12.39	2.613		
Friend support	Girl	1355	13.12	2.365	2.92	0.004
	Boy	1089	12.84	2.370		
Learning climate	Girl	1332	5.97	2.144	2.79	0.005
	Boy	1069	5.73	2.153		
Academic relevancy	Girl	1344	29.94	6.811	2.54	0.011
	Boy	1068	29.22	6.956		
Academic rigor	Girl	1344	29.78	5.930	2.45	0.014
	Boy	1059	29.19	5.918		
Teacher support	Girl	1344	5.16	2.589	2.07	0.038
	Boy	1077	4.94	2.622		
Neighborhood support*	Girl	1348	3.68	2.431	1.19	0.233
	Boy	1077	3.57	2.431		
Family togetherness*	Girl	1355	19.06	2.798	0.83	0.405
	Boy	1087	18.96	2.803		
Parent education support*	Girl	1361	4.66	1.583	0.06	0.948
	Boy	1090	4.65	1.620		

\* An asterisk indicates variables that have no gender differences

From the analysis of each dimension of the social environment results that girls are more “entitled” to be successful in school by the way they relate to the social environment (attitudes, perceptions, commitment, social capital) that influences the school performance.

Table 4.2. *Statistical indicators of individual adaptation characteristics. The results of T-test for independent samples*

Variable	Gender	Statistical indicator			Significance test	
		N	Average		N	Average
Trouble avoidance	Girl	1289	29.63	2.789	12.04	<10 <sup>-31</sup>
	Boy	1015	27.90	4.078		
Grades	Girl	1350	11.61	1.954	10.18	<10 <sup>-23</sup>
	Boy	1074	10.74	2.234		
Adjustment	Girl	1355	14.33	2.964	10.06	<10 <sup>-22</sup>
	Boy	1085	15.48	2.574		
Physical health	Girl	1349	21.95	3.177	9.65	<10 <sup>-22</sup>
	Boy	1076	23.19	3.140		
School engagement	Girl	1345	7.37	1.332	5.57	<10 <sup>-7</sup>
	Boy	1055	7.05	1.508		
Optimism	Girl	1342	37.99	6.195	3.89	0.0001
	Boy	1071	36.98	6.526		
Self esteem	Girl	1359	13.24	2.030	2.22	0.026
	Boy	1090	13.43	2.195		

Given that girls obtained better results on most dimensions of individual adaptation, it can be admitted that they have attitudes and behaviors that facilitate their academic success to a greater extent than boys. Interpretations of these results confirm the *social environment* data and the interpretations presented and discussed above.

As shown in the analysis of each dimension of the *individual adaptation* it can be said that school engagement, grades, trouble avoidance and optimism shown by girls in relation with the school, are significant factors which show that these elements, expressing adaptation to social environment contribute to obtaining better results.

Unlike girls, boys have higher scores on dimensions such as self-esteem and health factors, which apparently have no influence on the academic achievement, but only expresses how they are socialized.

In my analysis on how respondents (classified by gender) responded, resulted that girls got higher scores in 20 items (74% of all questioned dimensions), in: *Neighborhood youth behavior, Neighborhood safety, Learning climate, School satisfaction, Teacher support, Academic relevancy, Academic rigor, Personal safety in school, Friend support, Peer group acceptance,*



*Friend behavior, Parent support, Home academic environment, School behavior expectations, Social support use, Optimism, School engagement, Trouble avoidance, Grades*, while boys got higher scores in the following dimensions: *School safety, Physical health, Self-esteem, Adjustment* (i.e. in favor of girls). Similar responses, without relevant differences by gender, were obtained in only three dimensions: *Neighborhood support, Family togetherness, Parent education support* (11% of dimensions).

In the second section of the quantitative research, I tested the hypothesis that determinants such area of residence, school level or material condition produce different school profiles, with better academic results achieved by girls.

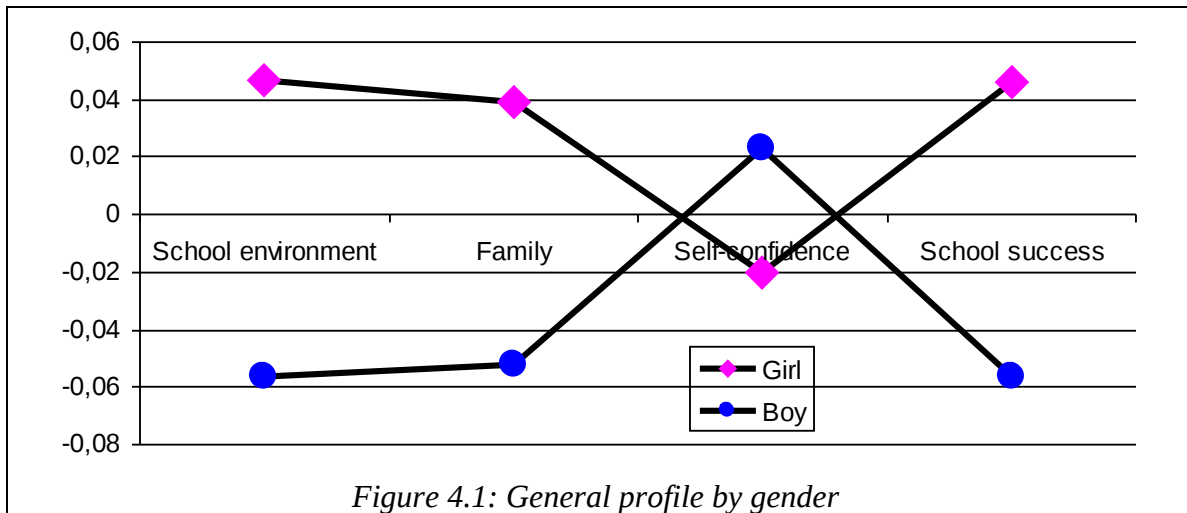
I checked what effects have gender, residence and school level (taken individually and together) over the school environment, school success, family and self-confidence. For this purpose I utilized a *factor analysis*, which determined general and specific profiles.

The factor analysis was applied in 2465 cases. The KMO (Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy) index was = 0.885 (>0.5) suitable for factor analysis (cf. Labăr, 2008; Hărăguș, Mezei and Roth, 2010).

The Statistics of proper values guided me to the identification of 10 factors that explained over 67% of the variance of *School Success Profile* variables. Individually, on variables, this percentage varies between 51-91%.

For factor analysis, I considered the following factors: (F1) – the factor for assessing the school environment (*School environment*), correlated with the following variables: academic relevance, teacher support, academic rigor, learning climate, school satisfaction and school engagement; (F2) – the factor for the perception of family role in school results (*Family*) correlated with the following variables: parent education support, parent support, home academic environment and family togetherness; (F4) – the self-confidence evaluation factor (*Self-confidence*) correlated with the following variables: self-esteem and optimism; (F7) – the school success factor (*School success*) correlated with the following variables: grades and trouble avoidance.

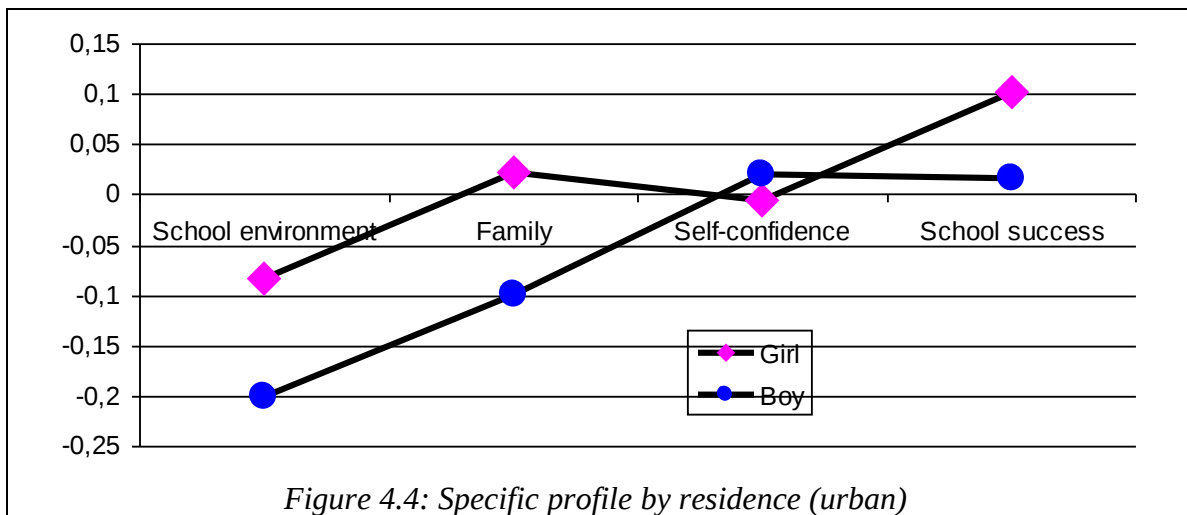
Taking into account these four factors, the factor analysis produced the following profiles: *general profiles*, which consider gender, area of residence (urban and rural) and school level (and primary and secondary) and *specific profiles*, which are the result of gender and (a) residence, (b) school level and (c) residence plus school level taken together.



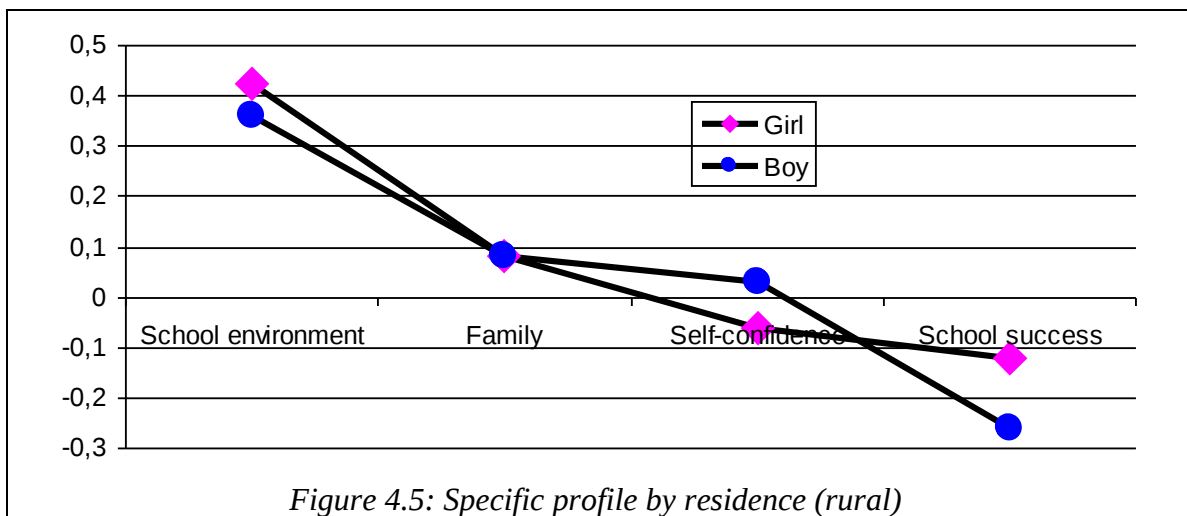
As shown in Figure 4.1, the differences between boys and girls are very high in terms of perception of the school environment, family and school success. Girls perceive the social environment more friendly, while the family is regarded as more supportive by them. Girls get the school success, but their self-confidence is lower. Perhaps this lack of confidence makes them more involved in school, which ultimately provides a better academic success over boys.

According to the general profiles I found significant differences by gender, area of residence and school level in perceiving *the school environment*. In perceiving *the role of the family*, there are greater differences in the case of gender and school level (with a higher valuation of the girls and middle school students) and lower in the case of residence. As regards the *self-confidence*, the differences are very small in the case of residence and school level, and higher in the case of gender, in favor of boys. Regarding the *school success*, the gender gap in favor of girls is evident, and there is considerable difference in terms of area of residence (for urban) and school level (for high school students.)

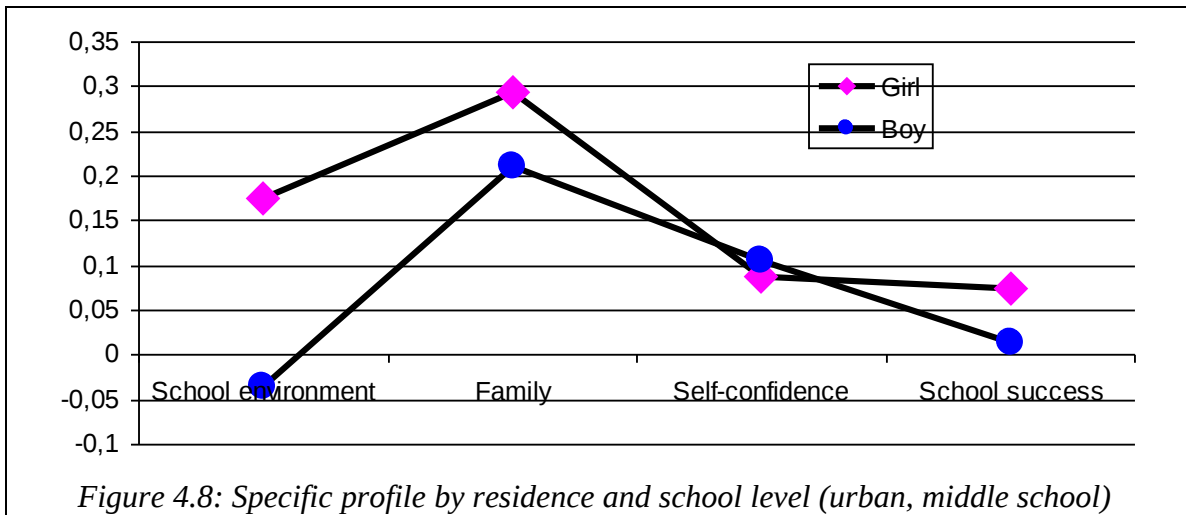
I further analyzed how residence and school level interfere with gender. Thus, a series of specific profiles were generated, by gender and area of residence (urban and rural), shown in Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5., by gender and school level (primary and secondary), and finally, taken together the gender, the area of residence and the school level, shown in Figures 4.8.-4.11.



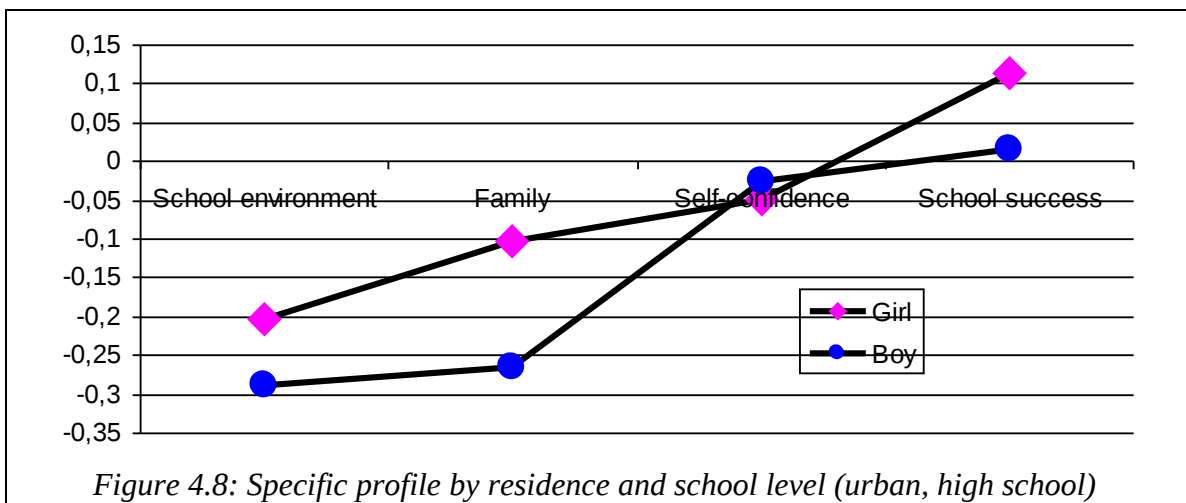
As shown in Figure 4.4, urban girls perceive the school environment more attractive and to a greater extent than urban boys. The family is perceived as more supportive by girls, and the school success factor also indicates higher values for girls. As regards the self-confidence, the schoolboys and schoolgirls in urban areas have similar values, with a little advantage for boys.



From Figure 4.5 results that gender differences are smaller in rural areas regarding the perception of school environment, self-confidence and school success. These differences are in favor of girls in the case of school environment and school success, and in favor of boys in the case of self-confidence. There are no differences regarding the perception on the role of the family and the support it provides to get involved in the school activities.



From Figure 4.8 results that urban middle school girls perceive more attractive the school environment than boys; the gender differences in favor of girls also persist for family and school success.



The difference between the gender profiles among urban high school and urban middle school is given by the perception of the family support. In urban areas, high school, both girls and boys feel themselves less supported by the family than the girls and boys in the secondary school. This can be interpreted by the fact that in high school there are other factors than the social ones (such as intelligence, motivation) that explains the greater school success.

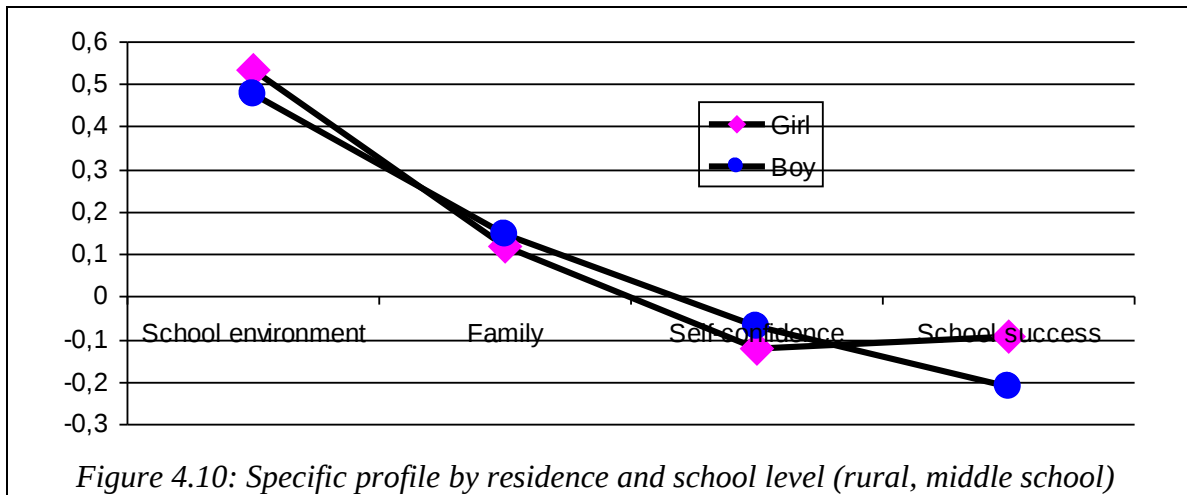
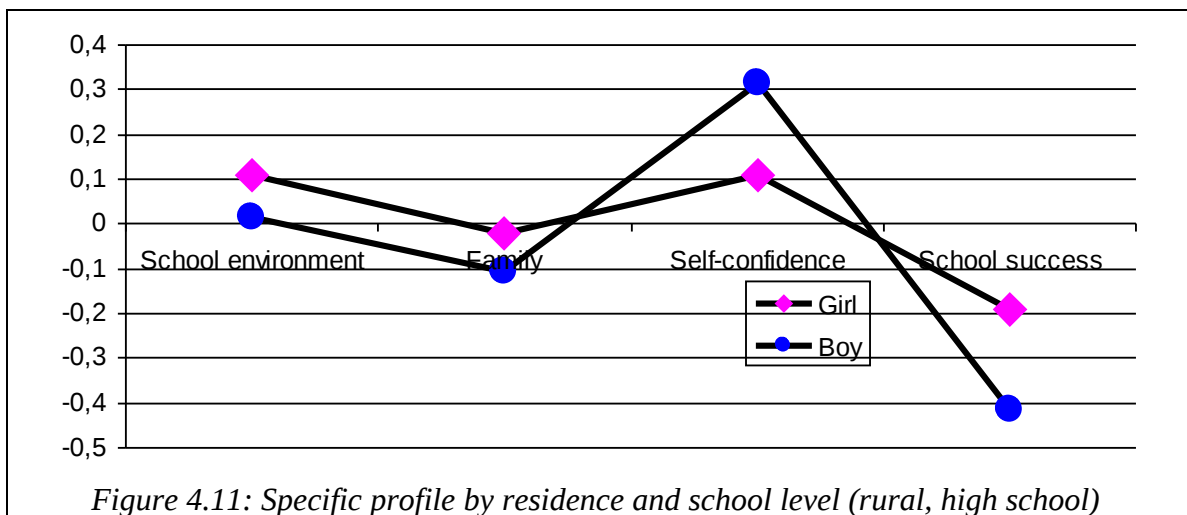


Figure 4.10 shows that gender differences between rural middle school students are very small. The school environment is perceived more favorably by girls, self-confidence is in favor of boys, whereas the school success belongs to girls. It can be noticed that there is no substantial difference between the profiles of girls and boys in rural areas; nevertheless, girls perceive that they get better results to a higher degree.



From Figure 4.11 results that rural high-school girls perceive the school environment attractive to a greater extent than boys; the family is regarded by them more supportive, and the school success is achieved by them to a greater extent.

According to these *specific profiles*, it can be said that the gender differences regarding the school environment fluctuate following the area of residence and the school level. If in the case

of urban girls in lower secondary level, the differences are very high compared to boys, in the rural areas the differences between boys and girls, in favor of girls, are lower.

The family is regarded as playing a role in the school to a greater extent by urban girls, regardless of school than, than by boys, whereas in rural areas girls are still those who appreciate the value of family in school, but the differences between girls and boys remain small.

I further checked the impact of gender and material condition on school success, as well as the extent to which the residence and school level help explain school success. For this purpose I used the *correlational analysis*.

The result of the correlational analysis also indicates the role of welfare in explaining students' school success: the effect of the residence is stronger than gender in this given situation. Thus, the variation of welfare self-perception can explain 18.8% of the variation in school success for girls and 22.5% for boys, showing that in rural high schools there is a correlation between the self-perception of the welfare level and school performance, whereas in urban areas this correlation is weak.

Thus, the results of my quantitative research confirmed the data offered by the National Institute of Statistics (2008), which showed that girls in urban areas in 2006-2007 had the highest rate of completion (89%), followed by boys in rural urban (84%) and girls in rural areas (78%) while boys in rural areas had the lowest rates of completion among these three groups (below 68%). However, my interpretations nuanced explanations of gender differences and created a background for interventions according to the specific profiles shown above.

## **5. The construction of gender in educational contexts. A qualitative research**

The aim of the *qualitative research* was to show that the *gender differences in school participation and performance depend on socio-cultural factors* (partially created and transmitted by the school environment). By researching this I intended not only to make a contribution to *the theory of socio-cultural constructivism* of gender, but also to show the fact that a number of processes, results and interactions that occur at the level of education/in schools are also socio-culturally constructed, and not determined by membership to a social category (such as gender). Three main arguments have suggested this: (a) the fact that, according to our quantitative research, characteristics of the social environment and individual and social factors (such as the residence or material condition) determine the school success in a higher degree among girls; (b) the fact that the gender gap has fluctuated over time and now girls outscore boys, suggesting that an “inferior” position in school performance is not a “given”; and (c) the

fact that, despite the performances that girls have achieved in education over the last decades, they have continued to remain in lower positions on the labor market and in lower paid/valued jobs (Kenneth, Bowles and Durlauf, 2000; Goldberg and Hill, 2007), this being due, as well, to some socio-cultural characteristics (traditions, stereotypes, socio-cultural practices, etc. of both men and women) and not to essential inherent gender qualities.

The *research questions* were: how is gender (and gender differences) constructed in school?; what are the roles, the characteristics and gender relations promoted/maintained in the school and how do the factors contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudices of gender in school actually function?; how do these factors contribute to the description, perception and appreciation of school?; how do these aspects of gender identity construction determine the school participation and the school success? These questions aimed at providing a more detailed understanding of how the social dimensions investigated in the previous chapter do interact.

The research provided interpretation and analysis of how students experience discrimination, segregation and self-segregation, gender and ethnic stereotypes and how all these have impact on the school participation and success. I particularized the types of relationships among students and their effects on students' educational involvement as well as their impact on teachers' evaluations.

By its nature, the qualitative research enabled the widening of my investigation from interpreting the school results or the students' opinions on the school environment and school adaptation (analyzed within the quantitative research), toward comprehending students' and educators' perspective on their position as actors in the educational processes (*semi-structured interviews*) as well as directly observing the school environment (*multiple non-participant observation*) in which these processes take place.

Besides the possibility of understanding how various school factors interact (such as the relationships between students, teachers and parents or gender, ethnic and class identities), the interviews informed how gender identity is constructed through particular cultural elements of the investigated socio-cultural environment. The qualitative research was conducted in two schools in the city of Cluj-Napoca ("S." Vocational School Group and "E" Theoretical High School) where I followed the influence of social factors on education from a gender perspective, through documentation research, observations and interviews with students and teachers.

Table 5.1. *Characteristics of the population studied, research methods and form of presentation*

Schools, groups investigated	Characteristics of population	Methods of collecting and analyzing data	Presentation form
“S.” Vocational School Group	Male and female students of Romanian and Roma ethnic background	Document analysis (education legislation, the two schools’ internal documents, statistical data regarding school participation and results)	Ethnographic description Interpretive narration
“E.” Theoretical High School	Teachers in lower and higher secondary levels, normal and special education	Non-participant observation (4 grades; 12 classes) Semistructured interviews (57 interviews)	Thematic tables

In my analysis I considered: the schools description, with their characteristics as physical spaces, and social environment where the educational practices occur; the educational paths and the professional choices; the families’ expectations and roles; the role of teachers and the impact of their assessment practices on students; the relationships between students and the extracurricular activities; the discipline problems and violence in schools. These set up the *major themes* resulted from the *observation* and *interviews*. I added to these the method of a case study on the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity (Roma) and disability, as relevant for understanding, interpreting and analyzing the proposed aspects. Each of these *themes*, with the students’ opinions, perceptions, intentions or confessions included, was identified and treated in distinctive subchapters, and placed in the center of the thematic analysis.

I used the *thematic analysis* in order to grasp the complex relationships between the different themes and how they relate to particular sub-themes so as to provide an overview and a deep understanding of how gender is constructed in education within the school practices. For this I identified recurring ideas, concepts, aspects and issues in interviews through an inductive process of exploration and discovery. According to this type of analysis (see Băban, 2002, p. 102) the research results are precisely these significant concepts, called *themes*, which connect important parts of interviews. Following the thematic analysis method (cf. Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999), after reviewing the observation notations and after transcribing the interviews I regrouped the fragments that illustrate each major recurring theme. As a result I identified *eight major themes*: (1) the physical and social space of the schools, (2) the educational path and the professional options, (3) the expectations and roles played by families in education, (4) the



student assessment, (5) the relationships between students, and the extracurricular activities, (6) the discipline problems and the issue of violence in school, (7) models and cultural identities, and (8) types of discourses circulating in the school environment on gender, ethnicity and disability. Each theme contains excerpts from interviews that illustrate that theme.

(1) *The description of the schools, with their physical space, within the social environment and educational practices:* I considered the fact that both schools offer rich and complementary information on aspects of educational practices, such as school attendance and how the physical space of schools is made up. I found that the organization of space inside and outside the school apparently provided a neutral gender image, since the physical space of the school did not necessarily value the gender difference (neither the ethnicity or disability, etc.). In the same time I realized that the organization of physical space is an important component of the social and educational environment where students construct and perform their gender identity.

Thus, the spaces dedicated to practice a trade (such as the *workshops* at S. School Group) and the *sport field* are strongly gendered, since they confirm the traditional models according to which there are crafts/sports for girls/boys (models also resulting from interviews). Consequently, even if the schools' physical space is not explicitly organized with the intention of creating such gendered areas, they nevertheless exist as spaces where gendered trades are taught/learned, respectively are being formed by the students themselves through their preference for gendered activities, intentional or spontaneous groupings according to gender (in the bench sitting, in the formation of groups of friends who talk during breaks or as school meetings/routes).

(2) *The educational path* is also strongly gendered, especially at the level of the vocational education, where the distribution or option for a trade is done according to gender. Thus are perpetuated, not only patterns and "traditions", but also gender stereotypes about the abilities or capacities that would reflect the profession "fitted" for girls or boys.

At the high school level the distribution by gender is apparently less rigid, this largely following the boys-sciences/girls-humanities model, although many girls can be found in science departments. This pattern is more evident in the humanistic departments where I found that the boys are significantly fewer than girls (5 out of a total of 24 students, or 20.8%). Even if the school departments are not organized by specific trades or vocations, when asked to think in terms of jobs, high school students reproduce the same traditional/normative pattern and mention among the professions more suitable for girls, teacher, seamstress and fashion models, and for

boys, engineer, porter, construction worker, cook. As regards the *professional options* students choose, there is an obvious gendering process of the professional fields, as well. They are found in the responses of both students and teachers. The arguments offered by teachers for motivating the professional options refer to the different socialization, the roles that the woman has in the family and to the physical capabilities of girls/women. Skills, biological and intellectual characteristics are also invoked by teachers in commenting the option for a certain professions. This gender stereotypes and preconceptions are reproduced and reinforced even by the teachers themselves.

Woodwork is suitable for boys, of course, they need some skills and job characteristics such as physical strength, creativity, practicality, productivity. (C.V. master-instructor, carpentry department)

Boys, however, don't have the same skill to dry the hair.. the girls acquire these skills from early stages, as they start to primp themselves, to utilize the hairdressing tools... the boys learn about these along the way, and they need more patience... from my point of view, they are a little lacking. (M.A. master-instructor, hairdressing department)

These patterns of thinking/judgment in which different qualities, skills, abilities and behaviors exist according to gender so as to explain the choice of a profession or another are to be found normally among students as well.

Girls have greater capacity to learn, and the boys have greater ability to do things... girls do better in theoretical subjects, while boys in subjects that focus on practice. (T. A., female student, 19 years)

A girl, in my opinion, would teach better than a boy, if she would become a teacher... girls have more patience, especially as primary school educators , working with small schoolchildren (B. R., female student, 15 years)

(3) *The expectations and roles of the families in children's education:* Many interviewed students speak about their material condition and the poor conditions in which they live. The vulnerable families in the teachers' view represent a risk factor for children who come from these families. The following families were considered vulnerable: monoparental families, families where one parent has left to work abroad, families where parents have been deprived of their parental rights and children stay with another family member, families with deceased parents, large families, families with low socioeconomic status. The type, size and structure of these families influence, as well, the access to education, the options, the school results and the educational achievement of students, and in many cases they end up as *social cases*.

The roles in family are gendered. Students give help in their households in different ways. From interviews results that the girls help especially in activities traditionally considered to be women's work (such as cleaning, cooking, washing, caring about their little brothers/sisters), while boys help their mother with shopping, cleaning/sorting things out in their room, and their father in small technical tasks or not at all. The views on gender roles and the tasks students should perform at home vary, but there are also situations where students are not allowed to involve in housework activities.

There is a flexible division of gender roles in household tasks. Although girls fulfill all tasks considered feminine, the masculine tasks not being required to them, boys perform a small number of tasks, both 'masculine' (computer repair help in the garden, etc.) and 'feminine'.

In light of our analysis, it is important to understand the family work as a mean by which students internalize gender roles (domestic tasks for girls and boys), that further contribute to how they choose the high schools or think about a future profession as 'suitable' for boys or girls.

(4) *Evaluation of students*: The way teachers interact with students is reflected in the expectations they have of the students. The interviews revealed both different expectations of teachers based on students' gender or ethnicity, and students' narratives that perceive these expectations as being different according to gender.

Teachers think that there is no direct relationship between school performance and student gender. However, there are several factors considered important as *carefulness, ambition, obedience, effort to learn* to have school performance, and these factors are largely associated with girls. So schoolgirls get, overall, better grades than students. As a result, the performance of female students is considered to be mostly due to ambition, to the fact that they are diligent, while boys obtain good results because of their skill and intelligence.

... but I can not say that girls achieve better performance just because of intelligence... they are more hardworking than boys and [consequently] manage to have very good knowledge. Even if sometimes one can say that boys are more intelligent and speculative than girls, many girls manage to achieve by hard work what boys, although more intelligent, do not achieve... (V.M. teacher, math teacher)
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It can be summarized, from the opinions expressed by students in the researched schools, together with expectations which are neutral regarding gender, a series of clear expectations according to gender.

Table 5.9. Gendered expectations of teachers, as perceived by students

Girls	Boys
<p><i>Teachers' expectations of girls/boys are different. Teachers expect more from girls. (A.C., boy)</i></p> <p><i>The expectations towards girls/boys are different. Girls are expected to have a nice conduct and to get good grades. (O.T., boy)</i></p> <p><i>Compared to girls, teachers expected us to be obedient (G.A., boy)</i></p> <p><i>The different expectations of teachers [are] like boys to be more obedient. (C.D., girl)</i></p> <p><i>Teachers expect us to not create particular problems, to learn better, to avoid problems, to be obedient in class. (P.D., student)</i></p> <p><i>Well, teachers expect girls to nicer, to be more indulgent because they are girls... you expect more from a girl than from a boy (H.L., girl)</i></p>	<p><i>From boys teachers expect less, they are thought to be lazier. A female teacher of math and physics says that men need to know physics, [because] all famous physicists were men, [while] in foreign languages teachers focus on girls. Not always, there are some exceptions. (A.C. boy)</i></p> <p><i>... from boys to be good, never to climb up to the benches... [a teacher] said that if they weren't good, they wouldn't be allowed to join the festivity. (O.T., boy)</i></p> <p><i>...we, as girls, are obedient. (C.D., girl)</i></p> <p><i>... because a boy is more daring, [the teacher] raise his voice louder, is tougher, but for a girl... if the teacher raises his voice at me I start crying, girls are more sensitive. (H.L., girl)</i></p>

In many responses get from teachers gender differences appear in relation to personal characteristics attributed to girls/boys. The presence of qualities traditionally considered as belonging to the other gender seem to be more valuable. In our discussion the presence of such characteristics as sensitivity and diligence in boys (which are normally assigned to girls) seem to have more dramatic results than in the case of the 'masculine' characteristics in girls.

*It is said that girls have a special sensitivity, and indeed we see that they have a tendency to creativity, but if a boy has talent and sensitivity outshine any girl, no matter how sensitive she is! I saw boys highly creative and sensitive... Girls are maybe a little more assiduous, but that's all .... but I met very assiduous boys ... and who had patience... (B.C. class master)*

Although reluctant to make generalizations and always bring counter-examples, teachers claim that there is a certain pattern that confirms that girls do better in certain subjects considered feminine (Romanian language and literature, foreign languages) while boys in subjects traditionally considered masculine (mathematics, physical education).

Gender identification is highlighted by the fact that some students maintain that they understand better what a teacher of the same gender teach them. This is an argument used by those who think that the feminization of education does not offer appropriate models to boys (Connolly, 2004), and therefore they would be disadvantaged by the fact that school is a feminized environment. *Female teachers explain more because they are girls and I understand better from them* confessed B.A. (girl, 11 years).

Regarding the student evaluation, this is often made without taking into account a clear distinction between the overall behavior and the attitude one student has during class. Teachers assess students' knowledge during classes (and not just by correcting a final test), and the grade inevitably also reflects the student's behavior in class. This is considered normal, and accepted by both students and teachers.

*The teacher scores the behavior, I know that... definitely you cannot avoid it.. (B.C. class master, biology teacher)*  
*I personally do not points and student behavior, ... so might as when he is not careful and you listen, and listening can be done so that it knows nothing and then give him bad note, as there coverage, the phenomenon of scoring, there are methods like that if you want to apply, but do not know to what extent they are interested if they take a little note... (V.M. teacher, math teacher)*

This fact is confirmed by students who considered it absolutely natural, by teachers, and even by the principal who noted this trend among teachers (although he considered it an unsuitable method, because *there are other ways to punish bad behavior*, considering it as an *inappropriate practice* (AC, school principal).

Student responses can be summarized in statements such as: *teachers rate the behavior too; behavior matters; teachers will unrate you because of behavior; will unrate you, at least one point and will tell you why, because you spoke or because you didn't obey; teachers take into account the behavior; if you are nasty and unruly you'll get poor grades.*

As shown through the words of those interviewed, only a small number of students say that teachers do not rate the behavior, but only assess the academic knowledge. Since behavior is perceived (and is actually) different in boys and girls, this have consequences in terms of gender differences in school assessment, grades and success.

(5) *Relations between students and the extracurricular activities*: I have found that the status, position, social prestige and popularity that have students in class are important for the team to be accepted or rejected by the group. Each of the students wants to be accepted into the class team

and this is marked by power relations that they establish between them. The groups are based on affinity or by gender and maintain certain friendships relationships that (pre)exist among students. Generally, students want to have good relationships with their peers (cf. also Allen, 1986; Wentzel, 1989, 1991).

Differences such as disability, ethnicity, low socio-economic level, another perception of life and/or religion, through which some students are distinguished from the majority students, generate marginalization or make them more harder to be accepted by the group.

Students in middle school classes are mostly constituted in gendered groups, while those in high school and vocational classes are part of both gendered and mixed groups. In gendered groups, especially topics considered feminine/masculine are discussed particularly, and the mixed groups are formed according to common interests/hobbies.

*There is the girl group and the boy group. The talks differ, girls are more generous, they are more attached... the boys [talk] about technology, about rock bands... girls about fashion, about their lovers or lovers-to-be... In our class are smokers too. (A.B. girl, 16 years)*

*I get along so well with both girls and boys, there are my friends. We talk about messenger chats, I don't know how to say, with the boys I talk more about football, with the girls we gossip all kind of things, anything, about classes, if we go out after school (T.E. boy, 15 years)*

*Each has something he or she likes most... the girls are in their groups, the boys in another. group. (M.R.D. boy, 16 years)*

The process of reciprocal knowledge among girls is more complex, these relationships are largely based on sharing personal experiences. It is already acknowledged that there is a greater dependence on social relations among girls than among boys (Oldenburg and Kerns, 1997). Girls are those who believe that classmates are important to them, while boys mention that to a lesser extent.

In girls groups the discussion topics are those traditionally considered feminine, such as fashion, makeup, boys, “love affairs” and the school.

Sharing and blabbing “personal secrets” is more prevalent among girls, both during childhood (Rose, 2002) and adolescence (Shulman et al. 1997). Talks about boys are very common among female teenagers, as well as are talks about separations, first loves, couple problems, the pressure to begin sexual relations. Sometimes these concerns affect their learning and even their educational paths. Girls’ topics are about their sentimental lives (*I was only interested in boys, my girl friend betrayed me, she chatted up my boy*) or related to pressures from their boyfriends

to begin a sexual relation (*he pushed me to begin a sexual relationship with him, so I started my sex life*).

The relations between boys are based on common interests, sport (as play or talk about sports, usually football) and music. They primarily look for play partners, the talks about “personal secrets” being very rare among them. While boys are reluctant to divulge their secrets to other boys, they are often willing to reveal them to girls. In fact they are concerned to be perceived as “masculine”, “tough”, “cool” in front of their male friends, uninterested in things that pass as “feminine”, such as sharing secrets or exteriorizing their sensitive side, which would diminish their prestige in the boys group (Leaper and Anderson, 1997; Tolman et al., 2004). The qualities considered feminine (sensitivity, empathy) expressed/exteriorized by boys are perceived, thus, as be signs of weakness by the other colleagues. To the extent that boys teenagers spend most time with friends of the same gender, these concerns about self-presentation may limit the types of social skills that they can exercise and develop.

If boys avoid confessing and sharing experiences to each other, they also avoid the opportunities to refine social skills associated with a “supportive listener” (Leaper et al, 1995), with empathy and concern for each other’s problems. This may develop into a unexercised ability (Tolman, et al., 2004) or even into indifference.

There are also cases where boys have the opportunity to become obedient, supportive or to experience supportive relationship, but this type of interactions are quite rare. In any case it is valued, among boys, the sincerity of a relationship. *I don’t let them to see that I am sensitive, because I don’t want to be hurt, it’s easier to put your mask ...* explains A.D., a 15 years school boy.

The qualities that a friend has to meet in another boy’s vision are: *to not mock me, to be popular, to gain confidence in him, be a good companion, not that one of a day or two, who betrays you in the back, to be fair to me.*

The most common topics that boys have are girls and their interests (sports, computers, music).

Risk behaviors associated with peer group often involves use of alcohol and prohibited substances, and gang affiliation. For the group of friends to serve as protective factor it is necessary for them to have a positive influence on students and to be engaged in positive activities such as school clubs, sports associations and follow the rules, so that they can counteract the negative influences of the groups. The group of friends is important for students, offering them models and emotional support. Membership of a group of friends influence their

educational paths and school performance. Identity and membership that groups provide, confer them safety and increase their self-esteem.

The way in which students are viewed by the other gender has a great importance, and much of their conversations are about sexual life, strategies of conquering girls/boys, love experiences, couple problems, qualities to be fulfilled by girlfriends/boyfriends.

In the feminine model assigned by boys one can find both physical and moral qualities, such as to be nice, to be amiable, to provide emotional support, to be intelligent, to be clean, not to deceive. Girls' self-perception about their qualities is that for most boys the only thing that matter is their physical body, which is sexualized, and almost absent spiritual or intellectual qualities,.

In the masculine model assigned by girls one can find such qualities that a boy should have as, according to girls: to be respectful, not violent, to take care of them, to listen to them, be calm, to be romantic, to be a good looking guy.

*The models of femininity/masculinity* students have (especially in the middle school) are mostly traditional (girls have long hair, are more talkative, flirt; and boys have short hair and share hobbies such as football or computer games), while those who do not conform to these models are the targets of malicious comments.

Girls' expectations from boys are particularly related to respect for them, no violence, equal treatment. Boys' representations about girls are about to be friendly, beautiful, smart, sensitive. Girls believe that boys value the beauty, femininity, and intelligence. *Boys want in a girl to be beautiful, feminine, not boyish, not childish. I am, though! Well I like roll skating, but also to get dressed in pink, that's delights me... not all the pink, that seems kitsch* (A.A., girl, 15 years).

Among the *extracurricular activities* practiced by the interviewed students, the most common are trips organized by both girls and boys, sports, especially football, for boys and dancing, choir singing and fashion, for girls. Teachers do not seem to be aware of the benefits extracurricular activities may have in school attendance and results, and their positive relationships with teachers.

(6) *Discipline problems and violence in school*: I found that discipline problems that occur frequently can be grouped according to: (a) *time of occurrence*: during class (talking with colleagues, on the phone, making inappropriate comments at teachers, inattention, other concerns) and outside courses (smoking, beatings, insults, forms of sexual harassment) and (b) *the type of violence*: verbal violence (insults, curses), emotional (humiliation, death threat cases, suicide, rape, mockery, rejection, use of stereotypes as revenge, etc..) and physical violence.



There are many discipline problems perceived by teachers and students to be *gender specific*. Girls are claimed to use insulting language (verbal abuse) more often than boys, while boys are denounced more frequently of beating (physical violence) than girls. Sexual harassment is usually accused by girls.

Also, a series of behavioral problems are connoted as *ethnic specific*, being assigned to Roma students. Absenteeism, school adjustment and rule abiding problems, school regulations despise, engagement in verbal and physical violence are among the most common of these problems. They are, in many cases, “over-attributed” and come to negatively (and stereotypically) characterize Roma minority groups or individuals. There is therefore a sort of “expectation” in schools that acts of indiscipline and violence (or certain acts of indiscipline and violence) to be performed by Roma students, even before any information on these acts to be obtained, and even if these acts actually do not happen.

In this case we can talk about strategies for responding to marginalization and internalized forms of adaptation and performing of an identity. As Phinney (1990) and Smith (1991) suggested, it must be taken into account the fact that ethnic identity is what gives them a sense of belonging to a minority group, and a form of performing this identity is performing a set of expectations related to that ethnicity, including indiscipline or violence. This is a behavioral pattern noticed in all minority groups. A teacher interviewed expressed this as follows:

*For them (i.e. Roma students) to be violent is a natural state of being and a survival strategy... from this point of view they have problems of adaptation, concerning school attendance, language and the observation of rules; they find it normal to be rude and not follow the rules. (A.C. director, S. School Group)*

Many Roma children end up in special schools as a result of missing the classes, which has as a consequence retention, and after one, two, grade repetitions, they are assigned in special schools, without actually having intellectual disabilities.

By invoking the ethnicity when various conflicts arise among them, children use a strategy of punishing and stigmatizing. Most students consider that ethnicity is not a difference that has something negative in itself, but the association with claimed misconduct makes them to be used as a stigmatization of Roma students.

In fact, students use these negative labels to some of their colleagues (of different ethnicity or coming from other regions of the country) when they “remember” and want to be “mischievous”. It takes all of a construction, as well, this time of a relational identity in opposition, not to other gender, but to other ethnicity. The pattern according to which these power relations are

constructed are similar, however. They range from physical retaliation from those who were insulted (*when they say gypsy to me, I beat them, I do so to make them angry on me*), the verbal retaliation from those involved (*students named them stinking Moldovan girls; I was insulted me too, but now I don't care that I am an Hungarian girl*).

Frequency and attribution of behavior problems swing to one side or another depending on gender. A partial explanation may be the higher number of students (boys in S. School Group and girls in E. Theoretical High School). Verbal violence is most often attributed to girls and the physical violence, alcohol abuse and smoking to boys. However, physical violence between students in researched schools is rarely used.

Physical violence is used more often by boys. Some of them play fights in order impress or to interact with girls. *There are no beatings... Ms. class master thinks that there are fights but we just play, since the 1<sup>st</sup> grade we do the same, boys chase us... even a new girl fellow thought that we fight, but we actually played a game with girls and boys. The boys just pushed us all.* (B. V., girl 10 years)

The aggressive and competitive ways of socializing, make students to use the physical force more frequently. Fights between students of the same gender are more common.

The punishment methods for inappropriate behavior in school are limited. The school administration and teachers implement rules and regulations allowing zero tolerance for violence. This is the main reason of the actual limited number of violent incidents. Gender is nevertheless involved in the different disciplinary measures and approaches. There is a greater tendency for boys to take physical action against, while in the case of girls, considered more fragile, more timid, more respectful, physical disciplinary measures are almost absent. The *gender effect* (Balica, 2004) is manifest, thus, when administering disciplinary measures as well.

(7) *Cultural models and identities. How minority schoolgirls and schoolboys are perceived:* From interviews I found that for students and teachers apparently ethnicity does not matter in itself, but only the behavior behind being a Roma student.

Deprived socio-economic conditions, housing and food problems, the situation of large families, low income, low education levels are usually associated with Roma, making it a very vulnerable and marginal social category, not always having access to learning opportunities. Roma issues are considered to be more social problems (poverty, large families, lack of education, jobs, the house), rather than ethnic problems.

This explains the fact that school administrations, teachers and students together argue that ethnicity does not matter, but behavior. However the fact that even if there is a discourse on

Roma normativity, that cultural differences are not understood, reveals the importance of Roma students perceived as being different, especially those who have discipline problems, and misunderstood behavior.

*There are particular problems of Roma pupils, with their social environment from where they come... it is a socially disadvantaged environment, with very poor housing conditions, large families... There are two areas from where these students arrive, Cojocna and Pata Rat.*

*We have in our school history children who only here, in our school, saw for the first time a shower... What can you ask from such children? How have they grown, if they haven't seen a shower? But they get used to and through education, largely non-formal, although it should be formal, we insist in developing in them good practices and manners. I'd say that, despite missing quantified results, we can see significant progress... (A.C., director)*

Racist remarks are used by other students to students of other ethnicity, especially as a form of revenge, when in conflict with them. Roma students have different personal strategies to reply to such challenges. Some of them use physical force because they were offended, others have come to want to transfer to other schools. Accepting their own ethnic identity and the fact that they are different is a complex process that requires understanding themselves and individuality and as construction of otherness through difference.

Cultural and gender differences occur within the Roma families. The traditional cultural model for Roma, with the man as breadwinner, that students see it in their family, restricts their professional options and girls' chance to have a career. Many Roma girls do not realize the importance of financial independence and school/professional success, that they can have by engaging in the trade prepared for at school. Motivation is largely nonexistent, and friends of the same ethnic group influence them to observe this tradition.

*(8) Types of discourses circulated in the school environment on gender, ethnicity and disability:*

As part of the interviews taken in the S. School Group, where with students placed in special education, I attempted to analyzed how specific discourses produce the ethnic category of Roma and the critical consequences of placing them in special education, in order to reveal aspects such as vulnerability, unequal opportunity and possible segregation of Roma children.

I analyzed the interviews by distinguishing some types of discourses that characterize the ethnic group as a whole, their status as students in special education and how discrimination appear at the discursive level. Thus, I detected and analyzed the "labeling discourses" (of stigmatization), the "compassionate discourses" (through which their condition is pitied), the

‘discourses of normalization’ (through which their situation is compared to a norm they have to fulfill) or the ‘civilizing discourse’ (in which overcoming the ‘deficiency’ or even the integration of these students is associated with ‘civilizing’ them). In addition, tracing a parallel between how Roma students characterize themselves (*self-identification*) and the *hetero-identification* made by the majority students, by the students from the mainstream education, as well as by teachers reveals both the different perspectives on these students and the segregation, the discrimination and the limitations of their educational opportunities to which they are exposed.

All these themes, aspects, elements, factors and contexts (a) show the complexity of the school practices and school environment as gender construction and at the intersection with other social categories, such as ethnicity or ethnicity and disability; and (b) explain how gender is constructed through these discourses within the studied educational practices and school environments, highlighting the socio-cultural factors that contribute to this construction.

The way in which gender transcends these issues was highlighted in a table of *thematic matrices* including interpretations of gender relevance and construction.

The qualitative research completed the understanding of gender differences as produced through gender perceptions and statement (i.e. subjective constructions) in schools. The better academic achievement of girls, analyzed within the quantitative research, could be explained through the description of school practices, resulted from the qualitative research. Within each theme, I could determine how gender is subject to specific organization (such as the school space or parents’ expectations), structures and social relations, gendered groups, gendered violence, stereotypes and biases, and how all these appear reinforced when gender is considered at the intersection with ethnicity or ethnicity and disability.

## **6. Conclusions: differences, perceptions, and gender constructions in the school environment**

My thesis demonstrated the importance of gender and gender differences in education. Gender, either alone or in interaction with other determinants, appear as a critical socio-cultural dimension in shaping and obtaining school success, confirming that gender is a fundamental element of differences in education.

**The Quantitative research.** First of all, the quantitative research confirmed that girls get better academic results than boys because the girls perceive themselves to be better integrated into the social environment and better adapted individually to their social life as students.

Secondly, the quantitative research showed that the differences between boys and girls are very high in terms of perception of the school environment, family and school success. Girls perceive the school environment and their family as more friendly and supportive. Girls have better educational achievements, but their own confidence is lower. Perhaps this lack of confidence makes them more involved in school, which provides a superior academic success as compared with boys.

On the other hand, boys perceive the school environment less friendly, while their family is perceived as providing less support. They compensate for this by greater confidence in themselves. As resulted in their academics, significantly lower than girls, this extra self-confidence makes them no longer engage so much in school activities and have less school success compared to girls.

Thirdly, my quantitative research showed that there exist significant differences by gender, by area of residence and by school level in assessing the school environment. In assessing the role of the family, there are larger differences in the case of gender and school level (with a higher valuation of the role of family by middle school students and girls) and smaller differences in the case of area of residence. As regards the self-confidence, the differences are very small in the case of residence and school level, and higher in the case of gender, in favor of boys. With regard to school success, the gender gap is evident for girls, while there is considerable difference in terms of area of residence (for urban) and school level (for high school students.)

Gender differences regarding the school environment emerge clearly from the various *specific profiles* that take into account the residence and school level. If in the case of girls in lower secondary level living in urban area the differences are very large compared to boys, in rural areas the differences between boys and girls are lower, but still for girls. The family is regarded as having an important role for the school to a greater extent by urban girls, regardless of school level, than by boys, while in rural areas, girls are those who appreciate the value of family for school, with very small differences between girls and boys. With regard to confidence resulted that boys are more self-confident to a greater extent than girls. Gender differences are very small, regardless of area of residence and school level. The exception is in the case of rural students at high school, where the difference is neatly in favor of girls. School success is in favor of girls, regardless of area of residence or school level, which confirms that girls prove the condition of having better school achievements.

Another result of the quantitative analysis reveals the role of the material condition of students' families in explaining the school success. Thus, the self-perceived level of welfare can explain 18.8% of the variation in school success for girls and 22.5% for boys, proving that in

rural areas at high school, there is a correlation between the self-perception of well-being and school performance levels, while in urban the correlation is weak.

**The Qualitative research** completed the understanding that gender differences are due to perceptions and considerations (i.e. subjective constructions) of gender within the school environment. Better academic achievements usually enjoyed by girls, analyzed within the quantitative research, could be explained within the qualitative research by describing the school practices.

It can be said that the family role in children's school education is visible in how children are "influenced" in order to have school success. This takes different forms, from establishing a suitable learning environment to providing emotional and material support while involving in the stimulation of learning activities (such as setting extra learning hours etc.) This kind of protective families do not necessarily facilitate children's school success. Gender differences appear especially in the different expectations parents and teachers have toward girls and boys, and in the influence they have in making important decisions in their children's/students' lives (such as the school choice), especially in the lower secondary school. In addition, more than in other aspects, the relationship with the teacher is crucial in discipline problems. There is some expectation from the teachers that girls behave differently than boys. This in itself is not critical, and could be a useful assessment of classroom management. But teachers tend to evaluate students according to their behavior in class and even according to their (convenient/praised or not by the teacher) relationship with the class teacher. Since schoolgirls are stereotypical seen as "more obedient" and under the pressure of this stereotype, teachers tend to appreciate more the work of girls. This stereotype, together with the understanding of the actual ability of students by gender (such as "girls are more diligent", "boys are more intelligent") produces a distortion in the proper evaluation of the students and affect how students and school in itself perceive school success. This indicates not only the complexity of teacher-student relationship but also the complexity of the role of teachers in school success.

Group membership is an essential aspect of a student experience and activity. How this membership is accepted, the rituals and behaviors and their impact on school adjustment, all have a significant effect on relationships, participation and the overall school performance. Differently from the relationship students have with family and teachers, relationships with colleagues are perceived as peer relationships, where friendships are more natural and the bonds are deeper (see the need for relationships with "therapeutic" role, where confessions or gender confirmation are performed) or alternative (i.e. resistant or critical toward the school and the educational system).

The ways through which the social identities of these students are constructed, are obviously determined by gendered patterns and models that the school environment provide. The school environment, therefore, appears as a scene where gender identities are constructed and performed in relation to school practices that seem external to the learning process (*extracurricular activities, leisure time*), but that actually are very important to how these students are integrated and work in the education system.

Furthermore, the disciplinary acts and violence in schools plays a particular role in the evolution and school performance of students. Whether they are involved directly or not, a school environment that abounds in indisciplinary acts and various forms of violence, adversely affect the school environment perception, the relations with teachers, and ultimately the conduct of classes and school performance.

Often, the relationships between genders and different ethnic groups are at the heart of indiscipline and violence problems, and can provide information not only on the school environment but also on how the classroom management and educational strategies, including student assessment, is affected or may contribute to decrease the number of such acts.

The school, as institutional environment provides a mainstream type of education and generally requires behaviors accepted by the majority group, regardless of the values and social roles of the minority groups. Different understandings of school success, the intellectual inferiority bias, the lack of social capital, limited access to material resources and information, the social environment families live all influence school success, and then the profession choice and the opportunities of getting a job, the income and living resources . In addition, all these have effects on social mobility, class formation and further evolution of individual life.

With regard to the *gender stereotypes*, they restrict students' educational/professional opportunities. Due to the different social/cultural capital and socialization of boys and girls, their educational paths are distinct. If male students are inspired by such qualities as competition, professional affirmation, desire to succeed and domination, schoolgirls are directed towards jobs requiring qualities considered feminine (gentleness, patience, care, obedience). These jobs are poorly paid, and there is a social expectation that women have to be successful through men, and not as independent persons, while the rate of women in poverty is considerably higher. The social position of women, thus, reproduce an imbalanced structure, which is much influenced by how education and school success are organized and conceptualized.

**Recommendations.** I suggest that the dimensions of the social environment should be considered in the sense of ongoing development of *educational strategies focused on gender*.

Thus, we can recognize that boys should be encouraged and supported by family, teachers and friends groups with regards to their commitment to school, to avoiding problems at school, to the expectations regarding their school behavior, in order to have school success comparable to the girls. This can be done through special programs targeting boys. On the other hand, since my research showed that girls have lower self-esteem and poorer health than boys, this issue would require consideration of programs/strategies toward developing self-esteem in girls and toward exercising a critical understanding of cultural models of femininity that girls adopt.

Secondly, my research revealed the existence of vulnerable groups (similar to those highlighted in EURYDICE, 2010). Thus, in order to improve school success there would be needed specific programs, educational strategies and interventions focusing on these particular categories, so determined, such as the rural Roma boys in high school.

Additionally, it would be useful to implement social intervention programs to reduce violence among students, such as those counseling for parents, as well as special programs such as the *Making Choice* programs (cf. Fraser et al., 2010, 2010b)

These recommendations consider some of the issues highlighted in my qualitative analysis, such as the feminization/masculinization of the educational paths, especially in the case of vocational education, gender stereotypes, measures for discipline problems by gender, gendered expectations of teachers, family's role in education and the professional choices of students and student assessment.

In order to eliminate gender stereotypes of teachers in expectations, evaluation, and guidance of students, specific courses on gender awareness and gender in curricula are needed. Thus, they should (i) adopt (cf. Balica et al., 2004; Jigau, 2001) an unbiased career counseling for students, highlighting the socially valued qualities, performances and specific personality characteristics; (ii) provide assistance in overcoming personal, familial, social obstacles impeding the professional achievement, (iii) encourage students to develop a plan on their careers, in response to internal individual needs and not as "submission" to some external pressure or by complying with the requirements of others, (iv) encourage students to value gender specific characteristics, and the positive characteristics the other gender has, illustrated with models of individual autonomy and independence in both genders, etc.. (Balica *op cit*, p. 119). Including in the continuous training programs dedicated to teachers of a training module on gender and education including activities of information, counseling and orientation regarding career (ibid.) could address much of these suggestions.

Finally, training courses and training programs for teachers on gender should consider deconstructing the gender biased expectations and valuing the positive gender differences, and



should acknowledge the 'gender effect' on student assessment, while implementing strategies/methods to avoid discrimination based on gender, and gender and ethnicity, area of residence, socio-economic status, disability, etc.

In conclusion, gender constitutes a critical element of achieving school success and intersects all aspects of the educational path and the roles of family, teachers and colleagues, but also a specific determinant of occupational choice, educational assessment, classroom management, extracurricular activities, management discipline problems and violence in schools, as well as of identity formation and cultural patterns of students. As a result, the specialized help for students in order to improve their school results may be more effective if the gender characteristics analyzed in my thesis would be taken into account.

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