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## **School Alienation, Patriarchal Gender-Role Orientations and the Lower Educational Success of Boys. A Mixed-method Study**

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# School Alienation, Patriarchal Gender-Role Orientations and the Lower Educational Success of Boys. A Mixed-method Study

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## Abstract

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This paper is an empirically backed contribution to the current ‘failing boys’ debate in regard to their lower educational success. The cross-sectional analysis focuses on two possible factors behind the lower educational success of boys in secondary school: school alienation and patriarchal gender-role orientations (as an expression of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’). School deviance on the behavioural level is considered as a main mediator between these factors and educational success. Furthermore, teaching style, peer attitudes and social origin are taken into account as important factors of educational success. Analyses are based on a Swiss mixed-method study (questionnaires among 872 eighth-graders, group discussions, class room observations). Results indicate that the gender gap in educational success is caused partly by boys being more alienated from school and preferring patriarchal gender-role orientations. The impacts of these factors on educational success are mediated by school deviance. An authoritative teaching style can largely reduce school alienation.

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**Keywords:** lower educational success, mixed methods, boys, school alienation

# Alienación Escolar, Rol de Género Patriarcal y los Chicos con Bajos Niveles de Éxito Escolar. Un Estudio con Métodos Mixtos

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## Resumen

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Este trabajo intenta ser una contribución empírica sobre el debate actual alrededor de los malos resultados educativos de chicos. El análisis trans-sectorial se centra en dos posibles factores que explican el éxito educativo inferior de los chicos en la escuela secundaria: la alienación escolar y las orientaciones de género de carácter patriarcal (como una expresión de la "masculinidad hegemónica"). La desviación escolar en el nivel de comportamiento se considera como un mediador principal entre estos factores y el éxito educativo. Además, las metodologías educativas, las actitudes en el grupo de iguales y el origen social se tienen en cuenta como factores importantes del éxito educativo. Los análisis realizados se basan en un estudio realizado con métodos mixtos (cuestionarios a 872 estudiantes de octavo grado, grupos de discusión, observaciones en las clases). Los resultados indican que la brecha de género en el éxito educativo es causada, en parte, porque los niños están más alejados de la escuela y prefiriendo roles patriarcales de género. De modo que el impacto de estos factores en el éxito educativo están directamente relacionados con la desviación escolar. Un estilo de enseñanza autoritaria puede reducir en gran medida la alienación escolar.

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**Palabras clave:** éxito educativo bajo, métodos mixtos, chicos, alienación escolar



The lower school success of boys has been discussed broadly in the public (cf. Tyre, 2008) and scientific sphere by employing various arguments from different epistemological perspectives (e.g. case study by Epstein et al., 1998; large-scale analysis by Helmke & Weinert, 1999; critical reflection of the underachievement discourse by Smith, 2003 or collected volume by Hadjar, 2011). The aim of the present study is to analyse the mechanisms behind the lower educational success of boys empirically by focusing on two factors: school alienation and gender-role orientations. With these foci, the paper has a strongly student-centered perspective. Students' own perceptions, rather than teachers' or parents' perspectives are studied. Although both gender-role orientations and school alienation are analysed on the individual level – as part of 'social relational contexts' (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p. 511) –, they are strongly linked to the cultural beliefs on the macro level (society) and the meso level (institutions).

The findings are based on a mixed-method study (questionnaires, group discussions) with school students in grade 8 at schools in the Swiss canton of Berne. Employing a triangulated design, we hope to transcend the 'Qualitative-Quantitative Divide' (Hammersley, 1992).

In Switzerland — where the gender gap to the disadvantage of boys is still rather small in comparison to other European countries (e.g. Hadjar, 2011) — 16 per cent of male and 23 per cent of female students obtained a university entrance qualification at the end of secondary school in 2008. Looking at the school tracks (leading to different degrees in stratified education systems), 59 per cent of the boys and 68 per cent of the girls attended a higher school track in grade 9, whereas the lower school track was attended by 30 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls (Swiss Statistical Office, 2009).

In this study, educational success is conceptualised in terms of school marks. Although school marks are linked to achievement and ability, they indicate success in school that does not equal objective achievement and is, therefore, linked to subjective assessment processes of teachers. However, for the individual student, school marks are even more important than actual ability, since school marks are relevant for a continuing educational career and the labour market. This applies especially to school marks in grade 8 in the Swiss canton of Berne, because these are crucial when it

comes to the question of leaving school after 9 years of schooling, or attending an upper secondary school.

As already outlined, this study focuses on two factors of school success: school alienation and traditional gender-role orientations – both assumed to be expressed in problem behaviour in school. School alienation is understood as a low attachment to school, low school commitment, low identification with school and learning and an emotional detachment from academic goals and values (Finn, 1989). Beside social origin and peer influences, teaching style is a major determinant of school alienation. Thus, an authoritative teaching style is another major issue analysed. Such an authoritative teaching style is characterised by providing structures, (positive) control and caring, and should not be mixed up with an authoritarian style. Gender-role orientations – also labelled as gender ideology, gender-related attitudes – are orientations that structure attitudes, aims, motivations and, finally, behaviour, and are therefore relevant for educational success. They are defined as individual beliefs about normal roles of men and women (Harris & Firestone, 1998) mirroring gender relations in family life and at the workplace (Brogan & Kunter, 1976; Coltrane, 1998). Even while intergenerational transmission of gender ideology plays a crucial role, gender-role orientations are responsive to life changes on the individual level (e.g. life course analysis by Vespa, 2009; qualitative interview study by Damaske, 2011) and vary across place and time on the societal level (e.g. significant increase in profeminist views according to cohort analysis by Mason & Lu, 1988; review of longitudinal research by Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Patriarchal gender-roles – as one possible manifestation of gender ideology – express compliance with traditional expectations in regard to the role of men and women in society and in particular at the workplace and in the family (Livingston & Judge, 2008). They consist of both the ideas of gender essentialism (difference) – since women and men are assumed to be naturally different – and male domination (inequality), since a superior role is ascribed to men (Ridgeway et al., 1998). Such patriarchal gender-role orientations represent some core aspects of the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, namely the definition of masculinity in contradiction to femininity, the maintenance of men’s domination over women and the discrediting of women and ‘the female’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Social institutions (such as family,

school, peers, church and media) play a crucial role in the reproduction of culturally specific gender-roles (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Pérez-Jiménez et al., 2007; Swain, 2005).

The paper is structured as follows: A brief reminder of the most prominent explanations of the lower educational success of boys will be followed by a theoretical exploration of the selected factors. Then the study design will be introduced followed by the results section: In the quantitative part, first descriptive results on gender differences in educational success and explanatory factors are presented, before giving a detailed insight into multivariate analyses. In the qualitative part, interpretations from the group discussions and classroom observations will follow. Finally, the main results will be triangulated and discussed.

## **Literature Review**

### **Some Aspects of the Failing Boys Debate**

The scientific ‘failing boys’ debate<sup>1</sup> focuses on school students and their characteristics, as well as on family background, teachers and school.

At the student level, a change in the educational aspirations of girls can be stated which is strongly linked to the increased labour market chances of women and better opportunities to use their educational investments in the process of status attainment (cf. longitudinal analysis by Breen et al., 2010). However, there are also gender differences in behavioural patterns that are relevant to educational success. A German large-scale project diagnosed boys as suffering from a so called ‘lazybones syndrome’ (Helmke & Weinert, 1999): boys frequently make less effort and have less of a sense of duty than girls, are also less compliant in their behaviour and exhibit more deviant behaviour at school. This, on the one hand, may divert boys from successful learning and, on the other hand, may be sanctioned by teachers, resulting in a lack of success at school.

Some research has also focused on the influence of leisure-time behaviours like media consumption. Based on a panel study, it was shown that boys spend more time than girls on the computer, playing games and watching films that are not appropriate for their age (Mössle et al., 2010). This may draw some of their attention away from learning, as well as

diverting some of their cognitive abilities that they need for school-related activities.

Another line of explanation is presented in intersectional studies on gender and ethnicity that focuses on a variety of interactions between women and men of different migrant groups concerning educational achievements and gender ideology constructions (Morris, 2012; Damaske, 2011; Vespa, 2009; Cokley & Moore, 2007; Kimmel, Hearn & Connell, 2005).

Moving the focus from students to teachers, female teachers have been at the centre of the debate regarding boys who fail at school from the beginning. From this point of view (cf. analysis of public statistics in Germany by Diefenbach & Klein, 2002), the feminisation of the profession of the (primary) school teacher has led to a feminine school culture – due to different socialisation experiences of female teachers and boys – that may result in a lack of understanding and conscious or unconscious discrimination. However, recent studies from different epistemological perspectives do not support this idea (comparative study by Neugebauer, Helbig & Landmann, 2011; feminist analysis by Francis & Skelton, 2010). On the other hand, it may be useful to consider the stereotypes of both male and female teachers regarding boys which may serve as ‘anchors’ for evaluations of students’ performances (‘anchor effects’, Strack & Mussweiler, 1997).

All in all, the underachievement of boys appears to be a controversial issue. While some studies stress the boys’ increasing disadvantage (Diefenbach & Klein, 2002; Tyre, 2006), others conclude that the gender gap is overrated and overgeneralised (Francis & Skelton, 2010; Morris, 2008) and needs to be considered more differentiated.

### **Gender-Role Orientations, School Alienation and Educational Success**

Not all, but some boys are failing in school. Thus, we focus on gender-role orientations and school alienation as two specific causes of the lower educational success of boys – the first being more prominently discussed than the latter. Our first argument is that probability of failure rises with *patriarchal gender-role orientations* which boys are more likely to believe in than girls – as shown in a longitudinal study by Ittel, Kuhl and Hess



(2006). Mendez and Crawford (2002) also found that girls adhere more strongly to liberal attitudes toward the rights of women in society and that gifted girls are equipped with more gender-role flexibility. This phenomenon is also quantitatively analysed by Massad (1981) demonstrating that the experienced pressure to stick to sex role stereotypes differs between girls and boys. Whereas for boys a link between masculinity and peer-acceptance was found, girls benefit from a balance between masculinity and femininity in order to strengthen peer-acceptance. Similar patterns are found in Ivins and Murphys' (2003) study on gender identity construction within classrooms: a high gender-role pressure on boys and potential costs to a boys' reputation if he is violating non-egalitarian accounts of masculinity. Thus, informal pupil culture and peer expectations play an important role while 'learning to be a schoolboy' (Swain, 2005, p. 218). However, even contemporary school – including teachers – can participate in the construction of hegemonic masculinity as Pascoe (2007) shows in her ethnographic study. According to research using the Gender Role Conflict (GRC) scale, rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in cognitive, affective, unconscious, or behavioral problems (O'Neil, 2008). Cornelissen et al. (2002) parallel the idea that boys who inherit traditional gender-role orientations, and who devalue gender-neutral or female attitudes and behaviours, have problems at school. The traditional image of male identity — critically reviewed and specified by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) as 'hegemonic masculinity' — which includes dominant, go-getter or even deviant roles, is incompatible with contemporary schools (cf. Swain, 2005). Non-egalitarian boys cannot gain approval from their peer group by being good at school, but must instead express a dislike of school. From the perspective of traditional (non-egalitarian) masculinity, characteristics such as conformity and cooperation, are devaluated as 'female', and so is educational success in some socialisation environments, demonstrated within an in-depth exploration (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002). In particular, academic elements in school – e.g. knowledge gained from books ('booksmarts', Morris, 2008, p. 740) – are seen as *female*, whereas practical elements (e.g. sports) are seen as *male*. In the British discourse on failing boys, traditional gender-role patterns are addressed as 'laddish' attitudes (Skelton & Francis, 2011) that are anti-academic: hard work and school achievement are devalued. Some

ethnographic oriented scholars (Willis, 1977; Martino, 1999) highlight that this ‘laddish’ construction of masculinity implies a devaluation of schoolwork, diligence and application as feminine; especially in the age between 11 and 16 (Swain, 2005) and among working-class boys. However, there are also other masculinities – e.g. Skelton and Francis (2011) analysed successfully literate boys and coined the term ‘renaissance masculinity’ describing (mostly middle-class) boys who are socially popular and able to incorporate *feminine* attributes that help them to succeed in a neoliberal society.

All in all, boys seem to adhere more strongly to these patriarchal gender-role orientation or ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and show more often anti-school behaviour. This is an *ironic outcome* (Morris, 2008, p. 731) or paradox, since boys who prefer patriarchal life styles should be much more interested in investing in education, according to interest-based explanations and human capital theory (Becker, 1964), since they should anticipate their role as the male breadwinner later in life.

Vice versa, employing a motivational explanation, it can be assumed that girls with patriarchal gender-role orientations perform worse than girls with modern egalitarian views since the former anticipate their roles as mothers and housewives with marginal interest in labour force participation. Therefore, it is not rational for them to invest in education (rational choice theories; Breen et al., 2010). Using survey data, Davis and Pearce (2007) have shown that the existing relationship between egalitarian gender views and college education is stronger for girls. These considerations lead us to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Boys have more patriarchal gender-role orientations than girls.

*Hypothesis 1b:* The higher boys and girls prefer patriarchal gender-role orientations, the lower their educational success.

*School alienation* is characterised by a low attachment to school, low school commitment, a low identification with school and learning and an emotional detachment from academic goals and values (Finn, 1989; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). In particular in regard to emotional detachment, it resembles the opposite of what Fredericks et al. (2004) call ‘emotional engagement’. In this study, school alienation is conceptualised in the sense of motivational and interest theories. A lack of interest in

school and a lack of intrinsic learning and achievement motivation — referring to a low interest in subjects and tasks and a lack of learning enjoyment — reduce educational success as the meta-analysis of Cameron and Pierce (1994) has shown.

Several cross-sectional surveys revealed that boys are more alienated from school than girls (Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). According to the Stage-Environment-Fit Theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), this gender difference may be caused by the mechanism that girls' needs – as objects of socialisation – seem to be better fulfilled by the school; and that they can adapt much better to the expectations of the school. Referring to Cohen's theory of subculture (1955), it can be argued that school alienation is a kind of reaction of boys whose needs are not fulfilled at school. According to Willis' (1977) ethnographic research, school alienation is an expression of resistance to school, particularly an opposition of working-class boys to school, its authoritative structures and its middle-class culture.

A main consequence of school alienation on the behavioural level is a lack of participation in learning activities and a lack of conformity to school rules, that eventually leads to lower school success and might even result in school dropout as analysed by Vallerand, Fortier and Guay (1997). The increasing emotional and physical distance from school and the decreasing identification can also mean a lack of resources to cope with experiences of failing in school for individual students (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). After all, the following hypotheses appear to be plausible:

*Hypothesis 2a:* Boys are more alienated from school than girls.

*Hypothesis 2b:* The greater the school alienation among girls and boys, the lower the educational success.

A potential link between patriarchal gender-role orientations, school alienation and educational success is *school deviance*; the violation of school norms. A general conceptual framework to theorise the mediating function of school deviance is provided by framing models. Considering the framing model of Social Action Theory (Wikström & Sampson, 2006), the following mechanisms can be described: If patriarchal gender-role orientations are employed as frames for the selection of an action alternative, action alternatives of boys are reduced to typical male behavioural patterns that might be interpreted as school delinquency, which

might lead to a decrease in educational success, since as *female* perceived behavioural patterns are no longer taken into account or actively dismissed. Morris (2008) emphasised – conducting participant observations and an interview study – that boys and girls actively use different (educational) behaviours in their performance of gender. The same can be assumed for school alienation. School alienation also functions as such a frame: If people are alienated from school, they do not consider action alternatives that resemble the image of a ‘good pupil’, but alternatives that are linked to active opposition to this image.

The school is an institution that normalises student behaviour, but at the same time the school institution and its structure provide reasons for school deviance (Holtappels & Meier, 2000). Students use deviant behavioural patterns to express resistance to school, to compensate for failures or even to meet the school’s expectations (e.g. cheating to pass a test). Therefore, school deviance ranges from cheating, school absenteeism and exam copying to violence against things or people. Stoudt (2006, p. 275) links the context of schools and the ‘hegemonic masculine curriculum’ to the reinforcement of gender-roles and the peer violence.

Gender differences in deviant behaviour are a common finding of cross-cultural quantitative studies – with girls usually showing less delinquency, less drug use, less xenophobia, and less violent behaviour than boys (Junger-Tas, Ribeaud & Cruyff, 2004). In contrast to socio-biologist explanations, this gender gap may be rooted in gender-specific socialisation (e.g. classical approach by Oakley, 1972). Following the Power-Control Theory of Gender and Delinquency (Hadjar et al., 2007), a large difference between mothers and fathers in labour force participation goes along with differences in parental styles (control behaviour) towards male and female children, and a transmission of certain values, namely non-egalitarian gender-role orientations. This leads to more risk-taking behaviour among boys and eventually to higher school deviance. Findings from experimental psychology indicate that the gender gap in favour of boys is low regarding cheating and school absenteeism, but larger when offensive behaviour, such as disturbances during lessons and violence, is taken into account (Eagly & Chivala, 1986; Eagly & Wood, 1999). Boys also respond more often to failing experiences by aggressive and violent behaviour (Hannover, 2004). Other so-called *hegemonic practices of masculinity* that potentially hinder

educational progress include rebellious attitudes towards schoolwork, challenging rules and authority and physical toughness (Morris, 2008).

School deviance is associated with lower educational success, since such disruptive and distracting behaviours may consume resources that are needed for learning activities and may influence the assessments by the teachers as shown in a quantitative-qualitative case study (Nagy, 2011).

This leads us to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3a:* Boys more often show school deviance.

*Hypothesis 3b:* Greater school deviance leads to lower educational success.

With regard to the link between gender-role orientations respectively school alienation and problem behaviour in school, another two hypotheses are derived from the previous explorations:

*Hypothesis 4:* The more students prefer patriarchal gender-role orientations, the higher their school deviance.

*Hypothesis 5:* The more students are alienated from school, the higher their school deviance.

## **Teaching Style, Peer attitudes and Social Origin**

Educational success and its factors also depend on other socialisation agents like family, peers and teachers. Teachers function not only as instructors, but also as social resources, since they are able to motivate, provide support for learning activities, and are able to raise the subjective wellbeing of boys and girls at school. From this point of view, the teacher may be seen as social capital in the sense of Coleman (1988). This supporting and motivating notion of teachers is reflected in an authoritative *teaching style* characterised by a high level of social control, but also a high level of emotional commitment and acceptance by the educator providing a good learning setting. Empirical results show that students benefit from an authoritative teaching style by gaining better achievements and being better integrated into the school, which improves their level of classroom adjustment and reduces the risk of school failure (Dever & Karabenick, 2011). Surveys of students and teachers in at-risk schools back this correlation (Baker et al., 2009). Hallinan (2008) also found in her study on

school attachment that students who perceive their teachers as caring and respecting think more positively about school.

Following this reasoning, we derive a sixth hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 6:* The more authoritative the style of the teachers; the lower the school alienation and the higher the educational success of the students.

As described above, peer acceptance plays an important role in adolescents' life. The characteristics of the peer group constitute a crucial factor according to Coleman's well-known 'Equality of Educational Opportunity' report (1966). The popularity aspect often results in the aim of being perceived as *normal* or *alike the others* within the informal peer culture in order to be protected from teasing (Swain, 2005). Thus, school-related attitudes and behaviour of *peer groups* can be defined as a source of motivation which does not always goes along with engaging in school, depending on whether the norms and values of teachers and students match (Murdock, 1999; Hadjar & Lupatsch, 2010). Large-scale analyses confirm the interplay between peers and individual achievement. School alienated peers and peers who engage in behaviour like smoking and drinking negatively influence school marks (Finn, 1989; Breakwell & Robertson, 2001). Legewie and DiPrete (2012) argue, based on their quasi-experimental research, that academically-oriented peer environments shape the construction of masculinity into less negative attitudes towards school and higher commitment with academia.

Since adolescents often seek friends who are similar to themselves (Murdock, 1999) boys are supposed to be more often surrounded by school alienated friends than girls. This leads us to our final hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 7a:* Boys more often report on school alienated peers than girls.

*Hypothesis 7b:* The more school alienated a student perceives his/her peers, the higher the students' own school alienation.

To avoid fallacies, it is important to control for *social origin*. For instance, a link between patriarchal gender-role orientation and educational success could be only an effect of social origin; working-class students prefer rather patriarchal gender-role orientations and at the same time have a lower educational success as shown by Morris (2012) on masculinity and class- and race-disadvantaged boys or Davis and Greenstein (2009) on the association between higher educational level and gender egalitarianism.

Thus, controlling for social origin helps to elaborate the genuine effect of gender-role orientations. A stable and robust finding of international large-scale research is a persistent link of parents' occupational status or educational level on educational attainment of their offspring (Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993; Becker, 2003), although there has been a slight decrease in educational inequalities during the educational expansion (Breen et al., 2010). With regard to the mechanisms behind these inequalities, primary effects (resource differences and achievements) and secondary effects (cost-benefit calculations) of social origin (Boudon, 1974) are effective: Compared to other social classes, working-class families have a lack of resources and often perceive a lower value of educational investment, but a higher investment risk (failure of their children; cf. Becker, 2003).

## **Methods**

The analysis of gender difference in educational success is part of the research project 'Lazy boys, ambitious girls?' (2008–2011); a cooperation between the Berne School of Teacher Education (Elisabeth Grünewald-Huber) and the University of Berne (Andreas Hadjar). A multi-method design has been employed including a questionnaire survey, video observations of German and Mathematics lessons, and group discussions with gender-homogeneous groups of students. The questionnaire is an effective way to survey anonymously students' self-reported attitudes and behaviour. To allow for actor-oriented interpretations beyond the standardised response options and for students' own concepts and 'explanations-in-use' (Willis, 1977, p. 62), group discussions were conducted. Finally, video observations enable to analyse actual behaviour within classroom settings. The great potential of this 'sequential quantitative-qualitative design' is the identification of statistical relationships, which then are deepened.

### **Questionnaire Survey**

The analysis is based on a quantitative student dataset. The cluster sample encompasses 19 randomly-selected schools (stratified random sample) in the canton of Berne (Switzerland) where 8 graders are taught. The net

sample encompasses 872 students (49 school classes). Students were told that the aim of this study is to increase teaching and school quality. The gender aspect was not mentioned to avoid reification.

The educational system in the Swiss canton of Berne is stratified to an intermediate extent. From grade 7, students are categorised into three school tracks: 'Real' (lower achievement level), 'Sek' (intermediate achievement level) and 'Spezsek' (upper achievement level), also varying by future educational and occupational possibilities. Whereas the upper school track is a kind of preparation for an upper secondary school career, students at 'Sek' level have a certain chance to progress to the upper secondary school, but often start vocational training or attend a one-year bridging education after grade 9.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to track attendance, our sample fits the actual distribution of school students in the canton of Berne (34.5 per cent in 'Real', 49.9 per cent in 'Sek' and 15.6 per cent in 'Spezsek'). The number of female students (51.1 per cent) equals about the number of male students (48.9 per cent). The average age of the interviewed students is 14.9 years.

The theoretical concepts are operationalised employing the following measurements: *Educational success* as an independent variable is a mean index of seven school marks that range from 6 to 1 in the Swiss system, with 6 as the best mark. Subjects included are German, French and Mathematics (the most important subjects for the tracking) and English, Nature (Biology), Culture (History) and Music. The school marks were gathered from official teacher files. An anonymous coding system was employed to link school marks and questionnaires.

*Patriarchal gender-role orientations* were measured by seven items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ) from a scale introduced by Brogan and Kunter (1976) and modified by Athenstaedt (2000). A patriarchal gender-role orientation is characterised by the acceptance of power differences, a positive attitude towards gender differences in familial authority and employment opportunities, and by a clear stereotype of what is male and what is female. Sample items are: 'It is more important for a woman to support her husband in his career than to pursue a career of her own', and 'In a group of men and women, only a man should work in the leadership role'. This scale ranged from 1 (egalitarian orientation) to 5 (patriarchal orientation).



*School alienation* is conceptualised as a second order construct that comprises three dimensions (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .66$ ): negative attitude towards school (factor loading: .704); lack of task orientation (.796); and lack of intrinsic motivation (.830). The three first-order-factors have been measured as follows;

*Negative attitude towards school* is a three-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .59$ ) that covers aspects such as: 'school has been a waste of time'.

*Task orientation* is part of the more complex concept of (academic) goal orientation by Nicholls (1984), and attempts to indicate if students work in a concentrated manner and successfully to fulfil tasks. The six-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ) has been recoded to become part of the school alienation construct (sample item: 'I am satisfied with school when something I learned makes me want to know more about it').

*Intrinsic motivation* is a two-item factor (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ) based on the Children's Academic Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (CAIMI; Gottfried 1985): sample item: 'I learn, because I enjoy learning'.

The instrument used to measure *school deviance* is partly based on work by Crick and Grotpeter (1995). The six-item scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ) represents different kinds of aggression against teachers, classmates and things. Sample items include: 'How often do you annoy your teachers intentionally?' or 'How often do you fight with others?'

The factor *authoritative teaching* comprises five items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ) that have been used in the PISA studies (Kunter et al., 2002). This measurement of teaching styles focuses on potential resources (in contrast to the issue of whether these resources are used or need to be used). Sample item: 'If I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers'.

*Peer attitudes* towards school were assessed by the surveyed students themselves. Following the Thomas theorem the interpretation of a situation matters, not the real situation itself. Thus, the perception of the own friends' attitude towards educational efforts are assumed to be more influential than actual behaviour. Peer attitudes are measured by four questions (cf. Hadjar & Baier, 2004) indicating positive views like 'My friends appreciate learning for school' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ).

The highest *educational level of the parents* is introduced as a control for social origin, since it is strongly linked to social status. The educational level of the parent with the higher educational qualification – stated by the

children – was transformed into years of education (classification of Swiss educational qualifications).

### **Group Discussions and Video Observations**

The gender homogeneous *group discussions* served the gathering of collective patterns of perception and orientation (Bohnsack, Pfaff & Weller, 2009) and enable to work out collective biographical experiences such as school climate, attitudes of school alienation or gender-role orientations. Those orientations are supposed to emerge in interactions in school, where they are constantly renewed and maintained. Twelve group discussions (with 4 to 13 participants per group) were carried out – selected via *theoretical sampling* by applying the criteria of ‘achievement level’ and gender-role orientations (extreme cases) on the base of the quantitative results. Whereas the first (unstructured and open) part of each discussion was introduced by the question why students feel/or not feel good at school, during the second part a specially-designed interview guideline ensured that all relevant topics were addressed. *Video observation* was used in order to analyse student behaviour during lessons. A category system was developed which facilitated the identification of observations as ‘behaviour ascribed to the own sex’ (doing gender) versus ‘behaviour ascribed to the opposite sex’ (undoing gender). Example categories are ‘being ambitious’ or ‘challenging teachers’.

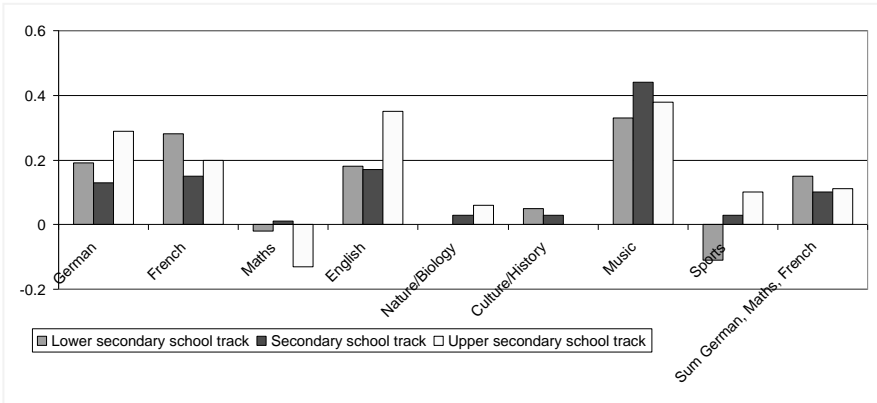
Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was used in order to analyse the transcribed data. Thus, data were summarised, segmented and patterned by a category system which was theory-driven, but also steadily enhanced according to the empirical material (coding with MAXQDA).

### **Quantitative Results on the Gender Gap in Educational Success**

First, the gender differences in school marks will be assessed. Then mean differences between boys and girls in the theorised explanatory factors will be looked at. Finally a structural equation model makes visible direct and indirect mechanisms behind the gender variations in educational success.

In Figure 1, subject-specific mean differences between girls’ and boys’ school marks are shown. The boys’ mean score has been subtracted from

the girls’ mean score: scores above 0 refer to a girls’ lead over boys. Girls score significantly better in German, French, English and Music. This applies to all school tracks. There are no gender differences in favour of boys. Summing up, there is a clear gender gap in school marks: girls outperform boys.



*Figure 1.* Gender differences in educational success (grade point average) in favour of girls  
 significant  $p \leq .05$

Data Source: Canton of Berne, Switzerland, School Student Sample 2009

A first impression of possible causes of the gender gap in educational success can be derived from a comparison of male and female students regarding the descriptives of some explanatory factors (table 1). As expected, there are significant gender differences in student characteristics: boys prefer, in line with hypothesis 1a, more traditional gender-role orientations than girls. Hypothesis 2a is also backed: boys are more alienated from school than girls. School deviance at the behavioural level is also higher among boys, as assumed in hypothesis 3a. Regarding peer attitudes towards school, the data are consistent with hypothesis 7a: boys perceive their peers’ attitudes towards school as less positive than girls do. Finally, looking at authoritative teaching styles, results indicate that there is no significant difference in the perception of the support by teachers.

Table 1

*Gender difference in educational success and explanatory variables*

Variable (min-max)	Mean Girls (standard deviation)	Mean Boys (standard deviation)	Mean Difference (Significance)
<b>Educational Success</b> (mean school marks) (1-6)	4.75 (0.40)	4.60 (0.41)	*
<b>Patriarchal Gender- Role Orientations</b> (1-5)	2.18 (0.78)	2.92 (0.83)	*
<b>School Alienation</b> (1-5)	2.45 (0.61)	2.59 (0.56)	*
<b>School Deviance</b> (1-5)	1.58 (0.52)	2.01 (0.73)	*
<b>Teachers: Authoritative Style</b> (1-5)	3.86 (0.65)	3.85 (0.70)	
<b>Peer Attitudes towards School (positive attitudes)</b> (1-5)	3.33 (0.68)	3.04 (0.72)	*

\* significance level  $p \leq .05$ Data Source: Canton of Berne, Switzerland, School Student Sample 2009;  
School Class Level n = 49; School Student Level n= 758

To explain gender differences in educational success, direct and indirect effects as well as interdependencies between the explanatory variables will be analysed by estimating gender-specific structural equation models (SEM, maximum-likelihood estimation) using AMOS. Owing to the complexity of the model, all scales were introduced as manifest variables into the SEM to optimise the ratio of number of cases (N) to the number of

variables. Goodness-of-fit measures show a good fit of the data to the hypothesised, slightly modified, conceptual model (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

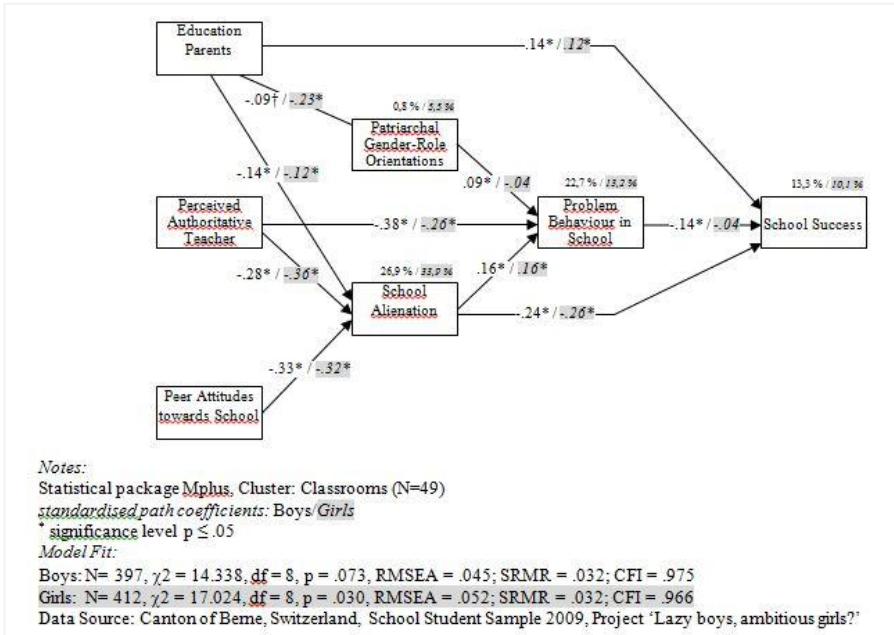


Figure 2: Structural equation models: Gender-specific explanation of educational success

Figure 2 shows that the included explanatory variables explain 13 per cent (male students) and 10 per cent (female students) of the variance in educational success. The main explanatory factor of educational success is school alienation which is associated negatively with educational success among both male and female students, as expected in hypothesis 2b. Patriarchal gender-role orientations do not have a direct impact on educational success as postulated in hypothesis 1b. But among boys, patriarchal gender-role orientations significantly increase school deviance, so that hypothesis 4 is only supported for the male subgroup. What applies also only to boys is that school deviance is another predictor of educational

success, in line with hypothesis 3b. Furthermore school deviance depends on school alienation: greater school alienation is associated with greater school deviance (as assumed in hypothesis 5). As becomes clear from [figure 2](#), the teacher is able to reduce school alienation and school deviance by employing an authoritative style. Thus, in addition to the teaching-school-alienation link postulated in hypothesis 6, authoritative teaching also reduces school deviance directly. A direct link to school success is not indicated. Among boys and girls, a very high influence of peer attitudes on school alienation concurs with hypothesis 7b. But there appears no other correlation, neither between peer attitudes and school deviance nor directly between peer attitudes and school success.

The control variable social origin has a profound impact on school alienation that is higher in families with a lower educational level. Patriarchal gender-role orientations are influenced by social origin among girls; among boys this holds only on the 10 per cent threshold. Furthermore there is still a genuine direct effect of social origin on educational success among boys and girls.

### **Qualitative Results on the Role of Gender-Role Orientations and School Alienation**

Results of the qualitative sub-studies contribute to a more holistic picture. It is focused on gender-role orientations first and then findings related to school alienation are presented.

The group discussions with the eighth-graders reveal different views on gender relations and gender-role orientations that differ by school track (achievement level). As outlined in the method section, gender-homogeneous groups of students had been asked about their conceptions of committed relationships in adult life. In the low educational track (low achievement level), male students often referred to traditional role models including a ‘male bread-winner’ and an ‘around-the-clock mother’. As reasons behind these ideas, a male student attending a low educational track mentioned: ‘Women are more patient with small children and teenagers. Men do have [...] less patience and work during the day and come back in the evening’. The majority of female students in low educational tracks also favour traditional gender-role patterns, but seem to have a wider scope of

life scripts. Their statements ranged from rather traditional – ‘My husband will work maybe 80 per cent [work load], I will work only one day [a week]. When he has time, he will also care for the children so that they see him [as well]’ and ‘The household is mainly dealt with by the women’ – to more modern views like ‘However, I do not want children and also do not want to marry necessarily. Most important is the job’. The group discussions with male students of the higher educational tracks (high achievement level) were characterised by a high degree of political correctness. Students are aware that their future spouses may belong to a modern generation of women who is not willing to abstain from an educational and professional career: ‘When we will be adults, the majority of women will want to work and say “Monsieur, you have to prepare the food!”’ The anticipated workforce participation is rather egalitarian, most of these male students want to share in the care for the children favouring a double part-time model. The female students of the higher educational track also expressed their strong orientation towards labour-market participation as well as towards family: ‘For me it is very important to never depend on a men. [...] You need a high education to stand on your own feet’.

Regarding educational success and school alienation, male students often stressed that female students would have a more facilitated access to learning and school in general, were more motivated and less distracted from learning activities. Male students from the high educational track stated that women were able to learn more easily than men and have more ambition, since men were more often engaged in gaming, cars and technical stuff. Whereas women were more able to concentrate on learning activities and have more stamina, men would be more often distracted. Both female and male students refer to a minimalistic approach of the boys and their higher degree of effort avoidance: ‘We often do the minimum of what we have to do’ stated a male student.

The video observation mainly revealed behavioural differences between male and female students. Boys more often tend to avoid efforts or at least try to express effort avoidance. They more often orient themselves toward minimum standards. An illustrative example is a scene from a lesson in the low educational track: The teacher announces a test for the next day. A girl expresses that the students would need to prepare this exam. A male student speaks out ‘For this test you do not need to study’. Coolness, non-conform

or deviant behaviour – being linked to a lower school success – is also more often to be found among boys. Counting the (few) incidents in the videographed lessons, boys more often resist orders of the teachers, copy from class-mates or state to have forgotten learning material.

There is one observation that might add to the understanding to the peer behaviour of some boys. While all students in a low level school class were filling out questionnaires, two male students showed disruptive behaviour (making noise, violating their desks). The students who finished their questionnaires were asked to take a break outside. Interestingly, the two boys stopped their annoying behaviour after the last male student had left the room – with only some girls still dealing with their questionnaires. This supports the notion that such deviant behaviours are addressed towards the other boys as a ‘situated construction’ of gender (Morris, 2008).

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

Both parts of this study have shown that student characteristics play a crucial role regarding the gender gap in educational success in favour of girls. School alienation appears to be the main predictor of educational success, and owing to the higher alienation level among boys, also the major cause of the gender gap. Also in the group discussions, a higher distance to schooling was more often attributed to boys in the perceptions of both sex groups. Another issue are patriarchal gender-role orientations: the male student groups reported a higher preference for traditional gender-role orientations than girls. In particular this was true for low achievers. The same pattern is revealed by the statistical analyses: Boys score higher in traditional gender-role views. Regarding the consequences a higher preference for such orientations is associated with more problem behaviour in school only for boys. This school deviance can be seen as a behavioural mediator between patriarchal gender-role orientations and educational success. Boys with a higher preference for patriarchal gender-role orientations behave more deviantly in school, and therefore have lower educational success. This finding was consistent with the classroom observations. Furthermore, the direct link between school alienation and school success is not surprising, since a low attachment to school can find expression in lower school marks without an indication on the behavioural



level. The finding, that the effect of school alienation on school deviance is as strong for boys as for girls, but problem behaviour in school only effects boys' school success, suggests the existence of different forms of deviance in schools and different perceptions of girls and boys behaviour from teachers' perspectives. Based on the SEM, a closer look at the explaining factors of school alienation is possible: a) teacher behaviour can reduce school alienation by employing an authoritative style (balancing the provision of structure and caring); b) peer attitudes influence school alienation of boys and girls to the same degree, whereas within the observational study situations emerged which demonstrated how particularly male students use the classroom setting in order to act *laddish*, especially in the presence of other boys; c) social origin has an important role in this framework: It has a direct impact on educational success for girls and boys, and children originating from families with a lower educational background show greater school alienation and higher preference of patriarchal gender-role orientations. This finding came also to light in the group discussions, which were clustered according to achievement level due to the stratified educational system. The group discussions provide a detailed picture regarding gender-role orientations: Low achieving girls adhere to rather traditional gender-role orientations, but with a broader range of configuration than working class boys, above described as gender-role flexibility.

Interestingly, there is no link between patriarchal gender-role orientations and school alienation, although such a link is implied in several theoretical explorations regarding the devaluation of school as female by boys (e.g. [Martino, 1999](#)). Maybe preferring patriarchal gender-role orientations does not mean being alienated automatically from school, but 'laddish behaviour' has the unintended consequence of reduced educational success. Therefore, behavioural level is more important in this argument than school alienation on the attitudinal level.

Beside the consistent results from the qualitative and quantitative parts of this study, each method gave added value. The SEM revealed direct and indirect effects of patriarchal gender-role orientations and school alienation – differentiated for girls and boys. In the context of attitudes towards and deviant behaviour in school, a questionnaire may provide answers which are less biased by social desirability. Additionally, the group discussions

revealed a link between traditional gender-role orientations and school success in terms of track attendance and supported a broader understanding of aspects which are not only experienced by individual students, but also constructed within student groups. The classroom observation enabled to recognise manifold variations of behavioural patterns.

Some limitations of the study will be explored further on. Motivation – as part of the school commitment concept – is a very complex issue linked to different factors (such as self-efficacy or attributional styles) and influenced by different socialisation agencies. Future studies should address this shortcoming by using more differentiated indices. Another main issue is that the analysis is based on a survey design with one wave. Causal links can only be made plausible by referring to the assumptions made in the theoretical explorations. Thus, longitudinal studies are still necessary before obtaining a holistic picture about the mechanisms behind gender-specific school success. Since this study has demonstrated the benefit of a triangulated approach, we recommend combining quantitative event analysis with life history interviews.

In closing this paper and reflecting on the importance of these results, another argument is raised in the current debate on failing boys: Although boys show worse performance at school and have lower educational success, they still have better chances than girls in the labour market. However, the lower educational success of boys in school remains an issue, since there is group of boys from a poor family background that has the highest risk of leaving school with no or only a very low educational qualification, and thus being stigmatised in the labour market for their whole life. As can be learned from these mixed-method-results, teachers and parents need to deal with school alienation and make students aware of gender-roles, and that learning at school can be part of both female and male identity. Taking up the idea of Vespa (2009) that gender ideology can change as people experience new social settings, ‘undoing gender’ (Deutsch, 2007) seems to be possible and – in the light of the just presented results in regard to patriarchal gender-role orientations – promising to get disadvantaged boys ‘back in’.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this review, we focus on sociological literature and will not refer to publications which understand gender as merely physiological or biological in the sense of the *gender role identity paradigm* (Pérez-Jiménez et al., 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The school system in the canton of Berne is very heterogeneous regarding class and school structures (different school tracks united in one school or even in one school class). Thus, we considered the clustering of students in class rooms.

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