Gender composition and female school choice

Schneeweis and Zweimuller (2012) explored the impact of gender composition in coeducational schools during Grades 5–8 on the choice of school type for female students in Grade 9. The study was conducted in Austria using school registration records and academic performance data.

The Austrian school system is structured so that after four years of comprehensive primary schooling, students have to choose between two school tracks, the lower secondary school (low track) and the first stage of the higher general school (high track) (p. 485). After “Grade 8, students again have to choose a school type. There are four broad alternatives, a prevocational school, an intermediate vocational school, a higher vocational school and the higher general school. The pre-vocational school is a one-year school that prepares students for various types of apprenticeships” (p. 486). This education system “consists of a variety of intermediate and higher vocational school types with different orientations, some of which are preparing for traditional female and male occupations, like schools for domestic sciences or technical schools” (p. 497).

The results clearly demonstrated that female students were less likely to choose the female dominated school types and more likely to choose the technical school type “if they were exposed to a higher share of girls” (p. 497). The magnitude of the effect was sizeable; “an increase in the share of girls by one standard deviation (0.11) decreases the probability of choosing a female school type by about 4.8 percentage points, which is a reduction of 11%” (p. 497).

The proportion of girls in the grade “has an influence on school choice for female students. It seems that in more female environments, girls are less restrained by gender stereotypes and are more likely to consider traditional male school types and careers” (p. 490). Schneeweis and Zweimuller (p. 497) concluded that “the gender mix in schools matters for females’ choice of secondary school”.

The researchers explained the implications from their main finding that “girls are less likely to choose a traditionally female dominated school type and more likely to choose a male dominated school type at the age of 14 if they were exposed to a higher share of girls in previous grades” (p. 482). Gender segregation in employment and the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields may be reduced if girls are educated in female environments that remove gender stereotypes. Schneeweis and Zweimuller (p. 483) believe that gender stereotypes are “less pronounced, the higher the share of females in class, thus allowing girls to make a less restrained career choice”.