

Early gender gaps drive career choices and employment opportunities, says OECD

International Day of Women

Madrid, 05.03.2015, 17:32 Time

USPA NEWS - Education systems have made major strides to close gender gaps in student performance but girls and boys remain deeply divided in career choices, which are being made much earlier than commonly thought, according to a new OECD report.

The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour and Confidence says that gender bias, conscious and unconscious, among parents, teachers and employers is partly responsible. "Despite major progress over the past two decades in reducing the gender gap, we need to find new ways to address the social and emotional aspects of opening children's minds to their abilities and future careers", said OECD Deputy Secretary-General Stefan Kapferer, launching the report in Madrid, Spain. "The good news is that these findings highlight that what's needed is neither extensive nor expensive education reform but a concerted effort by parents, teachers and employers".

Less than one in 20 girls considers a career in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) compared to one in five boys, despite similar performances in the OECD's PISA science test. This matters because careers in these fields are in high demand and among the most highly paid. OECD PISA surveys have shown that girls lack the same self-confidence as boys in science and maths and new analysis reveals striking differences in parental encouragement that exacerbate the problem.

Parents are much more likely to expect their sons to work in STEM careers than their daughters, even if they show the same ability. Some 50% of parents in Chile, Hungary and Portugal expect their sons to work in STEM fields, but less than 20% expect the same of their daughters. In Korea, the gap is only 7 percentage points. New analysis also reveals that boys are much more likely to underperform at school than girls, leading to disengagement and higher dropout rates. Six out of ten of low achievers in reading, maths and science in OECD PISA surveys are boys.

Improving reading skills is essential, says the report. Boys and girls have different reading preferences, with girls more likely to read novels and magazines, while boys prefer comic books and newspapers. Teachers and parents and teachers should take this more into account, giving children more choice in what they read at home and school. Moderate video gaming also boosted the scores of boys in digital reading.

Teachers could do more to boost the performance of both boys and girls in maths, a subject where boys do better in around half of participating countries. Teaching strategies that require students to explain how they solved a maths problem, apply what they have learned outside of the classroom and work more independently, improve results across the board and particularly for girls.

The report also reveals that teachers consistently give better marks to girls than boys in maths, even when they perform similarly in the OECD PISA maths test. The evidence suggests this may be because girls are more attentive in class and behave better and are marked up as a result. In the long term, says the report, this will hurt rather than help girls, as employers reward people for what they know and can do more than grades at school.

Employers also showed an innate bias towards boys: while girls are more likely to research careers via the Internet, boys are more likely to get hands-on experience by working as interns, visiting a job fair or speaking to careers advisors outside of school. Employers can do more to engage with girls to learn more about potential careers, says the report.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-3462/early-gender-gaps-drive-career-choices-and-employment-opportunities-says-oecd.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDSStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Jose A. Martin

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