

# SOCIAL MODELS FOR COLLEGE AND SUCCESS AMONG MALE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN SOCIAL SCIENCES



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*“For me, CEGEP is a world of discovery, knowledge, and evolution where we learn critical thinking and how to analyze the world around us.”*

(Excerpt from interview with a session 3 student)

The difficulty boys have integrating into school environments can be seen at all levels of education and in all Western countries. The problem is persistent and requires our full attention because of the negative implications on personal and social levels. In order to offer training in college that is adapted to boys, our understanding of the latter must be brought up to date, particularly through improved knowledge of what college and success means to them.

This article provides a broad outline on a qualitative study<sup>1</sup> relating to how male college students enrolled in Social Sciences visualize college and success. This research came about because males seem to experience specific difficulties along their academic path. We believe that the more we know about their interior universe—in this instance, their social models—the better adapted will be the interventions that take this information into account. After presenting the essence of the problem as well as the conceptual and methodological framework supporting our research, we emphasize the testimonials of boys who expressed their points of view through small group interviews or open questionnaires over three sessions.

*Various statistics on average schooling, access to college studies as well as success and graduation rates show a consistent gap between the sexes, once again favouring girls.*

## A MORE PROBLEMATIC SCHOOL PATH FOR BOYS

Within the framework of a paper entitled “Le désengagement et l’échec scolaires d’un trop grand nombre de garçons” (Academic demotivation and failure for too many boys), Jean-Pierre Bernard (2003) provides us with some interesting figures to help shed light on this reality. Here, we will focus predominantly on college statistics taken from that article. In 2000-2001, the expected level of schooling was 15.8 years for girls and 14.9 years for boys. At college and university levels, average schooling for women is 4.1 years versus 3.0 years for men. When it comes to access to college studies in general education, in 2000-2001, the gap between boys and girls was 18.4 points in favour of girls. During the first college trimester, girls succeeded more than boys did, with a 75% + success rate for courses, which represents a 16.2% gap for the 2001 group. Finally, the graduation rates at the end of the expected duration of college studies show a 13% gap in favour of girls starting with 1996 groups.

While recognizing that the gap between the sexes must not overlook the fact that the majority of boys do succeed in school and that boys—just like girls—are not a homogeneous group, Bernard concludes with the following statement: “The problem is not that boys are less successful than girls, but rather that they do not reach the expected rates of success.” (p. 21)

Various statistics on average schooling, access to college studies as well as success and graduation rates show a consistent gap between the sexes, once again favouring girls. This situation is alarming as it impacts the occupational integration of boys and social progress in Quebec, as mentioned in the Conseil supérieur de l’éducation (2000) guidelines “Rehausser le niveau de la scolarisation de la population québécoise” (Increasing the level of schooling for the Quebec population).

## UNDERSTANDING THE MENTAL MODELS OF BOYS

Although statistics help describe the scope of the phenomenon, our specific area of interest deals primarily with a qualitative approach designed to better understand the mental universe of boys. The question of the inferior success rate of boys, in particular our interrogations on the models that boys construct and maintain relative to college as a place of training and learning, has captivated our interest for several years already. Observations made in the classroom, exchanges with our

<sup>1</sup> This research was subsidized for two years, from Fall 2004 to Winter 2006, by the *Programme d’aide à la recherche sur l’enseignement et l’apprentissage*. We wish to mention the contribution of Carole Martin, teacher in Nursing at Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, who benefited from a day and a half per week of dispensation to participate in this research. The research report entitled *Social models for college and success among male students enrolled in Social Sciences* is available in hard copy at the library of each public and private college in Quebec and from the Centre de documentation collégiale that also has an electronic version. Additional copies can be requested from the Fonds de rayonnement pédagogique at Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu at the following email address: lucie.lahaie@cstjean.qc.ca.



students and our readings on the subject<sup>2</sup> led us to reflect and regularly discuss the issue with colleagues. It seems there is still much to be learned if we are to better understand the scholastic situation of boys in college.

The main research goal consists in revealing the social models of college and success found in boys enrolled in Social Sciences. The goal is to describe the social models boys have of college and success, to identify the evolution of these models over three sessions and to compare the models of strong male students with those of students with weaker academic results.

To contextualize the research, we referred to previous studies (Bouchard, 2003; Rivière, Sauvé and Jacques, 1997; Tardif, 2002) dealing with the social models of students. To fully grasp the social models students have of college, we include the overall components of the pedagogical situation as described by Legendre (1983) in his systemic model. Our perspective is also longitudinal since it takes into account the evolution of models over the course of the first three college sessions.

## THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MODELS

In order to clarify this concept, Fischer (1987) defines a mental representation “as a method of organizing our knowledge of reality, that is itself a social construct” (p. 116) and presents a few of its characteristic traits. Thus, from a structural perspective, a mental model is a process by which we restructure reality and appears to be a dynamic and unfinished development process. As for content, the model is above all cognitive: “It is a sum of information relative to social objects that can be more or less varied, stereotypical and detailed” (p. 119). This twofold aspect—dynamic development and level of cognitive complexity—was taken into account in our research, in particular by highlighting the transformations that the social models of boys undergo over successive sessions.

### THE CENTRAL CORE

According to Rouquette and Rateau (1998), “All models revolve around a central core” (p. 21). This core contains only a few components and serves as a stable base upon which the model as whole is built and from which it derives its meaning. In fact, it unifies and stabilizes the model. The social model changes when the core becomes peripheral or when peripheral components become central.

In the study of models, the priority is in locating and identifying the central core. As for identifying the content, this can be achieved through interviews, open questionnaires and the use of associations.

<sup>2</sup> The following writings were consulted: *Réussite des garçons* (undated document published by the Fédération des cégeps); *Les jeunes et les représentations sociales de la réussite* (Rivière, 2002); *La réussite des études. Historique et inventaire d'activités* by Jean Desilets (PERFORMA, June 2000); the research report (PAREA) of Margot Kaszap (1996); articles by Jacques Belleau (2003), Yves Blouin (2003), Luc Desautels (2004), Renée-Claude Lorimier (2001), Jacques Roy (2006 and 2003) and the file on scholastic success at college (May 2001) that appeared in the magazine *Pédagogie collégiale*; the article by Céline Saint-Pierre (2003) and the statements issued by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation entitled *Pour une meilleure réussite scolaire des garçons et des filles* (1999) and *Des conditions de réussite au collégial. Réflexion à partir de points de vue étudiants* (1995).

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### PERIPHERAL COMPONENTS

Peripheral components gravitate around the central core and make up most of the model content; they represent its most accessible section. These components include opinions, descriptions, beliefs, and stereotypes relative to the subject of the model. One of their roles is to allow a personalization of models and behaviours. According to Rouquette and Rateau (1998), “the transformation of a model occurs, in most cases, through a prior modification of its peripheral components” (p. 35).

Peripheral components are directly related to the core, constitute the most vivid, and concrete part of the model. They correspond to an interface between the central core and the actual situation. The study of the peripheral system thus appears just as important as that of the central system in understanding how social models operate.

The peripheral structure, a result of the hyperactivity of certain peripheral components, is always specific to a given subpopulation, according to Rouquette and Rateau (1998, p. 53-55). In our research, we highlighted the divergences in the peripheral structure to distinguish between boys of different academic calibres, that is, the STRONG from the WEAK; these sub-groups share the same central elements in the various social models that were studied.



### THE OBJECT OF THE MODEL

As mentioned by Jodelet (1998), the social model is defined by its content (information, images, opinions, attitudes) and is connected to an object (a task to accomplish, an economic event, a social figure).

The focus of our research is twofold: college and success. To define the object “college”, we chose a systemic model of the pedagogical situation (Legendre, 1983), because it refers to the principal components that we wanted to cover in our research, i.e., teaching, learning and the educational environment. For the “success” portion, we were inspired by the global vision of success proposed by Rivière, Sauvé and Jacques (1997) in the context of college training: we retained the concepts of “academic success” and “personal success”, but replaced the concept of “professional success” by that of “social success.”

### QUESTIONING BOYS

#### THE SAMPLE

This research is considered qualitative/interpretative research because the data is of a qualitative nature and the underlying epistemology is interpretative. The selected sample of our research included all boys recently enrolled in CEGEP and in Social Sciences at Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu in the Fall of 2004. These students make up the student body whose social models were studied over the course of three consecutive sessions: Fall 2004, Winter 2005 and Fall 2005.

To succeed in comparing STRONGER and WEAKER students, we used the following criteria in the distribution of students during the first session: the general average at secondary level and the first grade of the college session given in each of the three courses of the

specific training. During the other two sessions of data collection, we respected the same principle to proceed with a potential regrouping, using a standardized score<sup>3</sup> rather than the general average at secondary level.

We should keep in mind that the number of boys under study decreased gradually during the three sessions, because of their dropping out or changing programs. Table 1 specifies the number of boys—based on their school results—enrolled in the three sessions using various data collection methods.

### DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In order to collect the data necessary for a description of social models in boys, two complementary data collection methods were used: the group interview and the use of written material, especially questionnaires but also using lists of words and producing a drawing with commentary. Let us specify that the use of several data strategies, i.e. methodological triangulation, is particularly beneficial in isolating different facets of the problem being studied. Table 1 lists data collection methods used for the research in each of the three sessions.

Tableau 1: DATA COLLECTION METHODS

| METHOD   | SESSION | TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS | STRONG | WEAK |
|--|---------|--------------------------|--------|------|
| GROUP INTERVIEWS (12 TIMES)<br>(10 TIMES)<br>(9 TIMES) | 1       | 46                       | 27     | 19   |
|  | 2*      | 35                       | 22     | 13   |
|  | 3*      | 22                       | 16     | 6    |
| QUESTIONNAIRES   | 1       | 60                       | 30     | 30   |
|  | 3**     | 30                       | 23     | 7    |
| WORDS LISTS  | 3       | 22                       | 16     | 6    |
| DRAWING WITH COMMENTARY                                | 3       | 22                       | 16     | 6    |

\* Boys interviewed in sessions 2 and 3 also took part in the initial interview during session 1.

\*\* Boys who completed the questionnaire in session 3 had already filled in the questionnaire during session 1.

### SOCIAL MODELS OF TEACHING

In order to allow for the greatest number of testimonials from boys in this article, we had to limit our presentation of the results. We chose to present the convergences and divergences between STRONG and WEAK students in the third session, relative to the social models of teaching, given the keen interest usually generated by this facet of college. It should be noted that we do not present the evolution of these models over a one-year period: the changes observed during the course of the sessions would most certainly provide subtle differences and complete the picture outlined here. Excerpts taken from the interviews and questionnaires represent the points of view expressed in the third session by a variety of students taken from the three study profiles in Social Sciences<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The standardized score is the weighted performance average of all college courses (excluding physical education). Its calculations also include the units connected to courses and failures.

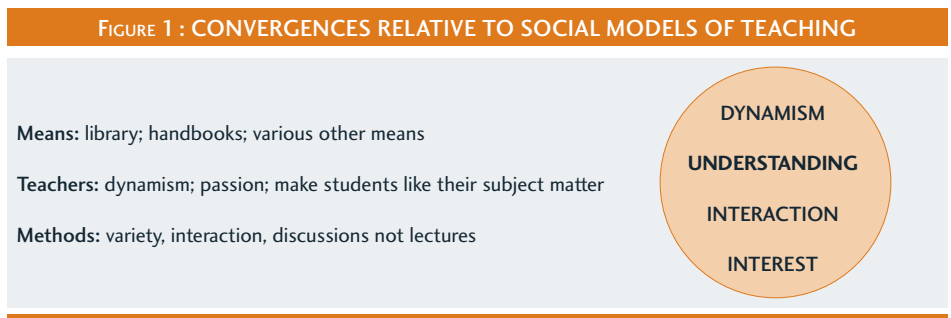
<sup>4</sup> The three study profiles at Cégep Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu offered within the Social Sciences program are: Administration and economy profile (300.32); Individual and society profile (300.34); Openness to the world profile (300.35)



### CONVERGENCES BETWEEN STRONG AND WEAK STUDENTS

The central core identified relative to the structure of the social model of teaching during session 3 is that of understanding and it is connected to three key elements: level of interest, dynamism, and interaction.

This model of teaching suggests that, on the whole, boys in session 3 view their teachers, the means, and methods of instruction as important complements that ensure understanding of the subject matter under study. Their remarks also reveal that the three aspects of teaching must arouse their interest, and that teachers and their methods must be characterized by dynamic activity and interaction. Figure 1 introduces the convergences in the structure of the social model of teaching during the third session.



### The teachers

As a whole, the boys interviewed feel that their teachers teach well. As far as they are concerned, the most desirable characteristics in a teacher are dynamism, passion, and the ability to make students like the subject matter.

#### Dynamism

“The teacher must be dynamic and seem to enjoy teaching the subject matter.” (WEAK)

#### Passion

“In my opinion, this is really a basic need for a teacher. If a teacher has no passion, there will be problems in communicating.” (STRONG)

#### Ability to make students like the subject matter

“A teacher must be able to make the students like the subject matter because if we are not touched or if we dislike the subject matter, we certainly will not learn anything nor benefit from taking the course. My main expectation from a teacher is that I will like the course and learn something that interests me.” (WEAK)

### Methods

When questioned, students said they consider overall teaching methods to be adequate. The methods they most appreciate are characterized by variety, interaction, and particularly, discussions. Teaching methods that are disliked are those that consist mainly of lectures or those that lack variety.

#### Variety

“I appreciate variety in teaching approaches. It makes it easier to maintain interest.” (STRONG)

“However, most teachers vary their methods: two lectures followed by teamwork in period 3 or the use of a PowerPoint presentation; one hour of explanations, a team assignment, things like that. This helps us follow the course and understand the subject matter.” (WEAK)

#### Interaction

“For me, interaction between the student and the teacher is important. It should not be a situation where the teacher is only there to teach the subject matter non-stop.” (STRONG)

“There should be a lot of discussion.” (WEAK)

#### Adding other approaches to the lectures

“Some teachers, even in this current session, do nothing but give lectures. It’s always blah blah blah and eventually we simply disconnect and our minds wander elsewhere. This is very bad!” (WEAK)

### Means

Students claim to be satisfied with library services as a complementary teaching tool and handbooks that are relevant and useful. Moreover, they appreciate any initiative that provides them with a variety of educational means.

#### Library

“The library is very useful. Bottom line is, we simply have to go to the library. There are many tools available there for us to use. I think we just have to stop being afraid to use them.” (STRONG)

“To do research, it’s the library.” (WEAK)

#### Handbooks

“You know, the notes we take are not always clear. So we go look up the information in the book and it’s explained in a different way. This helps us to understand and we are then able to make a connection between the book and notes. That’s great.” (STRONG)



“Sometimes teachers ask us to buy a book that they don’t even use. In most cases however, the book does help us understand.” (WEAK)

### Variety

“If you want my opinion, a combination of all teaching methods is the best approach to focused on learning (STRONG)

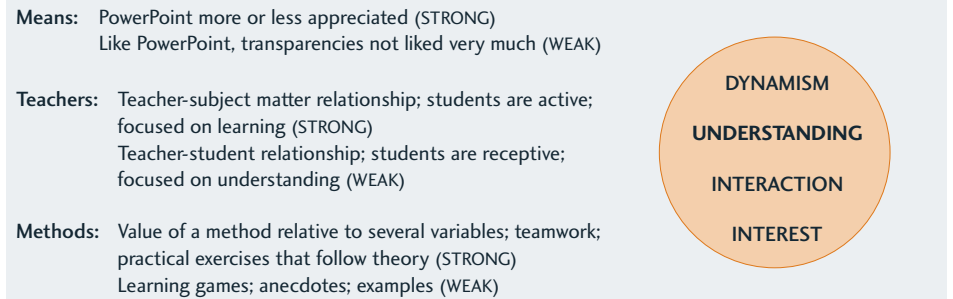
### DIVERGENCES BETWEEN STRONG AND WEAK STUDENTS

In terms of divergences seen in the third session, STRONG and WEAK students differ in several areas when it comes to their social model of teaching. Figure 2 lists the most important aspects that seem to differentiate the two groups. For example, STRONG students take into account the teacher-subject matter relationship as well as several components relative to their appreciation of teaching methods and express mitigated interest in PowerPoint presentations. WEAK students focus more on the teacher-student relationship and particularly appreciate games, examples, anecdotes and Power-Point presentations, but they do not like transparencies very much. We can see that the criteria for level of interest, dynamic activity, and interaction vary according to the subgroup in question.

### Teachers

STRONG students seem more concerned by the teacher-subject matter relationship, insisting on the importance that the teacher display a keen interest in the subject matter taught: they are focused on learning the subject matter and are active in this process. On the other hand, WEAK students focus more on the teacher-student relationship. They want the teacher to provide clear instructions; WEAK students seem pre-occupied with understanding the subject matter and are receptive to the teaching insofar as it captures their interest.

FIGURE 2: DIVERGENCES RELATIVE TO SOCIAL MODELS OF TEACHING



#### STRONG students: the teacher-subject matter relationship

“This is more like university situations where the subject matter is not presented in its entirety by professors; rather, students must make efforts to research different places to get access to the data.”

“For me, a good teacher is someone who knows his subject matter, has a keen interest in it, and is able to talk about it intelligently. Students see that the teacher is interested and passionate about a subject.”

#### WEAK students: the teacher-student relationship

“Sometimes teachers just don’t seem interested enough in what students really understand. They ask us if we understand, if everything is clear. The students however, participate more or less and sometimes, their minds may be miles away. These teachers have been lecturing for too long. It would be a case of trying to wake them up.”

### Methods

While recognizing the value of teamwork and practical exercises following theory, many of the STRONG students express a belief that teaching methods should vary depending on the subject matter being taught, the teacher, and the students in the classroom; the same methods are not used in all courses. For their part, WEAK students express their interest in games, examples, and anecdotal stories.

#### STRONG students: teamwork

“I find we learn a whole lot when we work in teams [...]. In your lifetime, you’re going to interact with other people. You’re going to live in a society where you’re always with others. So I think teamwork is important to develop competencies towards others.”

#### STRONG students: practical exercises following theory

“Practical exercises after theory allow for improved integration of the subject matter and its understanding.”

#### STRONG students: value of a method based on several variables

“I don’t think there are good or bad methods for teachers because there are so many variables that enter into the equation. It always depends on the course itself, the class, and the teacher. In fact, it depends on a whole lot of things at the same time, which means sometimes this method will work... and other times, another method will work better. Each course is different. So that’s it, it depends on the teacher and the class.”



#### **WEAK students: games, examples, and anecdotes**

"I like it when teachers use 'games' to illustrate the subject matter, or simple anecdotes. Long-winded courses that focus on theory are boring and students quickly lose interest."

"They should use examples that are found in everyday life that we are currently living. I remember my economics teacher, talking about supply and demand; she had said something about the price of beer. Everyone in class was listening [...]. Right away you're sure to get my attention."

#### **Means**

What distinguishes STRONG students from WEAK ones in session 3, relative to the means used to teach, can be summarized as follows: STRONG students have mixed feelings on PowerPoint presentations, they like them more or less, whereas WEAK students usually really appreciate this type of presentation but do not like the use of transparencies to introduce content.

#### **STRONG students: mixed feelings about PowerPoint**

"I've had it up to here with PowerPoint [...]. You have to listen to what the teacher says and at the same time, you have to make notes on the written presentation. Then, it's the teacher who has the controls so when she is finished speaking, she moves on... so you have to listen and take notes at the same time... and I find it hard to do two things at once."

#### **WEAK students: PowerPoint well-liked**

"(With PowerPoint) the information is there, everything is crystal clear. The teacher knows what's coming and can make the link between what we've just seen and what's next, or the teacher may return to a point we've already seen whereas, if the teacher is using a board, then it gets erased and the information he may want to review is no longer there and he can't rewrite everything... with PowerPoint, it's still there [...]. I don't think enough teachers use PowerPoint."

#### **WEAK students: dislike overhead projector**

"The overhead projector is okay, as long as it's not used too much. If the transparency only has a little bit of copy, you recopy it into your notebook, or if you are looking to correct some work, the transparency works. However, giving course notes on transparencies does not work. Let's face it, it's not really very captivating."

#### **COMMENTS THAT AGREE WITH ESTABLISHED PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES**

Data collected from boys on social models for teaching methods, particularly their preferences for variety, discussions and practical exercises, as well as a ban on the exclusive use of lecturing, agree with the pedagogical principles recommended by several authors.

Let us mention Barbeau, Montini and Roy (1997) among others, who suggest teaching strategies that favour student participation in the development of knowledge. Thus, providing examples, asking questions, using analogies or anecdotes are various ways that enable the student to process information, to deepen its meaning, to illustrate and anchor it in long-term memory and thus, to better remember it.

The importance of these strategies that support understanding—central component of the social models of teaching for boys in our research group—wins approval

among STRONG and WEAK students, but seems to predominate in the latter. These authors also mention the importance of the teacher-student relationship and the atmosphere in the classroom to support student participation and learning. According to them, a personal relationship with students stimulates their attention as well as their interest for the course. Our data reveals that this sensitivity to the teacher-student relationship is more important for WEAK students.

In the same vein, among intervention strategies relating to student motivation, Viau (1994) suggests teaching activities that involve declarative knowledge such as using an anecdote at the start of a course, or examples that students find interesting and analogies. In his presentation of a cognitive conception of school motivation, Tardif (1992) states that one of the main roles of the teacher in supporting student commitment, participation and persistence in completing a task, is to act directly and explicitly on the value of the tasks presented to the student so he may recognize the value of these activities in school as well as outside the school environment.

*The importance of these strategies that support understanding [...] wins approval among STRONG and WEAK students, but seems to predominate in the latter.*

#### **TEACHING AND LEARNING IMPLICATIONS**

Our research has shown that expectations of boys on teaching and learning more often than not agree with recognized pedagogical principles. This observation represents a valid incentive to implement means and methods of teaching and learning that support understanding and



meet the criteria for dynamism, interaction, and interest, components of the central core of models that boys have vis-à-vis teaching. The differentiated portrait we have drawn of STRONG and WEAK students is likely to fuel reflection among teachers as regards adapting their strategies to each of the two sub-groups.

Lastly, this study on the mental models of college and success in boys enrolled in Social Sciences serves as a reminder, if one is needed, that the paths taken by CEGEP students are diverse and that their goals go beyond the school while encompassing and making use of it: These boys invite us to better distinguish between their models of a successful life. ◀

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