

the old stereotyping: boys vs. girls

Studies on gender have been common over the years, and in the area of mathematics, boys have commonly been thought superior to girls. Thus, it has become an accepted norm that boys enter the scientific and computational careers in far superior numbers than their female counterparts.

In these days of major discussions about glass ceilings and equal pay for women, five researchers, Janet S. Hyde, Sara M. Lindberg, Marcia C. Linn, Amy B. Ellis, and Caroline C. Williams (2008), examine 10 states' math scores required in the age of No Child Left Behind. Their conclusion is that there is no significant difference between the scores boys and girls receive on math tests. Boys seem to have a larger variability than girls, and there is still a discrepancy on the number of boys versus girls who take high school math-oriented courses. Furthermore, there have been differing interpretations of what the data really say (Google the study and read the many comments). For classroom teachers, teacher-librarians, and administrators, however, this study brings up a much larger issue:

How much stereotyping do we as adults do in schools that contribute to, even create, glass ceilings or any other barriers to excellence both in school and life? Consider the young Michael Phelps, with those long gangly arms with fingers touching his knees, who was made fun of by peers and told by a teacher that he would never amount to anything and who goes on to win seven gold medals in swimming at the 2008 Summer Olympics.

It is so inviting to categorize those who come to school:

- rich kids who obviously will succeed more often than the poor
- kids from one ethnic group having all the advantages
- kids who don't speak English very well having a dumbed-down curriculum
- the gifted being ignored because the emphasis is on bringing everyone up to a minimum.

What do we do with those misfits, those who really have little chance to succeed?

Teacher-librarians are in a good position to encourage every child but in particular to notice the struggling, the loners, the geniuses, and just those regular kids who need encouragement and perhaps some advocacy after being beaten down by adults. We may not be able to reach every kid, but if we were asked to relate stories of our successes as a group of teacher-librarians, I suspect every person would have a story to tell.

Over and over and over again, we as adults must correct our thinking on the idea that each young person needs coaching toward excellence, that there is something magical about high expectations and differentiated strategies that result in so many surprises as learners exceed low expectations. Perhaps we all need to see the following movies again, and maybe over and over again: *Freedom Writers*, *Finding Forrester*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Hoosiers*, *The Great Debaters*, *Remember the Titans*, and *Stand by Me*. And, there are a host of others that can give us the inspiration and perhaps the little chiding we need.

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REFERENCES

- Hyde, J. S., Lindberg, S. M., Linn, M. C., Ellis, A. B., & Williams, C. C. (2008). Diversity: Gender similarities characterize math performance. *Science*, 321 (5888), 494-495.

