Because gifted girls so often fail to achieve their potential, they require specialized programming and counseling. Three factors in this longstanding pattern of underachievement and associated issues are: (1) biological (girls lack the innate ability to achieve); (2) environmental (aspects of the environment do not encourage female achievement); and (3) psychological (girls' personalities inhibit their achievement). Counseling, both formal and informal, can be critical in helping girls to recognize and address sex role stereotypes. Counseling can also serve as a positive force in the development of gifted girls' self concept and be instrumental in identifying mentors with whom girls can explore careers and lifestyles. Nine specific suggestions for teachers are offered. (Contains 46 references and resources.) (DB)
"Where are the Wise Women?"
A Reflection on the Issues Surrounding the Educational Experience of Gifted Girls
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The place: a school gymnasium
The time: the dress rehearsal for the Christmas pageant.
The scenario: A teacher is directing the children's activity and is arranging the gold, frankincense and myrrh. A little girl comes up to her teacher, points to the wise men, and asks, "Where are the wise women?"

Within the past two decades, the right of exceptional youth to educationally appropriate programming have been enshrined in law in several provinces. Among the pupils who have benefitted from these provisions are gifted pupils -- those educationally exceptional youth are gifted learners -- those pupils whose intellectual needs cause them to be placed among exceptional students.

A cursory glance through any current journal of or about the education of gifted pupils will re-enforce the fact that gifted pupils in no way form a homogeneous group. The literature reveals many "subgroups" of gifted pupils: the culturally-diverse gifted pupil; the pre-school gifted child; the physically-challenged gifted pupil; the gifted-learning disabled pupil; the underachieving gifted pupil -- and the gifted girl. The literature maintains that the needs of these subgroups differ significant from the gifted 'norm' as to require even more specialized considerations in identification and program development.

While many educators readily accept the notion of subgroups within the gifted population, some query the inclusion of gifted girls as a separate subgroup. Callahan (1980) justifies the existence of gifted girls as a subgroup with a convincing argument. Callahan suggests that unlike gifted boys, gifted girls do not grow up to be publicly recognized adults. Callahan cites the fact that the "overwhelming number of adults who are identified as gifted and creative are male." Or, in line with the opening anecdote, gifted boys grow up to be "wise men" while gifted girls do not grow up to be publicly recognized wise women.

Because gifted girls fail to achieve their potential, they require specialized programming and counselling.

Why do gifted girls fail to realize their potential? Three possible explanations are commonly identified as factors:

- biological: girls lack the innate ability to achieve.
- environmental: girls' environment does not encourage them to achieve.
- psychological: girls' personality inhibits their achievement.

The biological factors identified with women's lack of achievement are both historic and contemporary. These arguments perhaps reached their heyday in the debates surrounding women's
admission to institutions of higher education at the turn of the
century. Rosenberg (1984) demonstrated that well-known and well-
published nineteenth century scholars such as Harvard Medical
School's Dr. Edward Clarke, respected Philadelphia gynecologist
Dr. Thomas A. Emmet and neurologist Dr. S. Weir Mitchell argued,
in Dr. Clarke's words that because of their biological
differences -- especially their intellectual differences --"the
identical education of the two sexes is a crime before God and
humanity that physiology protests against and that experience
weeps over." More recently, the discussion of the "math gene"
emanating from the research of Stanley & Benbow (1980) and the
brain-mind research of Epstein (1974), Topfier (1981) and
Sylwester (1982) have caused these biologically-based factors to
surface once again. Simple put, these researchers argue that the
biological construction of young women's brains prevent them from
learning at the same rate and in the same mode as young men.

It is noteworthy that a century after the achievement of
women's rightful place in higher education was achieved, the use
of biologically-rooted arguments as a basis for the under-
representation of achievement by women in the literature, is to
say the least, problematic.

The environmental and psychological factors are closely
linked. The Women's Movement of the Sixties and Seventies has
caused educators, psychologists and sociologists to take a very
close look at the definition of societal roles and subsequent
gender issues. The family, the media, textbooks and even
teachers' behaviours are all seen to contribute to the re-
enforcement of behaviours among boys and girls. Callahan (1980)
Murphy-Poole & Smyth (1986) and Callahan & Reis (1989) conclude
that these environmental factors impact so significantly on the
psychological development of bright and gifted girls that these
factors do the most to underline the girls' potential. Verheyden-
Hilliard (1983) reaches similar conclusions

the gifted girl is -- as is every girl -- under
terrific pressures to conform to societal expectations
of 'appropriate' female behaviors. These stereotypic
expectations are a terrible threat to the development
of potential in any girl. For the gifted girl, the
negative reaction is often worse because her giftedness
may take her so far from stereotypic behaviors.

Researchers who have studied achieving gifted girls point
to the roles of 'significant others' who aided the girls in
meeting their goals through assisting their personality
development. Developing a positive self-concept through
appropriate attribution of success and failure; coping with
expectations and the 'need' for perfection; developing personal
and professional support systems -- all these strategies have
been identified as critical factors contributing to the success
of gifted girls (Addison, 1983).

While counselling is a critical component in aiding all
gifted pupils to maximize their potential, researchers have
identified it as an especially critical one in the development of
gifted girls (Wailed 1979). Counselling, like education, takes
place in three learning environments -- the home, the school and
the community. Counselling is both formal and informal;
professional and amateur and can be organized around three
cluster: academic, career and personal. Many people take on a
counselling role in the lives of gifted girls: parents; peers;
role models; neighbors; professional counsellors to name but a
few. Researchers identify that these counsellors play many
critical roles in the process of helping gifted girls to reach
their full potential:

- aiding in the recognition and addressing of sex-role
  stereotypes;
- assisting as a positive force in the development of the
  gifted girl's self concept;
- helping identify mentors with whom to explore career and
  lifestyle (Higham & Navarra, 1984; Petersen, 1982).

To summarize this overview of the literature, one can make
the following conclusions. Because of their under-representation
in the public circles of achievement, and because of their
specific and identifiable learning needs, gifted girls do
constitute a subgroup of the gifted population. To enable gifted
girls to reach their potential as achievers, educators should
undertake a program of positive development.

These issues are real and very close to home. In a recent
study of adolescent girls, the Canadian Teachers Federation
(1990) reported that adolescent girls

feel pressures and limitations boys are unlikely to
experience and that they expressed a lot of resentment
towards the systems that seem to favour [their
male peers].

Educators are beginning to recognize that the problems exist with
the achievement of girls in general and gifted girls
specifically. It is now time that educators take appropriate
steps to attempt to ameliorate this situation.
WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO ASSIST GIFTED GIRLS
IN MAXIMIZING THEIR POTENTIAL

1. Ensure that courses and classes reflect both the male and female experience.

2. If females are missing from a subject, ask the question WHY?

3. Ensure that all pupils see that the combination of being bright, achieving and female is possible.

4. Use inclusive language. Check that the pronoun 'he' is not always used to mean everyone.

5. Observe how pupils are re-enforced and rewarded: are boys rewarded for intellectually challenging remarks and girls for 'appropriate and conforming' behaviours?

6. Discuss this issue with males and females. It is not a female only issue!

7. When nominating children for programs for bright/gifted pupils, look to ensure that the identification criteria is not biased against young female students.

8. Check with those providing guidance and counselling services to ensure that they are aware that gifted girls have special needs and that those needs are being addressed.

9. Advocate on behalf of gifted girls -- especially with their parents, their teachers, their classmates, and themselves!
REFERENCES


Benbow, C. & J. Stanley (1980) "Sex Differences in Mathematical Ability: Fact or Artifact?" Science 210 1262-4


Selected Sources

A review of the literature on gifted girls contained in the ERIC/Exceptional Child Data Base is available through the Council for Exceptional Children member services.

The Winter 1989 Edition of the Journal for the Education of the Gifted (v.12 #2) is devoted to gifted girls. In addition to five articles, there is an annotated bibliography on Gifted Females. Back issues may be obtained through contacting the Journal for the Education of the Gifted, Council for Exceptional Children.

Among two of the most useful publications exclusively devoted to the topic of gifted girls are:


Several recent dissertations and graduate school exit papers have focused on the gifted girls and women. You may wish to consult the Register of Dissertations for a complete listing. Among those dissertations are:


In addition to the materials published specifically on gifted girls commonly found in the literature on education of gifted pupils, you may wish to consider some of the following:


Many teachers' federations, Ministries of Education, School Boards and Government Agencies have published support material on equity issues. Among them are:


Other community-based resources which you may contact for additional resources:

Canadian Association of University Women. (The University Women's Clubs). Each club has a roster of women who can be called on for speakers etc.

Women's groups within professional societies e.g. Women's Interest Group in the Professional Engineering Society, Women Lawyers, Farm Women's Group, WISE (Women in Science and Engineering: many chapters across Canada)

Status of Women Committees within the school boards and the teacher federations

University and College Women's Study Programs, such as
Women's Studies in Education Centre
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto M5S 1V6
(416) 923 6641

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