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AAUW: Young Girls Interested In Science - Their Number Continues to Grow, Despite Persisting Bias

By Sophie Braccini



2010 AAUW Tech Trek Award recipients (left to right) Miriam Wojtas, Miranda Martinez and Jacqueline Van Ardenne with presenter Sue Marston, Associate Professor at Saint Mary's College Photo K. de Groot

says, "None of the research convincingly links those differences to specific skills." The report found that in fact the gender gap is rapidly shrinking; math-precocious sixth and seventh graders boys now out-number girls 3 to 1, but 30 years ago that ration was 13-1. "That's not biology at play, it does not change so fast," says Hill, "... so we looked at the cultural factors." And the report found ample evidence of continuing cultural bias.

Martinez says she never felt gender bias in Orinda. "At OIS people don't think that way," she explains, adding, "Science is fun, it is easy to learn." Wojtas does not believe that being a girl ever played a role in her perception of her abilities. She is now in Algebra 1 (a class that's generally offered to 8th graders). "Sometimes 8th graders are not happy to see a 7th grader in the class, but no one is rude," Wojtas said. She believes her perception that girls can do anything comes from her 2nd grade Montessori teacher and to a class report on Marie Curie that she heard in the 3rd grade.

The importance of female mentors and role models is highlighted in the AAUW report as a way to counterbalance girls' lack of confidence in their math abilities. The report cites research showing that girls' performance suffers from any suggestion that they do poorly in math. In one experiment, college students with strong math backgrounds and similar abilities were divided into two groups and tested on math. One group was told that men perform better on the test, the other group was told that there was no difference in performance between the sexes. Their results were starkly different: In the group told that men do better, men received an average score of 25 compared to the women's score of 5. In the groups told there was no difference, the average score among the men was 19 and among the women it was 17.

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Miriam Wojtas is a 7th grader at Stanley Middle School (Stanley), and she loves math and science. Not so long ago, middle school was identified as the turning point at which girls began to shy away from science, but not Wojtas; and not Jacqueline Van Ardenne from Joaquin Moraga Intermediate (JM) or Miranda Martinez from Orinda Intermediate (OIS). On April 20th these three students received an award from the Lamorinda branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to attend a week at the Tech Trek Math and Science Camp held in June; all 3 girls say they want to pursue scientific careers. Data indicate the number of girls preparing to enter that field is on the rise; yet women are still a minority, and still face gender bias.

In a 2003 article, Cornell University stated that 28% of the 734 incoming freshman in its College of Engineering were women. "In just five years, the percentage of undergraduate women in the college has risen from 19 percent to more than 25 percent," read the article, "Nationally, engineering schools average 20 percent women undergraduates."

This April, the AAUW released a national research study titled, "Why So Few?" supported by the National Science Foundation, which looks at why women are under-represented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The report acknowledges differences in male and female brains. But AAUW research director Catherine Hill