Editorial

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Gender and Mathematics: Re-igniting the Debate

In January 2005, the President of Harvard University, Larry Summers, spoke at a conference on the diversification of the science and engineering workforce. His explanations for the gender gap (favouring males) in the profile of tenured academics in the sciences at Harvard sparked widespread anger, were seized upon by the media, and re-fuelled a 30-year debate on gendered capabilities. Ripley (2005) began her Time magazine article entitled "Who says a woman can't be Einstein?" as follows:

> There was something self-destructive about Harvard University President Larry Summers' speech on gender disparities in January. In his first sentence, he said his goal was "provocation"… He called for "rigorous and careful" thinking to explain the gender gap among top-tiered tenured science professors. But he described his pet theory with something less than prudence. The most likely explanations, he said, are that 1) women are just not so interested as men in making the sacrifices required by high-powered jobs, 2) men may have more "intrinsic aptitude" for high-level science and 3) women may be victims of old-fashioned discrimination. "In my own view, their importance probably ranks in exactly the order that I just described," he announced. (p.47)

During the 1970s and 1980s heated debates raged on just these stereotyped attitudes. Those familiar with the times will well remember the legislative changes that occurred, and the generously funded support for research on gender differences in mathematics (and science). The research findings untangled the complex web of factors that contributed to already well-documented gender differences.

Today, attitudes such as those expressed by Summers are thought to have been well and truly laid to rest. It was not surprising, therefore, that the outrage, anger, and disappointment in response to his remarks were so widespread. To hear such views on women's lack of ambition and limited mathematical/scientific abilities from the President of so eminent an institution as Harvard left many questioning the worth of efforts expended to attain gender equity in society, and wondering how widespread beliefs such as Summers' might be. Is it only "political correctness" that prevents these views being expressed more broadly? From another perspective on political correctness, Summers' defenders, in response to calls for his resignation, are claimed to have "fought back, insisting that Summers has been unfairly shouted down by a politically correct cadre of feminists" (Cannold, 2005, p.8).

What can we, the mathematics education community, learn from this incident with respect to our research agendas? One thing is clear to me: gender is not the dead issue in mathematics education that some have suggested. While boys' educational disadvantage is high on the political agenda in many English-speaking, Western societies, and there is good reason for many of the concerns expressed, females obviously remain central to gender issues associated with mathematics (and science) and related careers – including academic postings.

I, and others for whom gender has remained an issue of concern in mathematics education, have argued for some time that even if gender is not the main focus of a research study, including gender as a variable of analysis is critically important. Continuous monitoring of enrolment and achievement data, and of student, teacher, administrative, parental, and societal views about the gendering of mathematics are also vital.

Larry Summers may have apologised for his insensitive comments and wished that he could turn the clock back and give his talk again – differently. From where I stand, the incident has highlighted an issue within mathematics (and science) education that demands the re-alignment of research agendas, together with concomitant funding.

References

Cannold, L. (2005, March 14). Choice? What choice? *The Age*. Education, p. 8.
Ripley, A. (2005, March 7). Who says a woman can't be Einstein? *Time*, 47–52.