

Girls stop believing they are as smart as boys soon after starting school. SA parents are demanding education research to find out why

TIM WILLIAMS, EDUCATION REPORTER, The Advertiser

GIRLS stop believing they are as smart as boys soon after starting school, and South Australian parents are demanding local research to find out why.

A US study has found five-year-old girls view their own gender positively, but are more likely to believe boys are “really, really smart” by the age of seven.

That is despite girls thinking they get better grades than boys.

The SA Association of State School Organisations is urging the State Government to support a local university to research the problem.

“It’s well established that gender stereotypes about girls’ intellectual abilities exist and that they stop girls and young women from pursuing studies and careers in maths and sciences,” director David Knuckey said.

“But this new (American) study reveals that these stereotypes may actually be instilled in girls at the age of five and six. This blow to their confidence at such a young age effectively rules out any equal opportunity for girls.”



📷 Cowandilla Year 2 students Ivy and Charlie. Girls stop believing they are as smart as boys soon after starting school. Picture: Naomi Jellicoe

Mr Knuckey said local research was needed firstly to confirm that similar “disturbing” gender stereotypes existed in SA, then to go further and “investigate how and why these

gender stereotypes are being inflicted on girls”.

“It doesn’t make much sense targeting programs at encouraging girls into STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) at the secondary and university levels, if the damage is being done at the primary level,” he said.

Researchers from Princeton, New York and Illinois universities conducted experiments with children aged 5-7 who were mostly white and middle class.

They included telling children stories about a “really, really smart” person and asking them to identify that person from pictures. By age 6 and 7, girls were significantly less likely to pick

pictures of women or girls.

Girls also showed less interest than boys in games they were told were for “really, really smart” children, but were just as keen on games supposedly for “hard working” children.

The older girls were more likely to back their gender to get higher grades than boys, showing girls disconnected the idea of high intelligence from school marks.

“However, other aspects of children’s experiences in school, such as teachers’ attitudes and biases, may still be implicated in the development of this stereotype,” the researchers said.

SA Education Department executive director for learning improvement Susan Cameron said “unconscious gender bias” inevitably existed in schools, like the rest of society, so all students were taught critical thinking skills needed to tackle stereotypes.

Ms Cameron was interested in reviewing relevant Australian gender research, but “not necessarily” funding new studies.