The truth about girls and boys: challenging toxic stereotypes
Caryl Rivers and Rosalind Barnett

Since 2006, when the United States Department of Education changed regulations to Title IX, allowing for the implementation of single-sex programs in public schools, there has been a steady increase in the number of single schools and single sex classes offered to American students. While this has been celebrated in many educational communities, the move to single-sex education in public schools has caused concern for some academics. Caryl Rivers and Rosalind Barnett are among a group of American academics who have raised their objections in print.

The truth about girls and boys (2011) challenges the still widely-held view that girls and boys are fundamentally different. They examine neuroscientific evidence, assessment data and research. While Rivers and Barnett are rigorous in their approach, there is nothing new in this text. Most of the neuroscience has been covered in Eliot’s book Pink Brain, Blue Brain (2009), Fine’s text Delusions of gender (2010) and Jordan-Young’s Brain storm (2010). In fact, Fine is quoted and sourced heavily in this text.

Three chapters explore toy choice, aggression and caring traits in girls and boys. Rivers and Barnett’s conclusion that mass marketing of pink toys for girls and blue for boys helps to sustain gender stereotypes is hardly novel. However, their explanation about caring and nurturing is of value: “It’s clear that the capacity to nurture exists in all of us, male and female. How it develops has more to do with how we raise and educate our children, and with the messages society sends us than with any inborn gender-related caring instincts” (p. 141).

The truth about boys and girls (2011) culminates with the notion that single-sex education is not the ideal learning environment for students. Rivers and Barnett say that “to some readers, this chapter might be constructed as an attack on single-sex education. That is absolutely not the case” (p. 175). However a push for coeducation is very much the theme of this text.

Rivers and Barnett are correct to query the inappropriate use and reporting of studies to reinforce gender stereotypes. The ongoing growth of single-sex education, particularly in the US where this text is targeted, must be based on accurate educational and scientific research. There is no doubt that many neuromyths are still used today to justify gender differences and gender stereotypes. However, Rivers and Barnett have failed to acknowledge the excellence and benefits of single-sex education. They have also failed to include recent research which shows: how girls in single-sex schools choose gender atypical subjects in greater numbers, that girls can be more competitive in a single-sex environment, and that gender stereotypes are broken down in single-sex schools.

Unfortunately there is nothing new for readers in The truth about girls and boys. While this content has been explored in recently published books, it is nevertheless a good reminder for educators that the science in the past five years has overwhelmingly shown that boys and girls are much more similar than different in their neurocognition and learning styles.