

## BOOK REVIEWS

LOUISE ARCHER. *Race masculinity and schooling: Muslim boys and education*. London: Open University Press (2003). 189 pp. US\$31.95. (ISBN 0-335-21062-7).

The investigation into issues of masculinity benefits in a wide variety of ways from feminist study. The groundwork was laid down in terms of defining issues, methodology and connections between reality and theory. One aspect of this last point permits the masculinity researcher to avoid looking for simplistic descriptions. It is the lesson learned from early feminist study and adopted to the extent where often “masculinities” is used instead of “masculinity” as a way of highlighting the point. But often, even having accepted the complex over the simplistic, there are elements in the fabric of masculinity discourse that must be added. This true of race and ethnicity and is brought into clearer focus in this text.

In the introduction to her volume *Masculinity and schooling: muslim boys and education*, a contribution to the *Education Boys – Learning Gender Series*, Louise Archer identifies the work on Muslim boys as one of the “. . . ‘hot topics’ of social and educational debate” (p. 2). Indeed it is one of several hot spots in what is generally the ‘hot topic’ of boys and education that currently rages in much of the western world. She also points out the marginalized place research on race and ethnicity has within educational discourse. In part this is due to the largely singular perception of ascribed sameness given to boys and members of minority racial groups. Locating her work within the methodological framework of critical feminist research, “. . . the book attempts to ‘open up’ the ways in which themes of ‘ethnicity’, ‘gender’ and ‘culture’ are addressed within schools” (p. 2) It does so in three sections. In the Part I Archer sets the framework of the debate in terms of theory and policy. Part II is concerned with identity and Part III establishes the links between the identities of Muslim boys and the social issues defined by theory and policy.

In Chapter 1 Archer acknowledges two realities of the debate surrounding boys in education. The first is the diminished success boys are having

in school and the second is the complexity of the issues surrounding this phenomenon. In particular she pays careful attention to the variables of hegemonic masculinities pointing out boys are defined more by their diversity than similarity. A further complexity in this debate here, of course, is the addition of the racial component. Archer does not think current models of investigation adequately address the intricacy of this discussion in that they do not account for intersecting categories or hybrid identities. She suggests that, “. . . social identities might be conceptualized as integrally intermeshed and inter-related – such that axes of ‘race,’ ethnicity, social class and gender cannot be easily separated out from one another because they are combined in such a way that they ‘flavor’ and give meaning to each other” (p. 21). It is a complexity with which the discourse on masculinity is only beginning to come to grips.

Archer moves away from the general discussion of masculinity in Chapter 2 to the more particular one of the Muslim boy. She treats this discussion in an evolutionary sense, the pivotal moment being the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. Pre-Rushdie there was a perceptual blending of Muslim within a larger Asian framework characterized by an attachment to culture and stereotypical notions of industriousness, passivity and ambition. The comparative, and contrasting, racial minority was African/Caribbean boys who are ascribed a less positive set of attributes. Post-Rushdie the definition of the Muslim identity was separated. Its newly defined state centered around fundamentalist parameters and gave rise to “Islamophobia” as the key component in the definition of the Muslim ethnic minority. Subsequent world events further contributed to this view. As well, there was a shift in the perception of the Muslim boy and moved him away from his place as cooperative and compliant to problematic. In the final part of this chapter Archer lays out the critical feminist approach she uses to gather and analyze the data concerning Muslim boys. She uses an ethnographic methodology that relies on discussion, diaries, photographic diaries (to a lesser extent) and attends to the limitations of such methodology. “Particular care is also given to the racialized and gendered interactive context of the discussions” (p. 41). As well she is careful to repeat the interdependence of these racial and gender contexts.

The construction of identities, the central theme of Part II, examines the variety of identity construction issues faced by Muslim boys. Archer looks at these constructions in terms of school environment, gender identities and within the larger social context beyond school. It is a complex process often defined by the particular context in which it takes place. In Chapter 3 the kinds of within school constructions of masculine identity is reminiscent of the structures and attitudes identified as “cool guys, swots and wimps” by Connell fifteen years ago but Muslim boys are uncertain of which group to join. While the boys identified with the cultural values of success

and benchmarked much of their identity construction against a religious backdrop, at the same time they gained status within their peer group by adopting stereotypically black “gangsta” masculinity traits. “Black ‘gangsta’ forms of masculinity may be particularly popular forms of masculinity, and the ability to successfully perform these types of masculinity can increase a boy’s popularity and status among his peers” (p. 62). Issues of territoriality and protection draw upon several nexus depending on the focus. What do you do if Rushdie shows up in your town? The response is to kill him on the basis of religion.

Much of the study of masculine identities recognizes that such constructions are not so much “things” as “not things” that is, not feminine. Archer holds in Chapter 4 this is as true for Muslim boys as for any other group of boys engaged in the construction of their masculine identity. She contends that, “. . . boys’ masculinities are inherently relational identities – that is they are formed in relation to feminine identities” (p. 66). This construct is again complicated by the environment in which the boys find themselves. They develop their sense of masculinity and power from the patriarchal notions and idealistic portrayals of women in Muslim cultural and religious tradition, but they are witness to the breakdown of those stereotypical notions in the observation of the reality around them. On the one hand the definition of masculinity calls for protection and on the other enforcing women’s conformity to religious code. This dichotomy comes into particularly clear focus when dealing with the issue of sexuality. The double standard of what is acceptable for a Muslim boy is not acceptable for a Muslim girl resonates with the traditional “on one hand” and the progressive “on the other.” It led Yasser, one of the respondents, to state, “But these days girls are out of control, aren’t they? Swearing back at us and everything. And we can’t say now, they’re *girls!*” (p. 83).

In reading Archer’s account of the social lives of Muslim boys it is impossible not to be struck by the similarity to observed and researched accounts of the lives of second generation immigrants to practically all sectors of European and North American society. Idle socialization in which both neutral activities such as listening to music, talking and watching movies and negative ones such as experimenting with smoking seems to be the connecting link among groups of young people no matter where they are. In Chapter 4 it becomes apparent that Muslim boys are part of this universal culture. They share as well the second generation characteristic of adopting western media as their entertainment of choice and do not express regret or guilt over the abandonment of more culturally traditional forms of entertainment. In counterpoint to this adoption of more western ways is Muslim boys’ attachment to traditional notions of family both as they are experiencing it in their present state and as they see it in the future. Marriage, leading to

perpetuation of the traditional family, “to a nice Muslim girl” (p. 103) as Abdul states can be arranged by the family, but boys looked to having some say in the matter.

In Part III of her work Archer turns to the linking Muslim boys face between their personal construction of masculinity in terms of their race, ethnicity, religion and culture, and the reality of the world in which they find themselves in the culture of the school. She focuses on two aspects of connection, the daily strife of racism and the formalized goals they set for themselves within the educational culture. In Chapter 7 the focus is on encountered racism which the Muslim boys see as both pervasive and perpetual and to which they react, perhaps expectedly, with either violence or indifference. Typically they view racism as “. . . a predominantly masculinized phenomenon and their proposed ‘solutions’ to racism reflected different discourses of masculinity” (p. 107). It is, in fact, the dominant discourse. In terms of the formalized aspirations of Muslim boys in school, it is a shared phenomenon that is emergent in the discussion of boys’ general underachievement in school. School and education are viewed as utilitarian. “Among the Muslim boys in this study, the value of education was constructed primarily the instrumental terms, in other words, educational qualifications were valued as a means for gaining paid employment and entering the labour market” (p. 130). The labor market some saw themselves as entering reflected a certain naiveté about the current and likely future state of employment, but universally they looked to a future with financial success and social status. Their view of girls’ expanding opportunities was largely emotional and reflected the notion of traditional values.

In her concluding chapter, Archer looks to synthesize the findings of her research and connect the various elements that emerged from it to her central issue of Muslim boys, the construction of masculine identity and school. It is a daunting task. She readily admits, “. . . my aim has been to strive towards that impossible dream of producing a text that is both ‘properly’ theoretical *and* ‘useful’ at the same time” (p. 167). She identifies four key arguments that situate her work as an authentic connection to the overall understanding of the social issues to which her text addresses itself. In her view, educational policy and practice must account for diversity and issues of race and ethnicity are mainstream concerns. As well, the current demonization of Muslims is simply a current reflection of age old notions of minority suspicion reflecting more than anything else a lack of understanding. Finally the kind of research she has undertaken, while difficult, is necessary if unequal social privileges are to be dismantled.

It is this final point that provides, I believe, a fitting platform for overall comment. The discourse on masculinity is fledgling. It draws much from the experience of feminist research and should be able to avoid some of the early

attraction to finding simple definitions to complex issues. Add to this mix an awareness of the cultural, ethnic and racial factors that contribute to gender identity for both men and women and Archer is right, it is difficult. Also, it is unlikely there will be any one text or even series of texts that will be able to provide a full description. Nevertheless, as a statement that contributes to the overall discourse I think it is worthwhile. To those who are directly involved in the development of masculinity theory, both generally and as it specifically pertains to education, Archer provides one more significant fragment to a multifaceted and essential discussion.

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WAYNE MARTINO & MARIA PALLOTTA-CHIAROLLI, *So what's a boy? Addressing issues of masculinity and schooling*. Maidenhead, GB: Open University Press (2003). 310 pp. \$38.95. (ISBN: 0-335-20381-7).

Better build schoolrooms for "the boy"  
Than cells and gibbets for "the man."  
(Eliza Cook [1818-1889], *A song for the ragged school*)

*So what's a boy?* is a timely volume. It comes at a critical point in the expanding debate regarding boys and schools. Juxtaposed against an increasingly strident and often times stark mass media, this book offers a sober and contemporary view of boys and their place in that confused environment called "school." However, not content to simply cite data and/or repeat refrains found elsewhere, the authors have avoided the "boy crisis" trap and raised the debate by taking an appealing, narrative approach. One can hear and appreciate the voices of boys (all kinds of different boys) through this volume!

The book is divided into three, roughly equal sections. Part 1, Normalization and Schooling, sets the general scene and brings the reader into the lives of boys with discussions regarding body image, emerging masculinities, bullying/harassment, and friendships. The second part, Diverse Masculinities, delves into the central issue of how boys see themselves, their developing sexuality, cultural/home conditions, how they are seen by others, and how various boys (and groups of boys) react and inter-react. Part 3, Sites of Intervention, deals more specifically with school environment and curriculum implications, and considers how the various identified school environments shape and re-shapes boys' self/other images. It is in this last section that the general theme of masculinities is highlighted in discussions directly related to pedagogical issues.

At the end of the book, and somewhat separate, the authors provide a brief four-page conclusion. It is a shame that these pages were not slightly expanded, as they outline a realistic methodological plan that could well be replicated by others interested in boys and schools. Further, the authors

place their own study within the continuum of boy/male literature that is slowly moving into the mainstream research literatures. Nonetheless, all of the sections follow in a logical and interconnected manner and give the reader an in-depth look, via boys' voices, into developing masculinities, schools and relationships.

The sub-title of this book (*Addressing issues of masculinity and schooling*) is important. The authors are careful to avoid the sensationalist statistics and broad gender comparisons that too often confuse discussions concerning boys and academic achievement. This is not a volume of statistical columns, failure rates, gender comparisons, and/or chest thumping demands for schools to solve yet another societal problem. Rather, the authors carefully, and with insight, allow boys to tell their own stories in a non-judgmental manner. This is not a forced book and there is no obvious axe that needs grinding. The authors are to be congratulated for allowing the various narrative images to come to the fore and also, importantly, for permitting individual readers an opportunity to react on a personal and/or professional level to the situations and stories.

Additionally, the authors have left the safe ground of what might be termed mainstream "boyology" and delved into several seldom-viewed sub-areas that are too often neglected. For example, the issues of skin colour and emerging sexual orientations are openly discussed. Furthermore, a voice is given to aboriginal youth who have to negotiate complex and competing school and cultural environments. As well, the concerns of boys with physical difficulties are raised. Clearly, the authors have gone out of their way to offer a wide selection of boys' voices and to do so in a narrative format that catches the intimacy of the story at the same time as placing it within a realistic context.

In the Preface, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli cogently note that "our primary aim is to problematize the ways in which adolescent boys, from diverse backgrounds and locations in the Australian context, negotiate and perform their masculinities, both at school and in the wider society..." (p. xii). The authors have indeed met their primary goal and a North American reader should not be dismayed by the reference to the Australian context. True, there are times when specific words/phrases situate the boy, but the stories are for the most part universal and will resonate with anyone even remotely familiar with adolescent boys in other contexts.

To a certain extent, this is an unanticipated strength of the book. The myriad of stories are indeed universal and transcend physical locations. The Australian aboriginal stories could well be those of any number of First Nations adolescents in Canada. Equally strong, the narratives of boys with disabilities are easily contextualized within the North American framework.

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Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli view their efforts as a way of “providing an opportunity to listen to boys’ voices and to move to a greater understanding of the negotiation of power relations in their lives” (p. 287). There is no question that the authors have succeeded. This book is a must read for anyone even remotely interested in adolescent boys and their travels through the school system. The stories are genuine, heart-felt, and situated within a solid overarching context. The authors have allowed the stories – collectively and individually – to rise to the front and to take the reader along on a wonderful journey.

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