

BOOK REVIEWS

ROB GILBERT & PAM GILBERT. *Masculinity Goes to School*. London, Routledge. (1998). 293 pp. \$34.99 (paper) ISBN 0-415-19794-5.

Masculinity has been the subject of much discussion recently and it is perhaps not surprising that some of the first to respond to the issues of masculinity are those feminists who began their research in the area of gender. In this book Rob and Pam Gilbert take a close look at the Australian phenomenon of a culture of masculinity. They offer some serious criticisms of present attitudes and practices.

In terms of structure, the book is divided into three sections. The first section: "Boys and masculinity: Current Debates" focuses on some of the issues that surround the discussion of boys in school. In this context Gilbert and Gilbert come to some basic conclusions: 1) That a binary division of boys and girls does not take into account other factors of school success such as socio-economic status and ethnicity, 2) Boys are still more successful in life even if they are failures in school, 3) Boys are violent, 4) Because of the historical domination of masculine pedagogy there should be more attention paid to girls than to boys.

The second section begins with an examination of contemporary reactionary masculinist literature and spends some time critiquing theories of fundamental masculinity, theories of biological masculinity, hormonal influences and essentialism. In the second chapter: "Boys and Contemporary Cultures" the authors do an analysis of cultural issues and make some strong recommendations. First, they maintain "we hardly need look farther than organized sport for evidence of the formation of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 60) and go so far as to recommend the eradication of some forms of competitive sport and most computer games. They further recommend the elimination of internet cafés as little more than a "yuppified" version of masculinity which is off the street and performed less publicly".

They maintain that, as the province of (mostly) men, video games are "patriarchal, sometimes misogynist, and intrinsically homophobic, and frequently marginalise and demean activities or attitudes associated with the feminine or with non-violent masculinities" (p. 75).

The authors maintain that the reason for the existence of patriarchal men is the socialization that they receive in their homes as they are growing up.

They condemn suggestions of reactionary male writers that blame the failure of boys on a “feminization” process that can be associated with too much mothering. They ridicule the notion that boys could be aided by more “huntin and shootin” (p. 95) and note that reactionary male writers glorify the return to a state of warrior kings and gods “who cared for and protected their people and their world” (Biddulph, 1994, pp.12-13).

At the end of section two comes a focus on male sexuality that maintains that boys’ “macho” sexuality is the result of a disassociation from their bodies. This leads to the concept that gender education should be taught in schools as well as sex education.

In the final section of the book: “Boys and Schooling,” the authors condemn positivism – called “the masculine epistemological stance”(p. 120) and contend that science and mathematics are dehumanizing and “unquestionably hegemonic” (from Davies, 1996, p.214). There is some time spent on the notion of why tests that indicate boys are failing in literacy subjects might not actually represent failure but rather the evidence of hegemonic masculinity. Heterosexuality and sexualization recur as common causes of failure (though the link between heterosexuality and reading could be made much clearer). The authors focus on the need for the re-socialization of men and boys so as to change the failure and dropout rates of boys.

This book has much to say on the important subject of gender in school and places the radical feminist voice at the forefront. Whatever our personal or professional response to its major claims, it is certainly strong evidence for a need to locate the cultural foundations of the environment in which we discuss such diverse issues as gender. North American liberal feminists may be surprised at some of the recommendations, especially in the areas of competitive sport and computers where we now experience great successes for both boys and girls. Indeed, current research shows that girls who participate in sports have a higher sense of self esteem than those who do not. They have less depression, are more positive about their bodies and are will to take more risks on and off the playing field. (Women’s Sports Foundation, 1989). Further, most of the references to gender and men have a specifically Australian emphasis and completely ignore societies that have very different gender cultures (including Thailand and the Philippines).

In the final analysis we must admit that studies of gender are never universal and must caution against the notion that the experience of all women (or all men) may be addressed with a single perspective. Culture, like gender, is diverse and requires a constant awareness of who is speaking, whom they are speaking of, and where they are speaking from. Only then can we fairly evaluate such a complex issue.

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