

BOOK REVIEWS

WAYNE MARTINO, MICHAEL KEHLER, & MARCUS B. WEAVER-HIGHTOWER (EDS). *The Problem with Boys' Education: Beyond the Backlash*. New York, NY: Routledge. (2009). 290 pp. \$43.95. (ISBN 978-1-56023-683-2).

This well-written, well-supported, and useful book takes up the challenge of trying to move past the backlash that has materialized as a demand for the improvement of boys' educational success. This backlash is based on the belief that boys' education and masculinities are in "crisis." The contributors identify three problematic solutions to this "crisis" offered by conservative, neoliberal, and religious activists and writers: 1) the need for a so-called "boy-friendly" curriculum, which posits the cause of boys' academic performance on external factors and not on boys' attitudes and behaviours; 2) the call for more male teachers, who are asserted to be better teachers simply because they are male; and, 3) the drive for single-sex classrooms, where males receive instruction tailored to their claimed different needs.

Not satisfied with those strategies, the editors of this volume posit four conditions that are necessary for the improvement of schools: intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment, and working with and valuing difference. The exploration of these values, over 12 chapters, can be roughly divided into three themes: 1) the history of policy development and political pressure with regard to boys' education in the U.S., U.K., and Australia; 2) experiences and narratives of a diverse range of boys in schools; 3) a critical analysis of perspectives on the desire to teach children and the pressure to recruit more male teachers.

The history of policy development

The first two chapters of the book explore the history of policy development in relation to the education of boys. Marcus Weaver-Hightower provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of U.S.-based policies on boys' education where there has been less of a push for boy-centered educational policies than other countries, such as Australia and the U.K. Weaver-Hightower exposes the "religiosity" and "conservative, right-wing ideologies" that underpin much of

the history of policy developments in the U.S. Looking forward, he cautions against single-sex schools as the argument for such measures is not well supported by the available research findings.

Martin Mills, Becky Francis, and Christine Skelton follow with a similar analysis of Australia and the U.K. In these two countries, the authors find that neoliberal and anti-feminist interests are behind the push for policy change with regards to boys' education. In both nations, the use of a discourse of "poor boys" has been primarily used to push the agenda of reforming schools to be more focused on boys' needs. The authors conclude by suggesting that the success of feminism in Australia has influenced a greater level of backlash discourse about boys and school than the U.K. They posit that where feminist educational movements have been relatively less successful, there is a lesser degree of political backlash. This is an important, if not critical, consideration that explains and supports the main thrust of this book: the discourse of educational crisis as applied to boys is a political football that also signals a backlash against educational successes won by (pro)feminist policies and changes.

Nuanced experiences and narratives of boys in schools

The second theme of this book deals with the experiences and narratives of males in school, predominantly those who face challenges in relation to ethnicity, sexuality, and (to a lesser extent) class. In "What Can We Expect?: A Strategy to Help Schools Hoping for Virtue," Michael Reichert, Peter Kuriloff, and Brett Stoudt demonstrate the need for change in school curricula based on: 1) evidence-based knowledge about boys and schooling; 2) teacher-based inquiry teams who receive both support and training; 3) boys becoming part of the research team; and, 4) critical communication across multiple schools. By conducting a "school-based action research" project that called attention to schools' gender curricula, the authors are able to demonstrate the existence of deep-seated emotional responses (both supportive and oppositional) that school-based initiatives face when attempting such work. Specifically, the authors demonstrate that real equitable change in schools, which move us closer to a just society, won't necessarily be a comfortable process.

"Why Does She Need Me?: Young Men, Gender, and Personal Practice" (Rebecca Coulter) provides an important look into the efforts of males to reconstruct themselves. The notion of males needing to protect females is demonstrated to reinforce gender stereotypes and binaries about males and females in anti-violence programs. It is not clear, however, how such binaries are reinforced by *sex differences* (e.g., that males are on average larger, Vandermassen, 2005) in relationship to the social aspects that are considered. The critical assessment of the "trope of protection," however, remains valuable. Coulter provides a beautifully nuanced understanding of how the boys in her study simultaneously reinforced gender stereotypes in some respects while challenging them in others (p. 99).

“Masculinity, Racialization, and Schooling,” written by Carl James, describes the way in which black boys enact a *cool pose* (Majors, 1990) to succeed in meeting the expectations founded on dominant forms of masculinity. An important contribution of this chapter is the exploration of how the labels “at risk” and “underachiever” perpetuate negative social views of black students. James states that the resistance of black boys against school is understandable (read: legitimate) given that some schools are not positive environments for black boys. This position challenges the general thrust of much academic scholarship about boys and education, which sees internal factors (such as attitudes) as the primary culprit for boys’ educational performance. Thus, this perspective bridges the divide between positions typically held in the academic gender literature and positions held by conservative and non-academic writers.

Lance McCready’s chapter “Troubles of Black Boys in Urban Schools in the United States: Black Feminist and Gay Men’s Perspectives,” focuses on the need to hear directly from black feminists and gay men about the experience of discrimination of black boys in school. By drawing on interviews with gay black males, the intersection of black-ness, gay-ness, and male-ness becomes clear for the reader. McCready demonstrates the ways in which voices of marginalized men are kept from some spaces that are considered to be inclusive. This chapter conveys the extreme importance of building a research agenda and policy agenda that more prominently includes the voices of gay black men and black feminists.

Anoop Nayak’s, “The Beer and the Boyz: Masculine Traditions in a Post-Industrial Economy,” begins with a quotation from the film *Fight Club* that suggests males’ masculinities are in crisis. Nayak is skeptical of this essentialist version of masculinity, which leads to questioning the value of men in Northern England ascribing to industrial era forms of masculinity in the current de-industrialized context in which they live. Through an analysis of the history of the era and the culture of hedonistic drinking, helping boys to find new forms of masculinity is emphasized. Nayak concludes with an adapted quotation from *Fight Club*, “The first rule about masculinity is—there is no masculinity” (p. 165). Masculinity, then, is empty or disembodied. Thus, the generative capacities of the body (Shilling, 2005) are denied.

Michael Kimmel’s, “Hostile High School Hallways,” conveys the story of Jamie Nabozny and the many boys like him who have been extensively bullied for being gay or being perceived as being gay. Kimmel notes the horrible lack of school support and protection for these boys. With Jamie’s successful lawsuit against “the school district and the principals of both the middle school and the high school” that he attended, we begin to see hostile school hallways are changing for the better. Administrators and teachers are realizing that they have a responsibility, personally and legally, to protect boys in every school who face discrimination like Jamie Nabozny did. This chapter serves as a wakeup

call to teachers, administrators, and students that we need to support boys who are perceived to be different from the norm.

“Boys, Friendships, and Knowing ‘It Wouldn’t Be Unreasonable to Assume I Am Gay’” written by Michael Kehler, looks at the friendships boys develop with each other in school environments. By analyzing personal conversations and observed events in the day-to-day life of male students, Kehler speaks to the way in which heterosexuality is taken for granted, and how this in turn marginalizes alternative forms of masculinity. The incredible nuance in this analysis demonstrates that boys can contest and resist dominant forms of masculinity simultaneously.

Emma Renold’s chapter, “Tomboys and ‘Female Masculinity’: (Dis)Embodying Hegemonic Masculinity, Queering Gender Identities and Relations,” stands out because the chapter focuses on females who enact masculinities. This chapter reinforces the notion of disembodied masculinities. Renold draws on Judith Butler, who describes gender as a performance and Lacquer, who attempts (weakly) to challenge biological categorizations of male and female. This chapter will be useful for individuals who have not been exposed to perspectives that see gender (behaviours and attitudes) as separate from sex (physical differences). While there are strong criticisms of this position (see Vandermassen, 2005; Hrdy, 2009), this chapter provides an understanding of the performance of masculinities by females.

Male teachers and teaching males

The third theme addresses male teachers’ desire and the wish for more male teachers in schools. Taking on the “recurrent discourse” concerned with the motivation of males who choose to teach young children, the title of James King’s chapter asks, “What Can He Want?: Male Teachers, Young Children, and Teaching Desire.” King challenges the categorization of male desire as necessarily dangerous and sexual; instead, he sees non-sexual male desire to teach, as “productive for both teachers and their students” (p. 244). Considering Nell Noddings’ (1992) notion of care, the importance of desire and the use of the male body in caring for students and other teachers are taken into consideration. King describes in detail the contradictions of the pressure for more male teachers and the fear of male teachers as potentially sexually dangerous. He leaves us to consider why each individual desires to spend a lifetime teaching children, and suggests such reflexivity can provide the grounds to truly give students what they need.

Wayne Martino’s “Beyond Male Role Models: Interrogating the Role of Male Teachers in Boys’ Education” tackles the discourse that calls for more male teachers, especially in primary school, to provide young students with more male role models. Martino begins by considering a range of evidence that suggests that more male teachers do not necessarily provide educational

benefits for boys. Then, drawing on interviews with one current and one former elementary school teacher, Martino explores their narratives as teachers. Martino demonstrates that media-based conceptions of male and female differences can impinge on teachers' beliefs about the root causes of boys' underachievement in schools.

Conclusion

Teachers will find the narratives of the students who have experienced discrimination in schools an interesting point from which they can begin to rethink the culture in their own classrooms and schools. The first and last two chapters, which offer a critical recollection of the history of policy directed at boys' education in the U.S., Australia, and the U.K., are especially relevant for policymakers and academics. The remaining chapters give firsthand insight into the often-marginalized voices in the discourse on boys' education.

There are a few issues that I have pointed out which may be of concern to specific readers: 1) there lacks a serious discussion of the importance of physical differences between males and females; 2) gender is seen to be disembodied and empty; 3) this book does not comprehensively tackle the conservative, neoliberal, religious, and evolutionary psychology perspectives it purports to critique. Nonetheless, the book is useful for anyone interested in deepening their understanding of social theories of masculinity and the importance of social considerations in boys' educational performance. If you are going to read only one book on boys' education from a sociological and/or (pro)feminist perspective, this is a great choice.

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