The Problem with Boys: Beyond the Backlash
reviewed by Amanda Keddie — November 17, 2009

Title: The Problem with Boys: Beyond the Backlash
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The narratives of heterosexism, homophobia, and racism within The Problem with Boys' Education: Beyond the Backlash (2009) are disturbingly familiar. Decades of gender and social equity research and reform within and beyond western schooling contexts has made visible how these narratives constrain the schooling experiences of students and teachers. However, as this book comprehensively details, such narratives continue to be embedded in education policy and schooling practice. A white, heterosexualized masculinity continues to be the taken-for-granted and invisible center against which all others are judged. Like much (pro)feminist work before it, The Problem with Boys’ Education illuminates the injustices framing this “center” and calls for a move Beyond the Backlash against progressive and feminist gains in education. In particular, this edited collection provides further insight into the dire impacts of heterosexism, homophobia, and racism on students' and teachers’ school lives and the ways in which public and policy discourse and education practice in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom both colludes with, and confronts, these narratives.

Michael Kimmel’s chapter (Hostile High School Hallways) is especially compelling in bringing to light the association between instances of homophobic harassment and extreme levels of violent schoolboy retaliation. In making this association he draws attention to several US legal cases, including the “touchstone” Columbine High School incident, where nearly all of the male perpetrators experienced constant and ongoing heterosexualized bullying, violence, and harassment from their peers prior to their crimes. Michael Kehler’s chapter (Boys, Friendships, and Knowing: “It wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume I am gay”), similarly focuses on the ways in which homophobic harassment constrains the school experiences of young men in the US. He examines how schoolboy masculinities are regulated, policed and contained within heteronormative boundaries that marginalize and delegitimize non-dominant masculinities. In particular, he articulates how such boundaries prevent schoolboys from developing close same-sex friendships.

Rebecca Priegert Coulter’s chapter (Why Does She Need Me?: Young Men, Gender and Personal Practice) also provides insight into how young masculinities are shaped and constrained within heteronormative boundaries. Within different Canadian schooling contexts, she examines the identity struggles of young men, revealing, in particular, both their political consciousness of gender construction in their own lives, as well as their unconsciousness of the ways in which their deeply ingrained gendered beliefs reinscribe an othering and delegitimating of “the feminine.” Further exposing the taken-for-granted privileging of hegemonic masculinity in schools but in relation to the gender identities of male teachers, is James King’s chapter (What Can He Want?: Male Teachers, Young Children, and Teaching Desire) and Wayne Martino’s chapter (Beyond Male Role Models: Interrogating the Role of Male Teachers in Boys’ Education). King’s chapter examines how the gender identities of male teachers within the early childhood sphere are policed through frames of reference that devalue this space as feminized and cast suspicion on the sexuality and desire of these teachers. Martino’s chapter challenges a privileging of hegemonic masculinity in relation to male teachers. He provides a nuanced and critically informed counterpoint to simplistic arguments that associate an increase in male role models with improving boys’ educational outcomes.

Many of the chapters elucidate how this privileging of hegemonic masculinity is embedded within the processes of schooling. Michael C. Relchert, Peter Kurlonoff, and Brett Stoudt’s chapter (What Can We Expect?: A Strategy to Help Schools Hoping for Virtue), for example, examines the “man-making” gender regime of schools. These authors identify the tensions between this regime and schools’ “desires to cultivate boys’ character strengths” (p. 57). Drawn from research in the US, they propose several school-based approaches aimed at reconciling this tension and transforming boys’ investments in harmful masculinities. One of these approaches involved boys initiating and developing research into masculinity, bullying, and harassment within their school, and raised awareness of the school’s collusion in gendered cultures. In a subsequent chapter (Masculinity, Racialization and Schooling: The Making of Marginalized Men), Carl E. James extends such focus to examining how heterosexualized and racialized schooling processes in Canadian schools marginalize black schoolboys. He argues that constructions of these boys (as underachievers, athletes, “at risk,” and immigrants) serve as a form of racial profiling that reinscribe and perpetuate their social disadvantage and educational underachievement.
Examining issues of masculinity through broader social lenses is Anoop Nayak's chapter (The Beer and the Boyz: Masculine Traditions in a Post-Industrial Economy). This chapter examines young men's labour aspirations within the context of historical and cultural change. Nayak's focus is on working class boys in the Northeast of England and the cultural processes involved in their transition from formal education to the world of work. He examines the role of drinking culture in relation to this transition as an "embodied spectacle of masculine excess" (p. 150) that responds to the complexity and uncertainty of late-modernity while maintaining past attachments to industry.

The broader social lenses of public and policy discourse as they pertain to issues of masculinity and schooling in the United States, Australia, and the UK are also examined in The Problem with Boys' Education. Marcus Weaver-Hightower's chapter (Issues of Boys' Education in the United States: Diffuse Contexts and Futures) examines how such discourse has been mobilized in the United States. He notes both a lack of attention to boys' education in the US, as compared with other western contexts such as Australia, and the conservatism of current approaches. In light of this, he calls for a pro-feminist and nuanced stance to increasing interest and action around boys' educational Issues. Also reflecting a pro-feminist stance is Martin Allis, Becky Francis, and Christine Skelton's chapter (Gender Policies in Australia and the United Kingdom: The Construction of "New" Boys and Girls). Their analysis of gender equity and schooling debate and policy in Australia and the UK draws attention to key similarities in how gender priorities have been understood and rearticulated. They highlight, in particular, how constructions of boys' educational disadvantage have been shaped by anti-feminist and neoliberal discourses.

In light of the complexities and nuances these analyses of masculinity and schooling open up, the trajectories presented within this collection - to move beyond the backlash - are also complex. As is clear from the issues raised in the book, and supported by an abundance of work in this area (see Kenway, et al. 1998; Davies, 1993; 2000; Epstein, et al. 1999; Connolly, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Archer, 2003; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Lingard et al. 2009), a de-gendering and re-gendering of masculinities requires "complex analytic frameworks and research based knowledge" (p. xx) that reflect pro-feminist, anti-homophobic, and anti-racist principles. For Lance McCready, In his chapter (Troubles of Black Boys in Urban Schools in the United States: Black Feminist and Gay Men's Perspectives), theories informed by black feminism and gay men provide the progressive lenses necessary to re-frame troubled masculinities. Such lenses, as his work in urban schools in the US illustrates, disrupt conventional understandings of black masculinity and highlight the "interlocking nature of race, class, gender and sexuality in the lives of black boys" (p. 145).

For Emma Renold, in her chapter (Tomboys and "Female Masculinity": (Dis)embodying Hegemonic Masculinity, Queering Gender Identities and Relations), moving beyond the backlash requires a more radical theorizing that disassociates gender from the sexed body. In her examination of girls' appropriation of hegemonic masculinity, Renold challenges "the notion that 'masculinity' can be desired and displayed only by male bodies" (p. 224) thus opening up possibilities for rethinking embodiments and relations of gender, sexuality, and power.

Such rethinking remains a key imperative in beginning to shift the ingrained and taken-for-granted narratives of heterosexism, homophobia, and racism endemic in school cultures. It is clearly central to pursuing gender justice in education especially given that "what about the boys?" and associated recuperative "boys will be boys" discourses continue to colonize and distort this space. The Problem with Boys' Education is an important text because it maintains attention on this enduring and widespread problem and provides continued hope that schooling can redress the social and emotional costs of hegemonic masculinities. For as Kimmel points out in his chapter (p. 194): "If 'boys will be boys' is the best we can do as a culture, we can be pretty sure that men will be boys, too."

References


