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Wayne Martino & Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli. *So What's a Boy? Addressing Issues of Masculinity and Schooling*. Open University Press (McGraw-Hill Education), Maidenhead (and Philadelphia, PA), 2003. Paperback. 22.99 UK pounds. pp: 310. ISBN 0-335-20381-7

Summary

School life is structured by norms and amongst the central norms are those of masculinity. Authors Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli discuss themes - homophobia and racism - that are relevant to themselves. Their own experience and their interviewees' insights unravel normalising practices and may help to educate boys better.

Over the years, the way 'gender' is understood by social scientists has developed from something of a 'biological' to something of a 'cultural' perspective (compare Smiler, 2004). Gender is much more than a biological category that describes a position people have from birth on - male or female. Gender is also more than a social role that a person is taught by others to play, a position that people are made to fit into. Gender is made by people. It is not a structure immune to change: each person shapes his/her own gender and helps shape gender in general. Social-economic status, race and culture differentiate within gender. People experience the configuration of gender - nature, socialisation and choice - as a set of expectations and norms that they can live up to without much conscious thought, that restrict their behavior, or with which they can play. The possibilities of gender in late modern society - multiple masculinities and femininities - can be seen as opportunities for individual development and happiness. These possibilities can also be seen as confusing and full of risk. The possibilities of gender, their opportunities and threats, are in full view during late childhood, adolescence and early adult life. When I took up the book *So What's a Boy? Addressing Issues of*

Masculinity and Schooling I expected to learn more about people who shape their masculinities.

The authors state to have interviewed 150 boys from 11 to 24 years of age, over a period of three years. The interviews were semi-structured by the following questions:

- “What does being a boy mean to you?”
- “What is school like for you? Do you experience any problems?”
- “What do you like about school?”
- “Can you talk to us about your friends, teachers, family and their influence on you?”
- “What subjects do you enjoy/dislike? Why?”
- “Are you experiencing any pressures in your life at school?”

To me, these seem to be good questions. The authors spoke with indigenous, Asian, Italian and white Anglo-Australian boys, from both rural and urban locations. They spoke with, for instance, victims of bullying as well as with bullies. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli were assisted by, amongst others, an organisation of parents of gays and by representatives of Aboriginals/Torres Strait Islanders.

The authors desire space for boys’ voices. They want to counter a trend they perceive: a trend to understand boys as ‘victims’ of their biological sex. The semi-structured interview seems to be the right method to make boys’ voices heard, but the authors provide no justification for this method. Did they consider other methods? And except for their explanation of ‘borderland existences’ (see further on), Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli hardly engage with the corpus of literature on schools, socialisation and gender (I assume they do so in other publications of theirs).

Quotes from interviewees are inserted into the text throughout the book. That is interesting material to read and it should support the argument. Quotes are used in this way by for instance William Pollack (1998), Janita Ravesloot (1997), Koolhaas & Maris (1992) and Eric Marcus (2002). As I soon recognised names and stories in *So What’s a Boy?*, I felt that the transcripts of only a dozen of the interviews were used to illustrate the argument. Was this done to provide the interviewees with more ‘face’, as a service to

the reader? Or should I doubt the quality of other transcripts? The authors ought to have explained that.

The book consists of three parts. Part I is titled “Normalization and Schooling”. The first chapter explains the research perspective of normalising practices and borderland existences. The expectations and norms of social practices are usually not perceived as regulatory or repressive. Schooling is in that sense not problematic, the contrary is often true: its normality is familiar and safe. Only under extraordinary circumstances are normal practices felt to be restrictive. If, for instance, a boy’s mother dies and his emotions are not to be showed in school after the burial has taken place. From a position at the margin of normality the workings of expectations and norms can be observed. Disabled, homosexual and coloured people can actually feel how society is structured and they can be highly aware of their construction of identity. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli explain that their perspective of normalising practices and borderland existences draws on feminist and postcolonial theories and on Michel Foucault’s writings. I quote from the first chapter:

“This focus draws attention to ways in which boys learn to police their masculinities and to place themselves (and other boys) under a particular kind of surveillance. In other words, we are interested in boys’ understandings of what constitutes ‘normal’ or desirable masculinity and how they learn to fashion and embody this masculinity in socially acceptable ways.” (p. 3)

“Versions of masculinity and their relationship with other factors - such as ethnicity, Indigeneity, socio-economic status, rurality, sexuality, disability - are understood, therefore, as a set of self-fashioning practices which are linked to normalizing judgements and techniques for producing culturally and historically specific forms of subjectivity.” (p. 6)

The three following chapters in Part I are on bodies, harassment and friendships. Part II is titled “Diverse Masculinities” and there the authors discuss homo- and bisexuality, cultural backgrounds, indigeneity and physical disabilities. Part III is titled “Sites of

Intervention”. There the authors show how boys themselves interrogate masculinity in schools. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli further discuss school structures and pedagogies, the polarity between the courses of English and physical education, and health education. In their conclusion they provide school managers, teachers and others involved with the implications of their findings, to make schools aware of how they do and how they might educate boys.

The authors succeed to make clear that in the case of Australian boys’ education ‘normal’ is not necessarily good, or not good for everybody. Their eyes for borderland existences work well to unveil how social structures are experienced. This book by Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli can help to improve the education of boys, even if it does not in detail indicate how change in schools can be realised.

The authors start their chapters, before the actual introductions, with a personal reflection on the theme dealt with in the chapter, or with a description of an empirical observation and their experience of it. This helps the reader to trace back and understand the arguments and the message that the book contains. In their explanation of narratives Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli refer to Lather (1991) and Game & Metcalfe (1996). I provide part of the text at the beginning of the chapter concerning bullying and harassment:

“He strides in, and even as I’m indicating the chair facing away from the windows, he is scraping another chair into position so that he is fully in sight of anyone in the library as well as able to scrutinize me from a sideways angle. Outside, there is a steady stream of fans grinning, pointing, waving, eyes shifting suggestively between him and me. He responds with exaggerated grins, hand and finger signals signifying ‘Fuck off’ and shooting a gun. Occasionally he doesn’t respond to a question or loses concentration when he becomes immersed in the mutual displays and camaraderie. I stop asking questions and sit quietly observing. The boys outside the window indicate to him that I’m watching. He turns to me. ‘What’s up?’ ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Just mucking around.’ ‘Why?’ ‘They’re watching me. They’re waiting for me to do it. Anyway, that’s what normal boys do.’ I end that interview as well. I meet with the principal and organize a more private room in the admin block.” (p. 33)

The following comes from the text at the beginning of the chapter concerning sexual diversity:

“The interviews confront me with effects of the straight gaze that is continually directed to those who dare to name their non-normative sexuality or to appear different in their bodily enactment of masculinity. And yet in writing about sexually diverse boys, we want to shift this normalizing gaze away from the Other and to fix it firmly on those who have the power to classify and objectify. Homophobia after all is about regimes of heterosexuality and those who have the officially sanctioned power to diminish and pathologise the other. Homophobia is about heterosexuality and normalization - it is about compulsory heterosexuality.” (p. 75)

Author Wayne Martino is senior lecturer in education at Murdoch University, Perth, and he has worked as a teacher in different secondary schools. He is gay. Author Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli is senior lecturer in social diversity and health at Deakin University, Melbourne. She has an Italian background, she is a heterosexual feminist and a mother. Authors’ identities matter, that goes for the book under review and it goes for this review as well. I have volunteered with a gay rights organisation: I was one of the public information officers who went to secondary schools to inform classes about homo- and bisexuality, who were there to answer questions and open some discussion. I am gay, but I never felt that it sufficed to present myself as such to a class. I always had more to say about gender in general, about the specific expectations and norms for men and women, about consequences for thought and behavior. To combat discrimination against people with alternative sexual orientations is one thing, to change the main body of society seems to me the real challenge. My own secondary school days were not the happiest of my life, but I was not a permanent victim of harassment and I am not traumatised in any way.

Another thing needs to be said about the authors of the book and about myself. They are Australians, writing about Australian society, its schools and boys and for an Australian public. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli make clear that Australia is the country

of beer drinking mates who are into football, perhaps cricket.¹ I am Dutch, I live in one of the few countries that has made possible same sex marriages. And I was warned: here in the Netherlands I had an Australian colleague and one of the reasons she left her country is that she considers its politics to be narrow-minded and repressive. What the book's intended public may think outrageous, may seem obvious to me.

Furthermore, let me state that when I started with the book I did not expect it to centre around homophobia. Neither title nor the publisher's text on the back make that clear. It says, for instance: "How do issues of masculinity impact on boys from culturally diverse backgrounds, indigenous boys, those with disabilities and boys of diverse sexualities?" I am 'of course' indeed gay and not disabled or an immigrant, but, honestly, the book highlights masculinity as heterosexual and its protagonists as homophobic. In that light, disabled boys mostly do not live up to the ideal of masculinity because they are perceived to be weak, feminine and therefore amongst those boys who are into drama, literature or effeminate, generally. Such views are held by boys, the pupils themselves. They are facilitated, if not encouraged even, by (Australian) schools and society at large: sports and heterosexual male physical performance are on a pedestal.²

Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli show that power is at play in the relations between different boys. They also discuss the importance of sports in (Australian) society. They analyse masculinities at the levels of individual boys, peer groups and schools. Their discussion might fit into a higher level frame of analysis. Using Robert William Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' it can be said that the ideal of masculinity that disabled and homosexual boys do not live up to is related to the domination of men over women in society. Demetrakis Demetriou (2001), inspired by Antonio Gramsci, refined Connell's concept to a 'masculine bloc'. Demetriou explains that Connell failed to recognise how the ideal masculinity of white heterosexuals interacts with the marginal masculinities of homosexuals and coloured men. Even those men who do not share in the hegemonic masculinity benefit from patriarchy, they are willing to form a bloc that

¹ Another scholar who states how important sports are within Australian hegemonic masculinity is Robert William Connell (1992). He describes how young gays follow a life course outside the dominant social pattern, but do not actually challenge the existing gender order.

² See further Messner (1992), Sabo & Runfola (1980), Dunning (1986) and Frey & Eitzen (1991).

supports patriarchy. An interpretation of boys and schools along the lines of Connell and Demetriou might resemble the way Hua-Fu Hsu (2005) interprets inmates, guards and a prison along those lines.

As I see it, masculinity is worthy of research (compare Traister, 2000) and worthy of care. Power, violence and destruction are still much celebrated in the world and domination is equalled to success, not just in historical work by someone like Ernst Jünger but in everyday practice. Just think of drinking and driving. I find this regrettable. However, outright attacks against masculinity, as from radical feminists, are not very helpful. Nor does it help boys to construct a balanced identity if they have to spend their early years in feminised environments, with mostly female caregivers and teachers and with school rules that prohibit moving around and physical exploration - to sit still, to listen and to speak suits girls better. Boys are likely to 'share' by acting in concert, girls are likely to 'share' by speaking together (see for instance Pollack, 1998). In recent years, some people feel that in the Netherlands boys 'as boys' are somewhat neglected. Many teachers and most caregivers are female. School norms define a pattern of behavior that seems to suit girls better than boys (see for instance Bierens, 2004). And girls do better at school. Some programmes have been developed that allow boys to express themselves in ways that suit them, even if girls may find those ways too noisy or violent and if mothers or teachers may find them unruly. Such programmes assume that if boys are allowed to shout and run at times, and if some competition is built into the curriculum, the boys will be better pupils. Their way of learning would be recognised. I agree that extreme male behavior should be kept in check, but masculinity does have its value (both use and intrinsic value). For instance, according to Barrett & White (2002) masculinity seems to protect against depression. Male identities need to be nurtured and discussed in order to reach forms that neither threaten others nor deny male nature.

It might be surprising to readers, but 'good' masculinities might even be realised in sport. There are particular sports, clubs, groups and/or individuals with whom competition is merely friendly, and masculine power supportive. Laurence de Garis (2000) describes such a boxing gym. The research I would welcome as supplementary to the book by Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli is an evaluation of different training

programmes that aim to make schools aware of sexualities and create safe, supportive and pleasant school cultures. Please design, execute and evaluate such programmes. This requires the cooperation of pedagogues, psychologists, sociologists and policy scientists, not to forget school managers, teachers, parents and pupils themselves.

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