

Boys don't try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools

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Book Review

Boys don't try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools

By Mark Roberts & Matt Pinkett

Routledge, 2019, 203 pages

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A grasp of contemporary societal gender dynamics is essential to guiding students to meet their potential. Roberts and Pinkett's *Boys don't try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools* provides readers with a well-organized, informative, and insightful view into the representation of masculinities within schools. This book details the authors' anecdotal experiences, who connect their previous misconceptions, as well as their expertise, to multitudes of research studies, showcasing their personal growth and willingness to shift their pedagogical frameworks in terms of their understanding of masculinity within the school environment. The authors are all teaching in the British School System and they reference research from Western research institutions and sources. The format of this book is meaningful and purposeful through successfully beginning a non-threatening discussion of preconceived notions surrounding the concept of masculinity in schools. The book intends to provide teachers, school leadership and preservice teachers with a philosophical and practical approach to teaching male students.

The book's overall goal is to encourage a shift in the rhetoric surrounding the male role within society. This shift asks readers to use the provided anecdotes, research, and suggested strategies to dismantle negative gender roles by producing men who value the traits of "tender masculinity" (p. 3). It is the book's editor's aim to encourage educators and policy-makers to shift their understanding of male social roles that help create a more

equitable society as the concept of ‘tender masculinity’, while simultaneously asking that male social roles that contribute little to the creation of an equitable society, or the phrase ‘toxic masculinity’ be, henceforth, referred to as “non-tender masculinity” (p. 4).

Each of the ten chapters is organized into an easily digestible format where a concept is introduced through an anecdote, research is discussed to either confirm an ideology or confront a misconception, and then realistic, practical strategies are suggested. Topics range from common misconceptions about teaching boys, to the complexities of male mental health, acts of violence and social roles, to creating classroom environments that nurture students as individuals, and to addressing the influence of sex and sexism among the male student population.

Insights of key interest include the thoughtful and well-researched de-bunking of various engagement gimmicks with an emphasis on how utilizing these, one-size-fits-all ‘strategies’ creates the opposite of the desired effect. For example, gimmicks like competitions amongst peers often result in the perpetuation of harmful nullification of students’ self-worth and self-esteem, rather than acting as a motivation tool. On a similar note, the explanation and research behind the idea that male students will often use self-sabotage methods such as a refusal to attempt assignments as a self-worth protection strategy was particularly intriguing. The authors also argue that specified content does not drive student interest and that students should be exposed to as many different perspectives as possible in order to build up each student’s “cultural capital” (pg. 15).

The book often references the use of “pastoral care,” and, in my North American, non-religious context, I found the term to be confusing. When reflecting upon the necessity of a male teacher’s role in a male student’s educational career when there are so few in the profession, Roberts and Pinkett discuss the “pastoral team” and its definition as “the body of teachers responsible for helping and supporting students with issues not directly related to their subject learning” (p.71). The definition of pastoral care, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Education, is the “guidance and support which focuses on the learner’s welfare and their social and emotional needs, rather than their purely educational ones” (Wallace, 2015). Due to the history of the word ‘pastoral’ as having religious connotations, it may be more inclusive to use the term socio-emotional care or student success, or, in the case of the quotation, refer to the ‘pastoral team’ as a ‘student success team’. This way, the idea is more broadly accessible to those who do not prescribe to the Christian faith, especially given the emphasis throughout the text on the importance of

the use of specific language, its historical implications, and the role it plays in creating a more equitable society.

Introducing the idea of the necessity for standards which outline a way of ‘male being’ that contrasts toxic masculinity is imperative for readers to begin making positive changes in rates of male student success. The authors suggest that this set of standards should encompass a concept entitled “tender masculinity” (p. 3). Once again, focusing on the importance of language, ‘tender’ is a word that is generally associated with femininity and intimacy. Perhaps the use of an alternate word to describe a type of masculinity that values equity would be more appropriate. Equity is based on providing necessary support for the success of an individual. By placing emphasis on the term ‘tender,’ and using defining questions (pg. 3) that describe aspects of being that are feminine in nature, it is almost nullifying the validity of a male, or masculine identity, which in turn goes against the end goal of creating a more equitable society.

If you are a teacher thinking about adding these strategies into your practice, it is important to consider the goals of your individual students and your ideas about the goals of education in general. Are your goals for your students’ fact retention, or transferable skill building? What pathway is your student embarking on after secondary school? The goals of education change depending on these answers, and as such some of the strategies provided within this text may not best suit your students.

Overall, Roberts and Pinkett have created a valuable resource for professionals in the education system. Their work provides valuable strategies for teaching male students as well as reflects on the benefits of using these strategies by providing quality research and making logical connections amongst these ideas.

References

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