
Deficit Models, Masculinity and Boys' Achievement

JOHN QUICKE

ABSTRACT Boys' underperformance relative to girls has been a major cause for concern in recent years. Some have seen the problem as linked to a dysfunctional anti-school masculine identity. The article explores this idea via a close reading of a popular text where the focus is on boys' behaviour and achievement in the context of a strategy for rethinking masculinity in schools. It suggests that grounding a definition of boys' achievement and identity in a deficit model is likely to result in the deviant labelling which most teachers seek to avoid. Moreover, this model is consonant with a view of research, curriculum and pedagogy in the current period where the constraints on the development of progressive reform are only too evident.

During a recent discussion of boys' underachievement with a group of teachers I discovered that many of them had been reading a book called *Boys Don't Try* by Matt Pinkett and Mark Roberts. They had purchased the book, were keen to try out some of the ideas, and to encourage their colleagues to do the same. It may say something about the impact of research on teaching that the last time I had such an experience was more than thirty years ago when I once encountered a head teacher with a well-thumbed copy of David Hargreaves' *The Challenge for the Comprehensive School* open on his desk!

So what was the appeal of *Boys Don't Try*? As the authors point out, 'the genesis of this book began with a couple of blogs' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 1). Much of the language is chatty, and often sensationalist, and the content includes material drawn from the authors' personal experiences as practising teachers as well as their own childhood experiences. They don't shirk from giving detailed examples of some of the harrowing experiences of girls and female teachers on the receiving end of sexist and often potentially violent behaviour. Numerous difficult but not often discussed issues – from the iniquitous effects of nasty banter to the harmful nature of pornography – are

explored in some depth and concrete examples provided of how they can be dealt with in the classroom.

To their credit the authors use research and theory to support and develop their argument, and do so in a way which is accessible and teacher friendly. There is a particularly good chapter on disadvantaged students which draws on the seminal work of Diane Reay. There are references to a variety of recent qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as some older, well-known studies like Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* and Rosenthal and Jacobson's *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. A range of sociological concepts and analyses are drawn upon, from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to ideas about class and equality deployed by Reay. It includes an analysis of streaming and setting which the authors feel contribute to lowering expectations and reinforcing stereotypes. This section draws on a long tradition of research in this field that confirms the flawed and anti-educational nature of such practices, which, despite this, are still in regular use as a way of organising teaching and learning in schools.

However, although there is much in the book to admire, I was struck by what seemed to me some obvious contradictions. It was this which prompted me to explore some of the ideas and arguments that have a wide currency amongst teachers concerned with boys' academic underperformance. Boys not trying is seen as a 'self-worth protection strategy' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 11). I kept making comparisons with Hargreaves' book mentioned above, a vastly different kind of text, but which starts off in a similar place. Our present secondary school system 'exerts on many pupils, particularly but by no means exclusively from the working class, a destruction of their dignity which is so massive and pervasive that few subsequently recover from it' (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 17). The group that 'turn against the school in explicit opposition ... are predominantly ... urban working class ... and also largely male' (Hargreaves, 1982, p. 19). I shall return to this comparison at the end of the article.

A Delicate Balance

Although the focus is on gender, the authors are clearly aware that there are a number of social and cultural factors contributing to boys' underperformance academically. They acknowledge the impact of social class and ethnicity, which they discuss in a well-researched chapter on disadvantaged students. They refer to a table which shows that both 'working class boys and girls from myriad ethnic backgrounds are under-performing' and indicate that their practical suggestions for teachers can be used 'in efforts to raise the attainment of all disadvantaged students regardless of ethnicity and gender' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 25).

This is in line with the research in this area (see, for example, Connolly, 2016), which shows that social class and ethnicity exert a far greater influence on the GCSE performance of boys and girls than gender. We have to be clear, therefore, that in addressing the question of academic achievement through

changes in how boys identify as masculine will only have limited results unless we take account of other factors, in particular social class. It may be that the hegemonic form of masculinity, which they define as non-tender masculinity (NTM), does produce anti-school attitudes, but however boys see themselves and others as masculine and whatever their value commitment in this regard, many of them will still 'fail' in the system.

Although there is a concern for the link between attainment and the dominant form of masculinity, the ultimate aim of the book 'is to produce boys who turn into men of whom we can proudly say yes' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 3) to a list of questions which identify the characteristics of the man who embodies a different form of masculinity called tender masculinity (TM).

The authors warn, however, against adopting a deficit model of boys' behaviour based on stereotypes. Once boys have been pigeonholed in this way they often live up to expectations. There is a whole chapter devoted to 'expectations', which the authors regard as one of the main points to be addressed. Most of the research they quote is up to date but they do hark back to the famous Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) study which showed the power of teacher labelling in determining educational outcomes.

But how do you address the specific problem of boys' 'bad' behaviour without communicating to boys that you already have expectations that they might be more disruptive than girls? The authors talk about 'a delicate balance that has to be struck between tackling NTM while at the same time avoiding, alienating and prejudicially labelling boys with low expectations' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 96). So, do the authors manage to strike this 'delicate balance'?

Types of Masculinity

A difficulty here is the way the two types of masculinity are defined. They note the various dysfunctional characteristics of the hegemonic form of masculinity (NTM) such as aggression, competitiveness, toughness, sexism, homophobia and emotional reticence. However, it is unclear if all traits always go together and are all equally pernicious. The authors sometimes talk about this 'brand of masculinity' having certain 'side effects' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 2) but if certain negative behaviours are 'side effects', presumably the traits themselves would not necessarily be negative. 'Aggression', for example, may have cruelty as a 'side effect' but not always. In any case, it is not clear why 'competitiveness' (particularly in relation to sport) is itself a negative rather than, in certain circumstances, a positive trait. This is discussed below in relation to the references made by the authors to the sport of boxing.

Another issue is the emotional terms in which NTM is identified. Always having to prove themselves 'tough' means boys don't like to express their feelings as this is seen as a sign of weakness. Throughout the text much is made of the inability of NTM macho males to talk about their feelings. There are references to emotional coldness (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 3), to their

having all 'the emotional depth of a vacuum floating in outer space' (p. 3) and 'emotional mutism' (p. 64).

The problem with this focus on emotional shortcomings is that it leads to the medicalisation of boys' problems, one of the most obdurate forms of deviant labelling. 'Emotional mutism' is referred to in a chapter on mental health, where the authors baldly state that 'males are more likely to kill themselves than females because they don't talk about their feelings.' (p. 64). This is undoubtedly disturbing but how should we interpret the differences? Whilst even one adolescent suicide is cause for concern, the incidence is so low (for the 15-19 age group well below 10 per 100,000, with roughly twice as many boys as girls) that attributing the cause to the alleged dominant masculine trait of emotional mutism is not convincing, since the overwhelming majority of 'emotional mute' males presumably do not go down this route.

The authors are on stronger ground when they refer to mental health statistics in general: '10% of children and young people (aged 5-16 years) have a clinically diagnosable mental problem' (p. 63). In this context they might have referred to several studies which show that the incidence of psychiatric problems is much higher for adolescent boys than girls. A study by Hartung and Widiger (1998), for example, showed that of the 21 disorders usually first diagnosed in infancy, childhood and adolescence for which sex ratios are provided 17 are said to be more common in boys than girls.

However, it could well be that these statistics tell us more about how the aberrant behaviour of boys is defined and managed in schools than they do about boys' mental health problems. There has been much criticism of the excessive use of questionable diagnoses of conductor disorders like ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and ODD (oppositional defiant disorder), as well as autism (see Timimi et al, 2011). The former are linked to the alleged masculine traits of anger and impulsiveness, and the latter with so-called emotional mutism, lack of empathy, 'coldness' and other emotional symptoms. Boys thus diagnosed may well have problems or be problems but the psychiatric label pathologises the notion of masculinity and is not far removed from the notion of toxic masculinity which the authors seek to avoid. It also undermines their own argument by treating NTM as a 'sick' condition rather than as a 'normal' identity in a certain kind of society.

How to Avoid Deviant Labelling

The authors are certainly right to identify deficit models and deviant labelling as problematical. They back up their views and recommendations with research findings but although they refer to Willis's book, they don't draw on the vast amount of contemporaneous research in the sociology of education, i.e. that mostly carried out in the 1980s and 1990s which would have had a bearing on these issues. Even within mixed-ability classes differentiation practices take various forms and can have different, often negative effects. Many teachers know that the way to avoid deviant labelling is to make sure the focus is on the

'act' rather than the 'person', even if they might not put it in this way; so that whilst a boy may be reprimanded for a sexist remark there is no implication that he is seen as a particular kind of person, one who possesses, say, a misogynistic streak.

Of the various sociological perspectives involved in this research it is symbolic interactionism which perhaps is the most relevant in this context. It assumes that social meanings will depend on the context in which interacting selves are located and will be derived from perspectives which, according to Woods (1983, p. 7), refer to 'frameworks through which people make sense of the world ... construct their realities and define situations'. In the ebb and flow of interaction pupils may draw on a variety of often contradictory cultural elements. All social life involves a web of negotiations, with people interpreting and reinterpreting objects and events in accordance with their definition of the situation and perceived interests. Power is then defined as the ability to impose your definition of the situation, but no participant is ever completely powerless, particularly in a society which purports to be liberal and democratic.

So it seems likely that when we examine interactive processes of the classroom, the situation will be much more complex, dynamic and contradictory than might be supposed from trying to 'read off' the motivational springs of action from a structural feature of society, however dominant this may be. Pupils are not programmed role players. They may be disruptive for a variety of reasons in a particular instance, and gender may not always be salient.

In the light of this, I would ask questions of some of the examples the authors provide. In a chapter where Roberts discusses his own mistakes in trying to engage with boys' interests, he describes how in an English lesson he used *The Fight*, Norman Mailer's account of the Rumble in the Jungle, the famous boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. This is a well-written piece which deploys a variety of literary devices, which Roberts acknowledges, as well as having an interesting geo-political dimension and being of particular interest to a group of 'louder' boys. But on the negative side, he felt he'd 'unwittingly reinforced the stereotypical attitudes that so frustrated me during lessons' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 18).

But is this sort of material necessarily counterproductive? If sexism was an influence, one would expect an interest in this sporting event to be an expression of tough masculinity in contrast with, say, the 'weakness' of females. But gender might not come into it. Liking for 'hard', competitive, physically demanding sport is only gendered if it is accompanied by sexist language and attitudes, as when, for example, a male boxer is described as boxing 'like a woman' or boys talk in ways where they clearly see boxing as about being a 'tough guy' as opposed to just being 'tough'. To suggest that somehow boys' sexism may not appear on the 'surface' but reflects unconscious psychological predispositions is at best hypothetical and at worst an unfalsifiable assertion dismissive of boys' situated perspectives.

Certainly, this is a 'tough' form of masculinity but whatever one thinks about boxing it is a rule-following practice involving a high degree of skill and

discipline. In fact it is often seen by its advocates as a way of encouraging self-discipline and developing virtues like courage and resilience. It may seem something of a contradiction that in their description of 'tender coaching' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 75) the authors use boxing as an example, but this is only problematical if we assume NTM is all 'bad', which as I have indicated above the authors themselves seem unclear about.

The Engagement Myth

It seems to me that in a different way a deficit model is also at the root of the authors' traditional approach to research, pedagogy and the curriculum. Much of their thinking seems to echo the kind of deficit view of local knowledge typical of curriculum traditionalists. I have in mind the views of academics like Michael Young who writes about 'powerful knowledge' as a 'better' and superior kind of knowledge to students' 'common sense' or everyday knowledge, the latter being limited because it is tied to local contexts of experience, a view which I have critiqued in a previous article in this journal (see Quicke, 2017, p. 245).

The authors are critical of teaching approaches which focus on engaging with pupils' interests, because like many current supporters of a return to traditional methods they regard such engagement as a 'myth'. The problems they draw attention to are real enough. It is obvious that boys don't all like the same things and that to assume they do can reinforce stereotypes. Regular use of material from elements of popular culture which appeal to boys can lower expectations and promote a dominant anti-school masculinity as well as preventing boys from building cultural capital.

However, trying to make learning relevant by connecting with the boys' or for that matter girls' interests is surely not in itself a bad approach, and needn't have the negative effects the authors attribute to it? Using content relevant to their lives is not to somehow 'limit to them to exposure to new ideas' (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019, p. 15). Current interests are a good starting point for exploring how the personal and local are connected to wider social, cultural and political issues. The authors are clearly opposed to some of the guiding principles of child-centred progressive education, and even to the idea of the child as an active constructor of knowledge. In fact they seem to have a problem with the idea of 'engagement' as such. 'The idea that making lessons entertaining or tailored to pupil interests will increase focus and improve outcomes is a widespread fallacy' (p. 20). They claim this is supported by the research of Coe et al (2014), which shows that ensuring learners are always active rather than listening passively is an ineffective strategy. So it seems the authors are opposed to engagement per se, not just because it is likely to reinforce gender stereotypes.

This talk of 'the engagement myth' is of a piece with their positivist understanding of evidence-based research and their support for one particular form of pedagogy. For the authors, the solution to teaching boys well is the

same as teaching girls well: lessons that apparently four decades of research have shown to work well involving essentially a formal, traditional lesson with 'high challenge, high expectations' and 'No gimmicks. No short cuts' (p. 21) like group work and active learning. Rosenshine's (2012) *Principles of Instruction* involving reviews of previous learning, scaffolding, opportunities for guided practice, checking for understanding is the proven best practice.

Like most teaching approaches, this one has its place and may be appropriate in certain contexts, but there are plenty of other options in the teachers' toolkit which are just as valid. The view of research and support for 'listening passively' is consistent with the delivery of the so-called knowledge-rich curriculum which the authors espouse. They quote a blog post which refers to the Arnoldian view of this curriculum 'as the best that has been thought and said...' (p. 39). Although they acknowledge this canon is 'rightfully contested, debated and argued over', they fail to note the shortcomings of the current EBacc-led traditional academic curriculum.

One of the authors provides an example from his own experience of being in the bottom set for English at school where he studied no Shakespeare, but only texts thought to be commensurate with his 'ability'. He remembers studying Barry Hines's *Kestrel for a Knave*, which he felt ultimately 'narrowed my scope' (p. 16). But for me, Hines's book raises major questions about social class, the nature of schooling, our relationship to animals and human dignity, which sharpen moral sensitivities and facilitate the development of a cultural understanding and political wisdom that goes well beyond the context in which the novel is set. Plays like *King Lear* may 'contain some of the greatest words ever written in the English language' (p. 16), but the darker purpose of a rich old man and his intent to unburden himself, apart from having no immediate appeal for either boys or girls, may have no more significance for the major concerns of human existence than Hines's book. In fact, one could argue they have far less relevance for the dilemmas of modernity which students are likely to face.

Concluding Comment

Finally, it is interesting to compare the practical reforms suggested in *Boys Don't Try* with those in the Hargreaves book mentioned above. Whilst warning against romanticising working-class culture, and acknowledging the prevalence of sexism and racism, Hargreaves understands that the counter-culture and anti-school stance of youth culture may reflect 'an attempt to recover a sense of solidarity and community' (1982, p. 39). In this sense he regarded the mutual support and camaraderie of male peer groups as having at least some positive potential, although obviously he would not have condoned their aberrant behaviour. His book is an argument for a new community-centred curriculum where radical changes to the formal and hidden curriculum contribute to the realisation of education for all. One of the impediments to this development is the traditional curriculum and the exam system, to which he proposes

alternatives. Although one may disagree with certain aspects of his analysis, this is a truly radical book which seeks major reforms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

One would have thought the issues identified by Pinkett and Roberts would have prompted them to go down a similar path. An inclusive, community-centred curriculum is surely the answer to the problems they raise about masculine identity? But they are too focused on this single issue rather than the broader picture. Questions are not asked about the traditional grammar school curriculum and its role in reproducing the hierarchical structure in schools and poorly motivated male students. Although they are critical of the focus on grades for university entrance, they say nothing about the need to deconstruct the academic–vocational dualism, which is so harmful to equality. Their concern is that working-class male students should not lose out in the acquisition of cultural capital, but this assumes the existing social, cultural and economic relations of capitalism are an unalterable given. They are certainly aware of the ‘rigged’ nature of the exam system. As they point out, ‘exams are set up in a manner that is inherently competitive ... many summative assessment regimes are organised and administered to ensure that only certain percentages can achieve a desired “pass” mark’ (p. 11). But on this crucial issue the authors are happy to sit on the fence. ‘Some people think this is a good thing, others feel that the bell curve is unfair’ (p. 11).

The bell curve is certainly ‘unfair’ but it’s important to stress that it is a socially constructed phenomenon and not a fact of ‘nature’. The decision to distribute GCSE grades to fit this curve (or a slightly skewed version of it) is a political choice. Even if scores are manipulated to ensure a small year-on-year improvement, the proportions per grade remaining roughly consistent. Grade boundaries can be tweaked but the best-placed schools continue to work it to their advantage, while other schools may ‘improve’ but are still left ‘failing’ their students. The alternative to this norm-referenced form of assessment is a criterion-referenced one, where a different understanding and distribution of ‘ability’ is assumed. Adopting this latter form would not in itself undermine the selective aims and class reproductive outcomes of the current school system but it would be a step in the right direction.

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JOHN QUICKE is the author of numerous articles and several books on education and psychology, including *The Cautious Expert* (Open University Press), *Disability in Modern Children's Fiction* (Croom Helm), *Challenging Prejudice through Education* (Falmer Press), *A Curriculum for Life* (Open University Press), *Inclusion and Psychological Intervention in Schools* (Springer) and a memoir, *Grammar School Boy* (Matador/Troubador). He was Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Sheffield, and a local authority educational psychologist. He is currently a school governor at a community secondary school. *Correspondence:* johnquicke@gmail.com

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