indicates that dialogue between parents and educators is an important starting point for work on transforming pedagogies of schools. Nixon and Comber, also writing from Australia, describe how two teachers make films with their classes of young children, providing a much needed addition to the accounts of film production in schools which previously have centred on work in secondary schools. Film production allows the pupils to explore various narrative elements of play and literacy and draw on the cultural aspects of their experiences and learning. The description of classroom practice in Nixon and Comber's chapter is complemented by Merchant's chapter, which draws on data collected in a children's centre for two to four year olds. Merchant focuses on children's on-screen texts and describes the transformation that occurs when educators view children's engagement with computers as communicational practices, not just ICT lessons. These chapters add a unifying element to the book by touching on the themes explored in Parts 1 and 2.

The breadth of this book makes it a useful reader for many audiences. Researchers and academics in the areas of early childhood, literacy and media studies will find many of the studies useful and informative. Although the concepts in the book are drawn from other works (eg. Buckingham, 1993; Gee, 2003; Kress, 1997), the focus on empirical studies with young children is unique and a much needed addition to the field. The book offers students in these fields some excellent examples of research as well as clear theoretical underpinnings, and will certainly be useful as a course reader. Finally, for researchers and educators the book makes suggestions for further research, and Marsh provides a powerful Afterword, using Friere's theories to remind us of the importance of this kind of work in early childhood education.

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Boys and Schooling in the Early Years

Connolly, Paul. RoutledgeFalmer, London, 2004, 258 pp. ISBN 0–415–29840–7 (pbk) £18.99

For over a decade now, much consideration has been given to investigating the differences between boys' and girls' achievements at all stages of schooling,

particularly in relation to their performance in the literacy and language curriculum. It is also exactly ten years since I first studied gender differences in relation to literacy achievement and, in *Differently Literate* (Millard, 1997), suggested that the gap in boys' and girls' achievement was related to their perceptions of how reading in particular was related to identity. Since then, there have been numerous claims and counterclaims about the extent of the boy problem, with a plethora of explanations offered for what has been taken as a major contributory factor to the non-achievement of fixed government targets for literacy in England. In fact, though, there have been relatively few detailed analyses of the actual differences other than through an analysis of examination statistics.

Paul Connolly's book appears as a welcome and refreshing addition to the burgeoning literature on the subject – a debate which at its extremes has had a tendency to fall into two opposing camps. The first of these seeks to demonstrate that young male behaviour has been ever thus with 'the lads' cultivating for themselves habits of pleasurable indolence while still creaming off the best jobs. It further suggests that the current preoccupation with boys' performance is part of a backlash against feminism and ignores the fact that girls have worked hard for their current achievements. The second camp focuses on differences in boys' and girls' orientation to learning, suggesting that boys' preferences (frequently attributed to biological factors such as levels of testosterone or differences in brain size and structure) are being ignored within schooling systems that subtly favour girls. In *Boys and Schooling,* Connolly picks a way through the different explanations of boys' 'failings', challenging both oversimplifications and exaggerated claims about the assumed 'crisis'. He concludes that the persistent achievement gap between the genders is, indeed, real and is attributable to a combination of girls' consistent improvements and the nature of masculinity itself. Moreover, unlike the girls' gender issues, masculinity has never been subjected to critical analysis in schools by boys themselves, despite a growing supportive literature on the subject.

Having dealt with the exaggerations of the supposed crisis or a continued increase in the failure of boys' learning by reminding the reader that it is not all boys who are failing, nor for that matter all girls who are achieving their best, Connolly proceeds to suggest that what is required is a better understanding of the role that constructs of masculinity can be shown to play in the positioning of particular boys within the education system as a whole. He does this by a detailed ethnography of the schooling of two groups of primary age boys.

The specific focus for Connolly's research is the intercalation of class and gender in two contrasting school communities of Northern Ireland: the first in an affluent middle class area where parents are fully committed to the current systems of schooling; and the second in an impoverished working class area where parents have little understanding of what the system demands of either

themselves or their children. His work offers a model of well structured clearly reported research.

Of course, given the extent of the work that has gone before him, his data produce very little of any real surprise. Indeed, with Shakespeare's Horatio, we might exclaim that we need no ghost come fresh from the grave to tell us that boys are doing less well than girls, largely regardless of class and ethnicity. Nevertheless, given the confusion over interpretations of examination results, it is useful to have all the evidence weighed carefully and the statement made unconditionally.

What is original in this study is the detailed description of the way in which middle-class parental drive and early preparation of their children for schooling combine to create an ethos in which their young sons can be shown to avoid the pitfalls of hegemonic masculinity patterned out in the lives of their less fortunate working class peers. The latter are described as being like 'fish out of water' in the school environment and as a consequence set up for failure. As the blurb on the book cover claims, this is the first major study to focus specifically on young boys and achievement, as studies of masculinity have usually been fixed on the older, recalcitrant adolescent, where much of the damage has already been done and where there is much more resistance to change. In showing how it is not the biological fact of being male that prevents boys keeping up with their sisters but the ethos within which a male identity is formed and played out, Connolly is offering a way in which some of the pitfalls of male acculturation might be countered before the more difficult, and perhaps critical, secondary school years.

As with other similar studies, the work does not go much beyond describing the problem, with 200 pages devoted to analysis and only 25 to the implications for practice. However, the detailed evidence provided adds weight to arguments that call for teachers to familiarize themselves with the particular forms of masculinity which have been internalized by young boys and which press upon their academic achievement and for greater attention to be paid to the creation of effective parent partnerships. For, as Connolly affirms, it is pointless to describe the performance of some groups of young boys as underachievement when they are, because of their social circumstances, incapable at this period in time of doing any better. It is to be hoped that teachers will take up his suggestion for working with young boys in the 'Critical Gender Zone', working in school and with parents to challenge dominant forms of masculinity that limit engagement with learning.

An additional feature of Connolly's research and something you can access without purchasing the book is an extremely useful accompanying website (http://www.routledgefalmer.com/companion/0415298415/). This carries regularly updated information on research and links to a wide range of resources related to boys and achievement.

Reference

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