
Challenging Violence in Schools: An Issue of Masculinities

Martin Mills

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There seems to be an increasing gulf between the ways educational theorists have come to interpret gender and the way policy makers understand the categories of male and female within the practice of schooling. While educational theory heads off in a direction that encourages us to understand femininity and masculinity as socially constructed categories in which subjectivity is fluid and revisable, policy makers, it seems, continue to apply more essentialist notions of gender. This is starkly evident in the release of the report of the National Enquiry into the Education of Boys. Even a very superficial perusal of this Commonwealth report reveals its strong re-inscription of conventional (binary) gender wisdom. Where it matters, the report interprets differences in masculine and feminine performance as self-evident displays of discrete biological categories, within which gendered subjects are coded to think and act differently.

I expect that Martin Mills is disappointed with many aspects of the Commonwealth report on the education of boys. In his book *Challenging violence in schools*, Mills demands that masculinity be seen as both relational and unstable. Propelled by the values and aspirations of feminist scholarship Mills describes how masculinity is socially constructed and performed within the confines of discourse. Rejecting essentialising notions of gender, Mills' own diagnosis of the performance of boys in schools asserts a more reflexive account of gender subject positions in which males have the potential to reject practices that are regressive for themselves and others. While Mills concedes that boys are performing badly in schools, the root of their problem, he asserts, is that too many of them submit to narrow definitions of masculine identity that militate against them participating productively in the contemporary educational process.

Mills establishes direct couplings between masculinity and violence, then sets out to explore the implications of their coupling in the context of schooling. The important message that Mills conveys to readers is that violence is not just something that some (the minority of) males engage in to unjustly soil the reputation of other, non-violent, males. Rather, he describes the patriarchal advantage experienced by all males through the prevailing masculine hegemony. Through hegemonic masculinity, the attributes of 'strength, rationality and supremacy over those (constructed as) "inferior"' (p. 21) become normalised referents around which masculine performance is

produced and policed. Mills argues that, within Australia, these very characteristics are 'often linked to excessive displays of heterosexual activity (encapsulated in such notions as the "stud")' (p. 21). Rather than view young males as disadvantaged in the context of schooling, Mills asserts that their ongoing alignment with hegemonic masculinity is in fact a source of power and privilege. Drawing on empirical work conducted in two schools, Mills illustrates some of the ways schools support or neglect the (sub)cultural conditions that reinforce the current masculine hegemony. Mills argues that it is within the hyper-masculine subject positions that young males establish practices and rationalisations for naming and blaming 'others' and avoiding self-responsibility.

Importantly, Mills points out that the same hegemonic masculinity that is problematic in schools is dominant and privileged in wider society. He describes how hegemonic masculinity is not only signified by violence but that it is also a signifier of violence. To be sure, masculinity is signified by violence when acts of violence and domination are deemed legitimate as a means of defending this subject position. Mills maps the 'violencing of masculinity' onto the discursive masculine practices associated with sport, work and the suppression of 'others' to show that violence can also be used as a signifier of masculinity. Within these contexts, he argues, displays of domination and aggression are frequently enacted and celebrated in the pursuit of a hegemonic male subjectivity. However, while Mills describes the various ways that violence is 'normalised' within hegemonic masculinity, he does not believe that it is immutable.

A central theme of Mills' book is that things can be different (read better) for boys. As key sites of social transference, Mills argues, schools must play a pivotal role in challenging and redefining hegemonic masculinity. Part of this process demands that schools develop and project structures that support the uptake of counter-hegemonic gender performances. Complementing this is the need for schools to play a more deliberate and strategic role in problematising the concept of 'masculinity' through a range of curricula and pedagogic interventions. While it could be argued that his 'Principles for Action' are hyper-rational and fail to adequately address issues of traditionality and embodiment, they do provide some useful strategies for bringing issues of masculinity to the consciousness of school communities. Indeed, his strategies for change provide thoughtful approaches for challenging, 'masculinised performances that are grounded in misogynist and homophobic rhetoric' (p. 12). The ultimate success of educational interventions seeking to promote more pluralistic accounts of masculine performance must, according to Mills, be undertaken *with* boys and *not against* them.

I strongly recommend *Challenging violence in schools* to all those who have drawn themselves or have been drawn to the current interest in boys' education. Even

though the book makes very few direct connections between violence in schools and scholastic performance of boys, the general argument and theoretical and practical frameworks that Mills presents are important inclusions to any analysis of boys' education. For instance, having read the book, readers will inherently see the problematic nature of recommendations to increase the presence of male teachers in schools. While it appears that boys feel a greater sense of empathy discussing problems and issues with other males, it may be that male teachers are more likely to confirm the performances associated with hegemonic versions of masculinity. All that said, I think that the lacuna that exists between contemporary gender theory and policy is as much a problem for (pro)feminist scholars as it is for policy makers. The path to a more productive relationship between the two is clearly through dialogue.

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