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Spaces for Difference: An Interdisciplinary Journal

Title

Book Review: Boys' Bodies: Speaking the Unspoken edited by Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson

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Journal

Spaces for Difference: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 2(2)

Author

Walton, Gerald

Publication Date

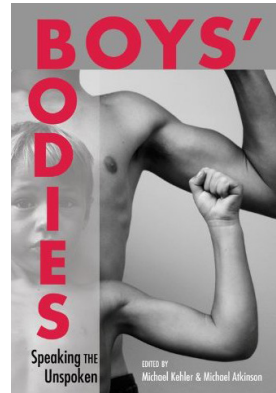
2011

Boys' Bodies: Speaking the Unspoken

eds. Michael Kehler and
Michael Atkinson

Peter Lang, New York (2010)
ISBN: 9781433106255 (233p)

Reviewed by: GERALD WALTON, PHD



In *Boys' bodies: Speaking the unspoken*, editors Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson point out in their preface that the relationship between masculinity, body expectations, behaviours, and health practices, and the drop in PE participation across several Western countries, has not enjoyed much spotlight in academic literature. *Boys' Bodies* addresses this gap and underscores an abundance of research on schools as key sites where boys learn codes of masculinity that serve as breeding grounds for homophobia.

As an anthology, *Boys' bodies* showcases a diverse range of topics and perspectives grouped within three themes: *Reviewing the intersections of obesity, body image, and masculinity*; *Enforcing masculinities*; and *Emerging/ contesting masculinities*. Peers, students, and researchers alike often view boys who are pushed to the sidelines as unhealthy, lazy, and lacking in dedication and character. Boys who acquire the label “fat” or “obese,” are especially at risk of being viewed in such a negative light. Gard investigates the so-called “obesity epidemic” and argues that schools need not bend to widespread pressure to be on the “front line on the ‘war on obesity’” (p. 16).

Ryan, Morrison, and Ó Beaglaoich explore boys’ “internalization” of male muscularity as presented in various forms of print and screen media. They point out that muscular images abound and are the standard by which other body types are measured against. Non-muscular images, the minority of boys’ body representation in media, are typically ridiculed and stigmatized and non-muscular boys tend to view their bodies negatively in light of the muscular standard. In addition, the authors problematize psychometric measures of internalization by maintaining that they are compromised in their ability to statistically and operationally assess the relationship between media influence and internalization.

Kirk gives a historical overview of PE across decades in Britain through which he illustrates a pecking order of boys that is especially salient in PE. He argues that while masculinity has always included a dominant form against which inferior

forms are measured, this limited interpretation is inadequate to describe historical shifts and social meanings of “masculinity” throughout the twentieth century. He contends that PE contributes to gender construction and embodied masculinity in ways that are not limited to the “dominant competitive, aggressive, not-too-bright” individual (p. 66).

Feminist-informed pedagogy in PE is the focus of Light and Kentel’s contribution. “Non-genderist pedagogy,” they claim, forms a basis from which the complexities of gender identities can be reconsidered. However, they also acknowledge the uphill battle in weaving such pedagogy throughout sports such as rugby considering that elite level commercial interests heavily influence learning about the intersecting discourses of sports and gender.

In research from Australia, Lee addresses the different concepts of health, fitness, and masculinity that tend to be held by upper-class boys and men apart from that of working-class boys and men. Whereas the former tend to be socialized into management and leadership positions and view balance and moderation as values for academic, social, physical, and mental health, the latter are more likely to value more explicit embodiments of masculine power “in order to express power over others within a context of perceived powerlessness” (p. 216). Lee uses her findings to “critique the relevance and impact of top-down, one-size-fits-all health promotion messages” (p. 218).

These chapters collectively advocate for a more nuanced recognition of who is served by PE as it is widely practiced in Western nations today. Differences among boys on how they view and practice masculinity (or not) and how they navigate the often-hostile terrain within school gyms and locker rooms need to be highlighted in teacher education programs and beyond. This book has tremendous academic value and the implications for policy practice are significant. In their chapter contribution, for instance, Atkinson and Kehler advocate education policy to address the ravages of dominant masculinity on most boys. As I can attest based on my PE experiences in the late 70s, such ravages are nothing new and I am certainly not alone in that regard. My experience also brings the supposedly recent PE attrition rates, discussed in the Atkinson and Kehler chapter, into question; my refusal to take PE in grades 10 and 11, mandatory in the late 70s and early 80s, indicates that attrition existed even when social scientists were not looking at it. Nevertheless, the book signifies that investigation of the issue of boys’ bodies is timely, socially significant, and rich with possibility for indicating how PE classes can and need to become safer learning spaces for all boys despite class, race, gender, ability, and sexuality differences. This book does, however, leave one to wonder about the plausibility of such a vision given the social capital that heterosexual hegemonic masculinity continues to have in society.

I also wonder about the title of the volume and its meaning. To suggest that the topic of boys’ bodies is “unspoken” is, I would argue, somewhat inflated. Various researchers (such as Pascoe, 2007 and Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) and filmmakers (such as Sut Jhally who directed *Tough guise: Violence, media and the*

crisis in masculinity, 1999 and Richard Gaudio and Douglas C. Taplin who directed *Shredded*, 2005) have spoken about boys' body image, dominant masculinity, and the role of media long before *Boys' bodies* was published. Also, the arguments presented in the book may be cutting edge in a research context; however, I doubt that they are cutting edge to boys who have, for decades if not longer, been marginalized and maligned as a consequence of the ways that competitive and aggressive masculinity are celebrated and extolled by many physical education educators, among others.

What I am suggesting here is not so much a criticism of the book but rather a query about whose knowledge counts most, and when. Undoubtedly, marginalized boys know what these authors know. They may not have the particular language ("hegemonic masculinity," "masculinity vortex," "embodied masculinity") or the audience (or more likely, any audience), but I doubt that *Boys' bodies* offers much that would come as a surprise to many boys who are shoved to the side-lines of PE and bullied for their failure, in the eyes of many teachers and peers, to live up to the standards of masculine aggressiveness and muscularity. While it is true that many boys will blame themselves for not measuring up, they may *also* (not *instead of*) act in resistance to hegemonic expectations in ways described by McCaughtry and Tischler: "pretending to tie shoes, taking longer than needed to retrieve equipment, faking illness or injury, . . . [and] deliberately forgetting PE clothes" (p. 190).

Kehler and Atkinson have done an excellent job at bringing several issues to light for an academic audience. Another crucial step would be to challenge PE teachers with the idea that athletically talented students are often valorized in PE at the expense of many of their classmates. As a survivor of physical education (PE) programs in my youth that had long-lasting malignant effects into my adulthood, I could very much relate to the authors' descriptions of how some boys are alienated from PE class by peers and PE teachers alike because they do not fit the image or demonstrate the athletic skill of athletically gifted boys. It was all too familiar to me to read that the environment in many PE classes engenders a "culture of cruelty" that facilitates widespread bullying (Messerschmidt) and that boys low on the athletic pecking order enact various forms of resistance despite their palpable anxiety and fear of PE class (McCaughtry and Tischler). As I read *Boys' bodies: Speaking the unspoken*, I felt validated and vindicated. One of the key messages of the book highlights the outcomes of boys' poor body image and attrition from PE as primarily the products of harmful and callous environments that tend to pervade PE. For this reason alone, the book is a valuable resource.

