



Pinkett, M., & Roberts, M. (2019). *Boys don't try? Rethinking masculinity in schools*. Routledge.

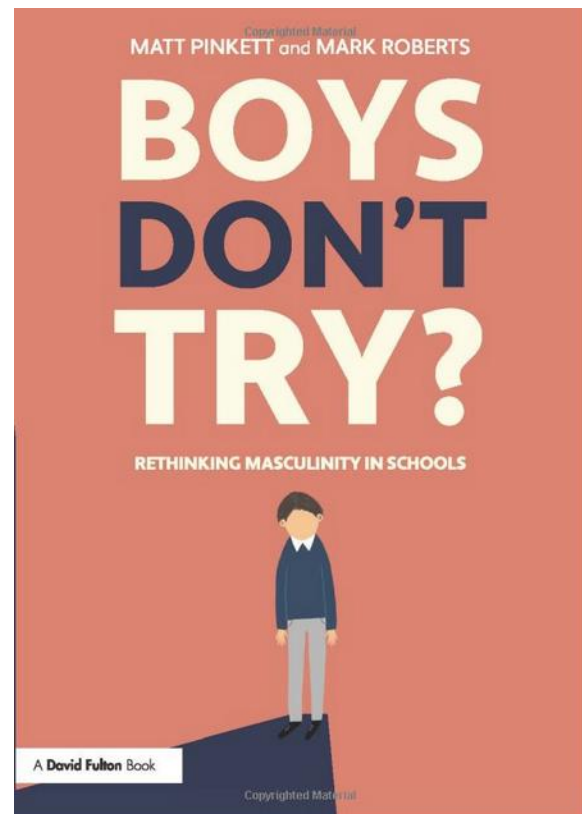
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For her most recent book, *Boys and Sex*, award-winning journalist Peggy Orenstein spent two years speaking with hundreds of boys about their indoctrination into toxically masculine ways of being. Orenstein's findings are troubling in some ways. For example, when asked to describe the attributes of "the ideal guy," those same boys appeared to be harking back to 1955. Dominance. Aggression. Rugged good looks (with an emphasis on height). Sexual prowess. Stoicism. Athleticism. Wealth (at least some day). Yet, like many in the education field, Orenstein (2019) hopes that understanding might catalyze substantial change in how we educate boys:

Now it's time to rethink assumptions about how we raise boys. That will require models of manhood that are neither ashamed nor regressive, and that emphasize emotional flexibility—a hallmark of mental health. Stoicism is valuable sometimes, as is free expression; toughness and tenderness can coexist in one human. In the right context, physical aggression is fun, satisfying, even thrilling. If your response to all of this is *Obviously*, I'd say: Sure, but it's a mistake to



underestimate the strength and durability of the cultural machinery at work on adolescent boys. Real change will require a sustained, collective effort on the part of fathers, mothers, teachers, coaches. (para. 60)

Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools by Matt Pinkett and Mark Roberts is a road map for bringing about this type of change. The book is a valuable tool for school leaders and teachers at all levels. It offers practical steps called for by Orenstein to help thwart the salient, dangerous masculinities that underlie the harrowing fact that boys are three times more likely than women to be victims of suicide (p. 2). If those compelled by this vexing statistic agree that harmful masculinities often thrive in school settings, then Pinkett's and Robert's research-based suggestions are a welcome addition to the toolkits of educators aiming to eradicate injurious masculinities.

The authors, both white men with plenty of experience in hyper-masculinized spaces, maintain that reasons for the disconcerting statistic are complex. Their primary objective is to embolden teachers with the know-how to combat harmful masculinity in education spaces. Toward that aim, the authors foreground a non-tender-masculinity/tender masculinity binary. According to the authors, we can and should teach the latter.

Veteran teachers hoping to keep abreast of recent scholarship and new teachers unfamiliar with inclusive approaches to education will benefit from the grounded, pragmatic approaches in the text. For educators desiring to cultivate safe spaces or wondering how best to counter harmful masculine stereotypes in traditional education settings, this book has good suggestions.

The authors make clear in the introduction that each chapter is meant to address a broad

topic: getting boys to engage; peer pressure; mental health; sexism; violence; relationships; best practices. Within each chapter, one of the authors details a relevant personal experience. Those anecdotes are then paired with research-based suggestions for how to mitigate the negative consequences of policies and decisions highlighted in the author's stories.

Pinkett – a teacher – and Roberts – a principal – alternate as the primary author of each chapter. This means that Pinkett's chapters often include things like lesson plans alongside general suggestions for the classroom. Roberts's chapters focus on the realm of policy by aiming for ways to create a healthy school culture. By offering an administrator's perspective alongside a teacher's perspective, the book paints a powerful picture of how masculinity operates. Notably, because the authors are British, the book is highly attuned to the British model of education. Regardless, any reader teaching in a Western context will find plenty of common ground.

Because the term "tender masculinity" can feel mercurial and difficult to pin down, the book is most useful when harrowing stories are paired with salient research. For example, the chapters on pornography, sexism, and performativity stand out because the stories are sobering while the research cited is unequivocal. What is illuminated is more than compelling, it is prescient and urgent. Educators wishing to show boys how to "be better" will benefit most from these chapters.

"Miss, I'd love to f**k you!" "Do you know how to deep-throat?" Pinkett begins the chapter on sexual violence by asking teachers to share instances in which they have been the victims of sexual harassment. Their answers are disturbing. Any reader believing that non-tender masculinity is not an urgent issue has that belief undercut immediately by the stories that teachers tell. Pinkett makes clear that the

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boys performing harmful masculinity at a young age are more likely to engage in sexual violence at an older age. He goes on to suggest that conversation has been proven highly effective for ushering students into less harmful spaces.

Because discussing pornography and rape culture with adolescents can be awkward and trying, the author's suggestions for how to broach the topic are straightforward. The lessons and ideas for entering conversation with students do not require advanced degrees in psychology or sociology. Any teacher, experienced or inexperienced in this space, will find the suggestions useful and applicable.

Notably, it is also in this section on sexism and pornography that Pinkett incorporates the importance of teaching gender as a social construct. While some readers might critique generalizations about gender throughout the book, the brief section on "Educating Students About Gender" rightly acknowledges that, "One way that schools might achieve this [constructive responses to sexual harassment] is by encouraging boys and girls to discuss the socially-constructed gender expectations that govern people's sexual attitudes and behaviours" (p. 114). By uplifting nuance, even in this brief treatment, the authors substantiate claims that more genuine conversations are necessary and possible.

How conversation and socialization interact seemingly interests the authors the most. That educators might perpetuate harmful masculinities because of ignorance is a truism that anchors the book. That educators can and should gain knowledge of how to disrupt the damage being done is a belief that Pinkett and Roberts address from multiple angles. Socialization – how it happens and how it can be improved – is of the utmost importance for Roberts and Pinkett. In Chapter 7, for example, Roberts makes clear a few key points:

The socialization of children to accept stereotypical gender norms begins early, with the use of toys, costumes, and discussions of feelings. It would be reassuring to think then that when it comes to the serious business of early years education – such as learning how to read – young children are exposed to texts that avoid such stereotypes. Sadly, this is far from the case. (p. 121)

Here, the authors are venturing beyond lesson plans and school policies. They intend to underscore that the problems observed in classrooms are the result of systemic problems. And these systemic problems are often the result of decisions made by powerful institutions. For instance, Roberts points out that Macmillan, a massive publishing corporation, has even admitted to exploiting gender stereotypes to sell textbooks (p. 122).

On the heels of these revelations, as if to predict a reader's skepticism, Roberts turns to a tiresome refrain in education: Given all these gender problems, "Do boys need male teachers? Would single sex classrooms make a difference?" (p. 126). Through anecdote the authors make clear that such questions are emblematic of unproblematized conceptualizations of masculinity, are actually sexist and reify toxic cultures, and most importantly, fail to realize that effective teaching can occur regardless of gender dynamics. Here and throughout the book, the advice and suggestions strike the reader as manageable and are meant to be straightforward: be thoughtful about seating plans; maintain high expectations for all students; effective teachers should be made available to all levels.

Yet, while the book effectively addresses the topics the authors have chosen, some readers might notice that a number of other topics are

not addressed. For example, the authors do not cover:

- how schools could or should better nurture trans students;
- the difficulties of teaching sexuality in less-progressive spaces;
- how sexuality is learned outside the classroom;
- alternative understandings of human development and sexuality;
- how intersectionality might generate additional subjectivities;
- multiculturalism and gender; especially as masculinity pertains to immigrant populations;
- socioeconomics and privilege in the context of gender dynamics.

Since power and privilege are of great concern in conversations on sexuality, the text would benefit from more comprehensive

unpacking of the political nature of gender and sexuality. The authors make clear, however, that their focus is how best to reach the working-class male pupil. The book is for the encumbered student lacking the language to talk themselves back from the ledge. In this way, Pinkett and Roberts stay true to their mission even while bypassing opportunities for more nuanced acknowledgement that sexuality and gender operate in complex ways.

In the end, if one agrees that educators have a significant role to play in liberating boys that are trapped by non-tender masculinity, then Pinkett's and Roberts's book is a useful starting point. Students of the teacher who implements their demythologized, research-based advice will benefit most. And benefiting students in these ways might just translate into saving lives.

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About the Reviewer


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