

Introduction

Schools, Masculinity and Boyness in the War Against Boys

Chris Haywood, Máirtín Mac an Ghaill and Jonathan A. Allan



The re-publication of Christine Hoff Sommers's book on the *War Against Boys* (2000, 2013) continues to feed into a widely circulating premise that feminist inspired pedagogical strategies are having a detrimental effect on boys' experience of education. It resonates with a UK newspaper article whose author asked: "Why do women teachers like me treat being a boy as an illness?" (Child 2010). In the late 1990s, Sara Delamont had already highlighted how the media targeted feminists for the failure of boys, where "school and classroom regimes ... favour females and feminine values; a lack of academic/scholarly male role models for boys, a bias in favour of feminism in curricula, a lack of toughness in discipline, and a rejection of competition in academic or sporting matters" (1999: 14). Such media-led commentaries point to the feminization of the curriculum, the restless nature of boys, boys' pre-disposition to kinaesthetic learning, and the lack of male role models. One of the central concerns of Hoff Sommers's work is that schooling is disrupting the natural development of boys. Of particular concern in this account is that feminist-inspired teaching that seeks to ensure gender equality is resulting in the increasing alienation of boys in schools. She argues that the consequences of attempting to improve girls' experience of schooling has resulted in boys' low self-esteem, depression, and under-achievement. Rather than creating a learning environment in which boys and girls can thrive, the pursuit of social justice requires boys to suppress their natural masculinity. The series of articles in this section provide a number of conceptual and empirical contributions to the study of boyhood that, in turn, could be used to reflect critically on the epistemological, theoretical, and political assumptions that underpin such an approach. As a way of intro-



ducing the articles, this introduction engages with the main title of Hoff Sommers's 2000 book, *The War Against Boys*, and sketches out how contributors to this Special Section may contribute to the debate.

What is most striking in Hoff Sommers's account is that the boys' experience in education is framed as a war against boys. So, although she claims that schooling policies are a result of ill-informed educationalists who carry out biased research, the key dynamic for this war against boys is feminist activism. The use of the metaphor of war in this context functions in a number of ways. First, it positions Hoff Sommers as one who is trying to protect boys' well-being. War, among other things, is an activity that is seen, most often, as being vicious, damaging, and indiscriminate. However, the use of the war metaphor takes place through a connection with the term boys. In the context of medicine, Slobod and Fuks (2012: 144) point out that using the term war locates the body as a battlefield in which patients "become bystanders to their own care." A similar process can be seen when the term war is referred to as being against boys. This (adult) war is something that boys are unable to control or stop and, in this account, boys are the victims. Boys are positioned as passive and objectified through the feminization of schooling. However, Galman and Malozzi's contribution to this section questions the viability of the assumption that boys can be simplistically feminized. Rather, they highlight the enduring nature of (hegemonic) masculine tropes that are drawn upon and used by boys and girls in early childhood. They provide a nuanced ethnographic account that helps to frame the complexity of the lived experience of gender relations within preschool learning environments. In so doing, they question the assumption of boys' passivity.

At the same time, the assumption of boys' passivity dovetails with contemporary Global North versions of childhood that ultimately conceive of boyhood as lacking agency, strength, and capacity. The use of the metaphor of war in relation to notions of childhood also suggests a sense of urgency and immediacy (Titus 2004). As Janssen points out, "the child is always already seduced into a symbolic and social order, and it obviously "cannot consent" to any aspect of its being thus implicated" (2011: 160). In this sense, not only is there a war being waged against boys, their symbolic and social location means that they are unable to defend themselves. Thus the connection of war in this context is a powerful call to action. Furthermore, the current social and symbolic order and its ascription of a boyness that is vulnerable, defenceless, and helpless means that "[t]hose invoking the war metaphor position themselves as resolute protectors of the community"

(O'Brien 2009: 38). In *The War Against Boys*, Hoff Sommers appears to take up an offensive position by highlighting how feminist work on social justice in education is not only uninformed and poorly carried out, but, crucially, it is politically motivated to the detriment of boys' well-being. In response to this war, Hoff Sommers argues, we need to think about ensuring that learning will appeal to the boys' masculine nature. Tarrant et al. (this issue) identify a number of educational interventions in the UK, the USA, and Australia that have attempted to re-masculinize the curriculum by introducing more male teachers. They argue that this is based on an assumption that by providing these role models boys will grow up to be properly socialized men. This argument, as Tarrant et al. point out, is based on socialization and sex role theories. Such theories, they argue, are underpinned by "essentialised conceptions of identity" that insist on a coherence between "categories of sex, gender, and sexuality." More specifically, we need to recognise "that gender and masculinities are dynamic, relational and produced in diverse social contexts." Therefore, whereas those advocating the use of role models draw upon a norm of boyhood that is static and fixed, Tarrant et al. suggest that research on boys and masculinity needs to reflect on how boys actively negotiate their gender identities.

One of the consequences of boyness being embedded in the social and symbolic order is that boys' social and cultural value becomes naturalized. The effect of this, and implicitly embedded within the war/boys juxtaposition is that war is a contrived artificial activity, whereas boyness is deemed to be something natural and unavoidable. Therefore, it is an attack on the natural gender order that Hoff Sommers finds particularly disturbing. Using a wide range of scientific studies to highlight the natural state of boys' masculinity, physiological and psychological evidence is presented that supports the claim that boys are naturally pre-disposed to boyish behaviours. More recently, in a YouTube video, Hoff Sommers states that "Boys need to work off their energy. They need to be free to play the games that they enjoy. As our schools become more feeling centred, more competition free, more sedentary, they move further away from the needs of boys" (2015: 4.42m). Thus, Hoff Sommers argues that while girls' behaviours are valued by teachers, boys' natural dispositions are devalued. Rather than chastise boys for their energetic behaviours, Hoff Sommers suggests that we should be encouraging them and supporting them.

In Jonathan A. Allan's article (this issue) implicit understandings about boyness are questioned. In the context of boys' suicide, Allan not only questions the universalization of the category of boy, but also the way in which

by framing social relations through the category, a collective notion or a “coercive universalization” of boys is deployed. He suggests that “[t]he logic is one that draws on the particular to establish a hard and fast rule, an Essential Truth, that explains the situation for all boys, or at least, many boys.” A consequence of this, as Allan points out, is that there is a simplistic, decontextualized understanding of boy that erases difference. Allan suggests that it is imperative to unpack the processes that underpin the erasure of heterogeneity.

Finally, it is important to consider the connective term, *against*, in Hoff Sommers’s title. Crucially, as indicated above, she suggests that it is feminist activism that it is to blame for the current malaise that boys are experiencing. Importantly, the relationship between feminist interventions and boys’ education is represented as antagonistic. The term *against* operates to position feminist activity as contradicting the pre-given nature of boys, and disregarding what is inevitably natural. The force of the term means that such action is morally wrong. It could also be argued that the concept of *against* positions the discussion of boys’ education in terms of nationhood and the war against boys as being about ensuring the well-being of future generations and that of the nation. Again, Hoff Sommers points out, “If boys are in trouble, so are we all” (2015: 5.18m). The result is that by her protecting boys, Hoff Sommers implicitly claims that she is also protecting the nation. Boys operate within a particular space in the cultural imaginary since they are deemed to be epithets of the nation’s future and, therefore, the focus on girls’ education, at the expense of that of boys, is an attack not simply on boys, but on the future of the nation. In Hoff Sommers’s work, boys are a homogenous group with boyness superseding issues such as race/ethnicity, socio-economic class, and age. In short, such categories are elided. In many ways there is an appeal to a standard normalised definition of boyness that is white, middle-class, and heterosexual (for example, see Riggs 2008).

Interestingly, Hoff Sommers tends to name all males in compulsory schooling as *boys*. However, if we begin to collapse the category of boy, and de-centre the primacy of gender as the organizing category, then the underpinning processes of difference within educational contexts become more complex. In short, if the category of boy becomes dis-aggregated from other forms of discrimination, feminization as the dynamic of boys’ underachievement becomes fractured. In *The War against Boys* (2000) there are only two index entries on single pages for African American boys. This is interesting given the number of media reports on black boys and academic success. For instance, Sternod’s (2011) review of US news discourses from 1997 to 2007

revealed that one of the most talked about issues was black boys' underachievement. Furthermore, the news reports do not cite feminization of schooling as the cause of failure; rather, underachievement is located within the family home. As a consequence, schools must work to replace the values that are not present in the home, namely those of a black male role model. As a result, teachers, especially black teachers, are often ascribed responsibility for mentoring young black men. In contrast, *The War Against Boys* (2000) underplays the importance of race/ethnicity and class by promoting a version of boyhood that is overly-gendered and unable to accommodate the range of intersections that take place across a multiplicity of social, cultural, and economic positions. Furthermore, the use of masculinity to describe boys' gender is intriguing. Is the masculinity that boys possess the same as the masculinity of grown adults? This is not simply an issue for Hoff Sommers's work but an issue for all those working in boys' studies; do we simply use masculinity to identify all male identities irrespective of age?

The importance of unpacking the title *The War Against Boys* and making connections to the articles in this section is that it enables us to see the underpinning dynamics of the argument being proposed by Hoff Sommers. The merit of her work is that it enables us to reflexively question the assumptions that underpin our understandings of what it means to be a boy. Furthermore, it also helps us to recognise the political nature of boyness and how the term can be semantically filled. Therefore, *The War Against Boys* inadvertently enables us to highlight how bodies can be framed with versions of boyness. More specifically, what it means to be a boy operates within the parameters of a dyadic model of gender, that is, masculinity and femininity. In other words, the process of highlighting the injustice that is being done to boys through feminist interventions in Hoff Sommers's work has the unintended effect of questioning what is actually meant by being a boy, the experience of boyness and the conceptual adequacy of the term *boy*.



CHRIS HAYWOOD is a Senior Lecturer in Communication and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University and has been writing in the field of men and masculinities for the past 20 years. He is a co-author of *Education and Masculinities* (with M. Mac an Ghail 2013) and is currently writing *Men, Masculinities and Contemporary Dating Practices* (Palgrave). He teaches modules at undergraduate and postgraduate level and is currently supervising PhD students from Thailand, China, Syria, UK, Brunei, Saudi Arabia, and Taiwan. Email: chris.haywood@newcastle.ac.uk

MÁIRTÍN MAC AN GHAILL is a Professor in Multi-Professional Education at Newman University, Birmingham. He has published widely in the field of men and masculinities. He is the author of *The Making of Men* (1994), co-author of *Men and Masculinities* (with C. Haywood 2003) and *Gender, Culture and Society* (with C. Haywood 2007); editor of *Understanding Masculinities* (1996); and co-editor of *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Gender and Education* (with M. Arnot 2006). He has successfully supervised several PhD students to completion from China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Arabia. Email: M.MacAnGhail@bham.ac.uk

JONATHAN A. ALLAN is the Canada Research Chair in Queer Theory, Gender and Women's Studies Program at Brandon University, Manitoba, Canada. His research involves developing scholarship in the field of queer theory, chiefly working at the intersection of affect theory and critical studies of men and masculinities. Email: AllanJ@brandonu.ca

References

- Child, Frances. 2010. "Why Do Women Teachers Like Me Treat Being a Boy As an Illness?" *Daily Mail*, 2 September.
- Delamont, Sara. 1999. "Gender and the Discourse of Derision." *Research Papers in Education* 14, no. 1: 3–21.
- Janssen, Diederik F. 2011. "Alcibiades the Schoolboy Redux, Or the Impossibility of Childhood Sexuality." *International Journal of Sexual Health* 23, no. 3: 158–160.
- O'Brien, Gerald V. 2009. "Metaphors and the Pejorative Framing of Marginalized Groups: Implications for Social Work Education." *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45, no. 1: 29–46.
- Riggs, Damien. 2008. "All the Boys Are Straight': Heteronormativity in Contemporary Books on Fathering and Raising Boys." *Thymos: Journal of Boyhood Studies* 2, no. 2: 186–202.
- Slobod, Douglas, and Abraham Fuks. 2012. "Military Metaphors and Friendly Fire." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 184, no. 1: 144.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. 2000. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. 2013. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies are Harming Our Young Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFpYj0E-yb4> (accessed 9 March 2015).

- Sternod, Brandon M. 2011. "Role Models or Normalizing Agents? A Genealogical Analysis of Popular Written News Media Discourse Regarding Male Teachers." *Curriculum Inquiry* 41: 267–292.
- Titus, Jordan J. (2004) "Boy Trouble: Rhetorical Framing of Boys Underachievement." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 225, no. 2, 145–169.