During the 1990s and 2000s, many countries witnessed new discourses on boys and education both within research and the wider popular discourse. This took place in the context of a feminist critique of patriarchal relations, a global monitoring of education, and an increased interest in the negative consequences of traditional masculinity, not only for women, queer people, or the nature and global resources, but also for boys and men themselves. Mainly, the discussions centred on three key topics. First, boys’ encountering, incorporating, and/or resisting cultural ideas of masculinity were being looked at with a strong focus on gender hierarchies and gender norms (Connell 2000; Kimmel 2008; Plummer 1999; Salisbury and Jackson 1996). Second, boys’ situations in educational institutions were discussed controversially with regard to disadvantages and/or privileges of boys in education (Epstein et al. 1998; Kenway et al. 1997; Martino et al. 2009). Third, the situations of particular groups of boys were explored, acknowledging the diversity of boys and the intersectionality of masculinity and gender with other social categories and hierarchies (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003; Nayak 2003).

Since then, the discourse on boys, masculinity, and education has become more diverse and nuanced, yet central issues remain either under debate or overlooked. While the debate on failing boys seems to have lost attention, research is increasingly being conducted on transformations of boyhood and configurations of masculinities toward possibly new forms such as caring or inclusive masculinities. Queer perspectives, postcolonial critique, and the analysis of global gender orders have also enabled a critical perspective on the hegemonic and heteronormative tendencies that are inscribed in ideas about gender, subject, and identity.
At the same time, the differentiations and shifts in academic discourse raise new questions. These relate, for example, to cultural diagnosis and its connections with pedagogical practices and institutions, for education as an essential mode of cultural reproduction and transformation is deeply interwoven with constructions of masculinity. Therefore, one could ask: How can the current situation of boys in educational practices and institutions be described properly? How do masculinities inform educational discourse and practice? And how does education inform masculinities? Does hegemonic masculinity (still) dominate in education, or is there a shift toward inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2009; Bridges and Pascoe 2014)?

In light of these questions, this issue addresses different educational institutions and educational practices such as elementary education, youth work, vocational education, and education in informal settings like peer-group, media, and leisure activities. The main focus, however, is on the school itself and the practices the boys who attend it. The biographical and social dominance of this institution is thus also evident in boys’ research. Overall, the contributions point to a broad range of transformative practices of masculinity. At the same time, they also show that male dominance still remains. R. W. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity continues to be an important theoretical reference point.

To the Contributions

In their article “Transforming Practices of Masculinity: A Model based on Qualitative Research on Boys’ Education,” Jürgen Budde and Thomas Viola Rieske present theoretical conclusions from a research network that focuses on boys in different educational institutions from early childhood education to young adult vocational education. Of particular relevance is the question of the transmission or transformation of hierarchical concepts of masculinity in and through educational practice. To this end, they elaborate a model that aims to recognize both the (re-)production and the critique and subversion of gender norms and gender inequalities in practices of and with boys. The article furthermore analyzes intersectional entanglements of institution, age, and gender. It proposes a differentiation between boys as a biographical category of identification and masculinity as a gendered social principle.

With the intention to improve healthy relationship programs through an intersectional approach, Caroline Claussen, Jordan Keough, Ceilidh
McConnell, Stefan Lewis, and Deinera Exner-Cortens present the findings of a study conducted with non-white ethnoculturally diverse boys on their lived experience at the intersection of masculinity, race and ethnicity, and adolescence. The results show that adolescent boys, and particularly non-white boys, experience specific challenges ensuing from stereotypes and dynamics of othering, negatively affecting their relationships to others as well as to themselves. With regard to healthy relationship programs, the authors conclude from their interviews that a recognition of ethnoculturally diverse boys’ experience of marginalization and of their plural identities at the intersections of multiple differences is vital to the programs’ success.

Diloshini Govender and Deevia Bhana analyze interaction practices among boys. The article “Navigating Masculinity: Peer Relations and Violence among Eight–Nine-Year-Old South African Schoolboys” shows the ambivalent self-positionings and ambiguity of masculinity practices. The authors argue that masculinity and masculine norms are context-dependent and contradictory. Drawing on a qualitative study, they show that boys reinforce and challenge hegemonic masculinity not only by using violence as a means for dominance but also by subverting it. The ability to subvert masculinity, however, was not separate from hegemonic ideals in which the feminine and women are subordinated. The authors also argue for an integration of postcolonial perspectives in theoretical approaches to masculinity research, which have so far been dominated by concepts from the Global North.

The article “What Does Masculinity Mean? Young People’s Perspectives on Masculinity in the Mirror of Education in Germany” by Johanna M. Pangritz takes up the discussion about failing boys and the supposed need for male role models in educational institutions. Using documentary analysis of interviews with adolescent pupils, the question of the transformation and transmission of hierarchical masculinity is also addressed. The study shows that the production of masculinity follows a binary understanding and that the demand for more men in pedagogy tends to reinforce this conclusion. It also points out that school can be an unsafe place for female students because of hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, the case studies show that education has the potential to transform masculinity.

The lack of male reference persons in educational institutions is also taken up by Niels Uh lendorf in his article “Discursive Constructions of Boys in the Field of School Social Work in German Elementary Schools.” The article is based on interviews with social workers at German primary schools, which were analyzed within the framework of the sociological
approach to discourses. The study shows three subject positionings: boys* were positioned as (1) caught up in aggression; (2) naturally deviating from school rules; or (3) sitting on the sidelines. Overall, it found that school social work primarily focused on norm deviations and transgressions, while a general orientation toward masculinity norms was rarely challenged. The article argues on the basis of the theory of subjectivation that gender categories are not fixed entities but rather generated and continuously transformed in dynamic processes. These gender categories can be exclusionary or disciplinary as well as supportive and caring.

Alex Blower and John Rainford address the situation of working-class boys’ access to higher education. They argue that ideas of masculinity hinder working-class boys from participating in higher education and use the concept of possible selves both as a research tool and as an educational tool. In contrast to an approach aimed at raising aspirations, a possible-selves approach looks at individuals’ palette of like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves and at the cultural and societal structures that enable and constrain individual choices. In workshops with male youth, they used creative methods to explore masculinities in the lives of working-class boys and to try on identities beyond the boundaries of their everyday lives. The authors argue that the methods used provided a safe space for the boys to interrogate their own conceptions of their lives and to discover—and possible reject—alternatives.

Chidi Ezegwu discusses boys’ disengagement from schools in Anambra State, Nigeria. Drawing on two studies with male and female participants who dropped out of school, he reconstructs a local dominant masculinity—man’s beauty (nma woke)—as a central concept that structures the lives of the interviewees. According to this concept, boys are expected to attain an ideal of masculinity that encompasses material wealth achieved through early participation in the labor market. While this concept ensures both boys’ future position as breadwinners and their participation in the economy, it also hinders their participation in education in Anambra. In order to achieve change, the pressures experienced by boys need to be acknowledged, Ezegwu argues, and addressed critically.

While the contributions to this issue present important insights, there are some gaps in the research on boys, masculinity, and education to be worked on in the future. One aspect that could be looked at more thoroughly concerns methodology. How can the relation of boys, masculinity, and education be researched empirically? Which methods and which methodologies are in use, and in what ways do they create and transform knowledge on boyhoods? Which ethical and participatory standards are re-
quired? Of course, the articles in this issue do comment on their methodologies—however, a thorough methodological discussion of research on boys, masculinity, and education is still missing.

It would also be interesting to get more research on how the relation between boys, masculinity, and education is shaped by economic, political, cultural, and ecological change. In what ways, for example, do authoritarian regimes (and diversity alliances), the ongoing destructive exploitation of our planet (and the rise of sustainable development), and the ongoing dominance of the Global North (and discourses in the Global South) shape the education of boys and men?

Lastly, the relevance and the breadth of educational institutions and contexts is not considered sufficiently in this issue. Playgrounds and preschool, digital interaction and social media, youth work and residential care—there are many contexts that need to be looked at with regard to the questions just posed and to many other questions for that matter.

We therefore hope that this issue inspires further research that will bring about new insights into and generate transformative knowledge about boyhoods and boys’ education.

References


