Review of Being Normal Is The Only Way To Be by Wayne Martino and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

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Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli offer a fine examination of how the social construction of gender within Australian high schools impacts the lives of boys and girls. Men’s Studies scholars will appreciate that the impetus for *Being Normal Is the Only Way to Be* was the cultural and political debate of the 1990s on whether or not Australian society was feminizing boys. Political “conservatives” in Australia, like their counterparts in the United States, argued that feminist agendas, particularly ones found in public schools, were creating a “crisis of masculinity” by stripping boys of their manhood. The authors, however, believed that the issue was much more complex and that young people’s views and experiences could shed light on the matter.

As a result, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli surveyed students (14-16 years of age) at six Australian schools that were attended almost exclusively by Anglo students—2 urban government schools, 1 rural government school, 1 Catholic co-ed school, and 2 single-sex schools, one for boys and one for girls. Students were “asked to write about what life at school as a boy or as a girl was like, to highlight what they enjoyed about school, and to describe any problems they experienced” (p. 14). The authors utilize feminist and cultural studies frames to thematically analyze the students’ perspectives, which they present in eight chapters (“Boys and School”; “Girls and School”; “Being A Boy”; “Being A Girl”; “Boys Harassing Girls in School”; “‘Bully Boys’ and Bitch Barbies”; “Developing Student Welfare Policies”; “Conclusion”). Throughout the book, the authors examine the following issues, paying particular attention to how they are interconnected in the lives of students:

* how hierarchies or pecking orders of masculinity and femininity impact the lives of both girls and boys at school
* how an exclusive focus on boys works to silence the very significant ways in which sexuality and gender continue to impact detrimentally on girls’ lives at schools
* how homophobia impacts upon young people’s peer group cultures and learning
* how students critically question schooling in terms of its practices of normalisation
* how many students are aware of and attempt to problematise the effects of gender and other influences in their lives at school. (p. 5)
Among other conclusions, the authors find that while students’ experiences varied depending on their gender, their socioeconomic status, and the type of educational institution they attended, all students had to contend with the prevailing notions of normalcy and the sex/gender regimes which stressed heteronormativity. Additionally, the authors find “sex- and gender-based dimensions of bullying and violence in schools which impact on both marginalised boys and girls,” that is, those students deemed uncool by the dominant boys who hold tremendous social power in their schools (p. 12). As a result of the social pressures they faced, most students responded readily by self-policing their own behavior, thus, perpetuating what the authors identify as a “panoptical gaze” among the students.

Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli make it clear that it is their intention to influence both education policy and pedagogical practices with their book. As a result, at the end of each chapter they include questions and prompts for teachers and school administrators—their intended audience—to use in professional development discussions. Their hope is that the discussions will lead teachers to reflect on the impact normalization and heteronormativity have on the students’ “emotional, educational and mental health and well-being at school” (pp. 9-10) and commit to improving their students’ lives at school.

While the findings presented in Being Normal will not surprise gender studies scholars, and though it does not address the experiences of non-Anglo students, the book makes a valuable contribution as one of the few studies that examines, compares, and contrasts, the social construction of gender at various types of educational institutions serving adolescents. For this reason, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli’s work may prove useful not only in professional development workshops for teachers and school administrators, but also in undergraduate courses on gender and education; students and scholars of gender and youth culture will also find the work useful. Between the students’ voices and the reflection material at the end of each chapter, undergrads will learn how gender, class, and culture intersect at schools and with the lives of adolescents, who “are not outside society and history” (p. 26).

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In Sperm Counts, Lisa Jean Moore explores the cultural significance of sperm. Targeted at general readers, this isn’t a book just about the biology of “man’s most precious fluid”; rather, for Moore, semen is imbued with intense social meanings involving birth, death, disease, virility, sex, violence, love, hatred, and genetic heritage. Beyond examining the stereotypical idealizations for men’s health, wealth, and prowess through a traditional feminist lens, this book makes a contribution to the study of gen-