
Book Review

Mark McCormack, *The Declining Significance of Homophobia: How Teenage Boys are Redefining Masculinity and Heterosexuality*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012; xxix+166 pp.: ISBN 13: 978 0199778249, £32.50 (hbk)

In his superb book, Mark McCormack examines a paradigm shift in attitudes among teenage boys toward homosexuality and in regard to their own sense of nascent masculinity and sexuality. In doing so, McCormack also has created a challenging and provocative scholarly paradigm shift in considerations for parents, teachers, policy makers and academics in regard to assumptions on the conditions for LGBT teenagers in British schools today. The book is a must-read, and certainly should be absorbed by scholars working in the fields of sexuality and gender, studies of teenagers and schools, LGBT political lobby groups (such as Stonewall) and educational policy makers in general. Stonewall argues vigorously that homophobia and homophobic bullying is endemic in schools in Britain. McCormack demonstrates convincingly that Stonewall, probably the world's most successful LGBT political lobbying group, is basing this claim on research that not only is considerably out of date, but that rests on flimsy methodological and empirical foundations. McCormack argues, quite rightly, that the tenor and emphasis of Stonewall's current campaigns damages its own credibility. Furthermore, the organization runs the risk of affecting the experiences of closeted school children, making it more difficult for them to come out at school, fearful of the supposed current 'epidemic' of bullying of teenagers like them, and hampering their attempts to assess the realities of the level of homophobia in their own school environment.

McCormack takes a qualitative approach in his research. The site of enquiry is 'Standard Town', located in the south of England. The ethnographic study examines 'Religious High', 'Standard High', and 'Fallback High', all in the same town. The age range of boys included in the research is 16–18 years old – in other words, male youth that have attained the age of consent for sex in the UK and have well-developed sense of agency and identity, though still at school. 'Standard Town' is not known as a metropolitan or liberal town and there is no particular reason to expect this town to be socially liberal. Indeed, it is the kind of town that traditionally one would have expected LGBT youth to move away from, and to the metropolis, in order to come out and be themselves. McCormack states that at the outset of his meticulous research, one of his anticipations was to find high levels of homophobia, in particular at 'Religious High' which might be expected to promote socially conservative values. The consistent finding in this research is that

heterosexual male students in all these settings are gay friendly – espousing pro-gay attitudes, being inclusive of gay students, condemning homophobia, having supportive friendships with gay peers. Furthermore, homophobic attitudes are condemned as a sign of immaturity. One of the striking features of this research is that attitudes among the teenagers in the study bear little relation to institutional policy on homophobia maintained by the schools in question. Boys at ‘Standard High’ criticize their school’s policies as being homophobic in tone, and anti-bullying policies in ‘Standard High’ and ‘Religious High’ do not reference sexual orientation. ‘Religious High’ is the only school in the sample that has learning materials for students on homosexuality. There are few correlations between attitudes among teachers and the opinions and outlook of male youth in the sixth forms in these schools. McCormack argues that social change has occurred among these youth as a result of how they engage in wider cultural discourses, rather than institutional norms. The study is very well contextualized, and comparatives are made between the UK and the contemporary ‘culture wars’, often inspired by fundamentalist religion, in the USA. Since this research was conducted, there have been further shifts toward inclusivity directed by the UK school inspectorate (OfSTED), that schools such as in ‘Standard Town’ will have to comply with by statute, though it seems as if the boys are way ahead of the policy makers.

Many scholars will find McCormack’s arguments startling, and no doubt this book will be received with a large degree of scepticism initially. Generalization from McCormack’s findings will be a serious issue for scholars to contend with, though the value of qualitative over quantitative research will remain at the centre of this particular debate. It is doubtful that McCormack’s findings will be replicated in Northern Ireland, for example, but until such research is conducted, this remains an assumption. McCormack does not claim that homophobia has disappeared from British schools and its male youth, but as the title indicates, its significance in these settings is declining. It’s a good news story, and one that needs to be taken account of by scholars, and in particular by Stonewall. The book reveals a new and inclusive masculinity, where antipathy toward homophobia affects the relationships and outlook of heterosexual male youth.

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