Introduction

They do try, of course.

Well, some of them do. Despite the national trend of boys' relative educational underachievement in comparison to girls, there are many boys who try very hard at school and achieve great success as a result of doing so.

However, it must be said that for every boy who tries to succeed, there is another boy who tries to fail. These boys try to avoid completing work. Sometimes, they try too hard to impress popular peers and forget about trying to impress their teachers. Occasionally, they try to hurt and humiliate each other; and try to belittle and demean girls or female teachers. Or they try to hide how they are feeling behind a mask of bravado. As this book will illustrate, when boys behave like this, they are actually trying to aspire to an outdated, but nonetheless widespread, idea about what it means to be a "real man".

A tale of two blogs

The genesis for this book began with a couple of blogs. In January 2016, Matt Pinkett wrote a blog post entitled *Balance for Boys*, arguing that

> …teachers across the country are so focused on addressing, combating, and undoing the deplorable wrongs inflicted on women in society, media, and literature for centuries, that they're inadvertently alienating the boys.

A few months later, Mark Roberts knocked out a blog called *Boys' Engagement in the Classroom*, containing wisdom such as:

- Boys love competition (group vs group, homework league tables, etc.)

- Is there an alpha male in the group? Win them over and the others will probably follow

- Sometimes the timetable is against you. Try negotiating rewards for hard work e.g. P5 Friday 45 minutes of solid focus = 15 minutes of more relaxed learning.

We wince as we read these now.

One blog saw it fit to blame feminism for boys' academic underperformance; the other spouted stereotypical mumbo jumbo and encouraged lower expectations for boys.

Gradually, we've had to rethink some of our beliefs about masculinity. Especially the ones we articulated so clumsily in our respective blogs. The truth, as we realise now, after two years of discussion, rethinking and readjustment is that boys' relative lack of academic success is nothing to do with feminism at all, or a lack of engaging ploys to grab boys' attention, but a wide range of complex contributory factors. This book will examine these factors in the nuanced way that the subject requires. Throughout, we will invite you to rethink masculinity in schools, as we did.

The problem with boys

Boys underperform at all key stages of primary and secondary education compared to girls. Boys are more likely to be excluded from school. Boys are less likely to go to university; boys are less likely to become apprentices; boys are less likely to find paid work between the ages of 22 and 29. And when these boys become young men, they are three times more likely than women to be victims of suicide. They also belong to the gender that makes up 96% of the UK prison population.

These are startling statistics, especially given that there are no significant differences in male and female cognition. And yet, as we shall discover throughout the book, teachers largely see girls as obedient and hard-working, but view boys as disruptive and uninterested in their education.

The fallacy of boys' engagement

Training courses for teachers, aimed at raising boys' attainment in boys have proliferated, peddling the fallacy that there are specific techniques that can be employed to engage boys, reinforcing ideas about gender difference, and playing on fears of "the boy problem". This book will show that boys are just as capable of academic success as girls, whilst also highlighting key areas of pastoral care that need to be acknowledged by schools in order to combat the side effects of a brand of masculinity that leaves many boys floundering.

What about the girls?

We are limping – too slowly, but limping nevertheless – towards female equity in areas like education, careers, and the right to go through a life without being sexually abused or harassed. Some will rightly question the need to address the boy "crisis" when in fact it is women who are more likely (despite the grim statistics about boys cited above) to be illiterate, poor, and victims of sexual abuse.

However, it's our belief that in tackling the serious issues faced by boys in education, teachers can go some way to tackling the serious issues faced by girls, both in schools and out in what adults persist in calling "the big bad world". We should avoid futile and meaningless boys vs girls narratives and recognise that when boys struggle educationally, it also has a direct, adverse effect on girls. *Boys Don't Try?* hopes to offer useful advice that will help boys but also help girls as well.

Tender masculinity

So, what do we want for our boys? Do we want our boys to talk about their feelings, even if those feelings are anger and frustration? Do we want our boys to be chivalrous, even when chivalry is tied to the belief that women are damsels-in-distress? Do we want our boys to be vulnerable, even when vulnerability can expose them to pain? These are complicated questions, but there is a simple answer to the question, "What do we want for our boys?"

That answer is: tender masculinity.

In a blog post entitled *In Praise of Tender Masculinity, the New Non-Toxic Way to Be a Man*, Terra Loire explains that tender masculinity is a "necessary antidote to our media portrayals of men" as macho tough guys with all the emotional depth of a vacuum floating in outer space. Loire suggests that if you ask the following questions of a man, and can answer in the affirmative, then he embodies tender masculinity:

- Is he invested in all of his relationships, not just romantic ones?

- Does he express his emotions in a healthy way?

- Is self-awareness a concept he's comfortable with?

- Does he commit to personal growth?

- Are boundaries something he is aware of and respects?

- Is he unafraid of male intimacy – for instance, can he express affection for male friends without making a gay joke?[1]

The ultimate aim of this book is to produce boys who turn into men, of whom we can proudly say "yes" in answer to these questions.

What about toxic masculinity?

"Toxic masculinity" has become a popular term of late. When we first heard it, it struck us as a timely phrase for a dominant strain of masculinity that defines being a man through the qualities of toughness, emotional coldness, aggression, predatory heterosexuality, and unblinking homophobia. The metaphor seemed particularly apt, summing up the way that traditional ideas about manhood have destructive

consequences for boys. We liked how "toxic" hinted at the pernicious effects of these beliefs, gradually poisoning the victim, unnoticed until it is too late.

But now we've changed our minds.

Now we think, like its subject, the term does more harm than good. Males have enough on their plates – the ones they are constantly spinning in an effort to meet the demands of being a "real" man – without being seen as some sort of disease, contaminating those who they come into contact with.

Non-tender masculinity

So what term, to refer to negative aspects of masculinity, might we use instead? Let's remove the appealing but exacerbating metaphor of toxic masculinity and label this condition differently. Let's use a term that addresses the issues faced by modern males without heaping further opprobrium upon their shoulders: **non-tender masculinity**.

This is preferable to toxic masculinity because its very usage directs us towards a more desirable alternative: the tender masculinity we should desire for all our male pupils. It doesn't imply that masculinity is an infection; the last thing we want is boys seeing themselves as noxious contagions of little positive worth. We'd like it if every reader of this book could use the term non-tender masculinity, rather than toxic masculinity, to reduce the stigma that being male carries in some circles, without shying away from the unkind nature of certain male behaviours and attitudes.

Stories, research, and solutions

Each chapter of *Boys Don't Try?* features an easy-to-navigate three part structure: the story, the research, the solutions.

When we first discussed the idea of writing a book about boys and schools, we knew that it would involve our own experiences of education, as pupils and teachers. We also realised that our lives outside of school offered rich insight into the masculine condition. It's easy to look down upon anecdotal evidence, with its subjective limitations, but we feel it helps to frame the subsequent debates that rely on the use of research evidence. We make no apology for telling stories about the experiences of boys in education. The anecdotes we use may provide only insights; yet without these insights, we think the solutions to the problems we discuss would be harder to pinpoint.

At the same time, we acknowledge that narratives about masculinity and education can only act as a launch pad for further investigation of the complex issues we cover. By engaging with a great deal of high quality research, we provide a solid foundation that can help leaders and teachers move away from the popular but highly damaging "commonsense" approaches to solving "the boy problem" in our schools. These "intuitive" answers to engaging boys miss the point and make

things worse. Our argument is based on a body of evidence that gets to grips with topics such as anxiety and achievement, behaviour and bullying, schoolwork and self-esteem.

A summary of the book's content

In Chapter 1, you'll discover why some of the most common myths about teaching boys are not only wrong but actively damaging. You'll see the problems caused by using specific techniques to "engage" boys, which imply, erroneously, that boys are somehow different from their more successful female peers.

The experience of disadvantaged pupils in the education system is addressed in Chapter 2, helping you understand why disadvantaged boys perform so badly compared to their more privileged peers. You'll find out how decisions made by schools – such as the groups pupils are taught in – worsen rather than alleviate disadvantage gaps.

In Chapter 3, you'll learn about the effects of peer pressure on adolescents, and how the influence of peers can have a particularly profound and destructive impact on boys. This chapter will look at ways that schools and teachers can attempt to tackle the issue of teaching boys who would rather gain acceptance than achieve good results in school.

Chapter 4 focuses on boys' mental health, with a specific focus on suicide, anger, and self-harm. In this chapter, you'll be offered practical, useable advice on how you can encourage boys to talk about their feelings, and what you can do when they just won't. You'll see how a proactive approach is required in order to ensure the mental well-being of the boys in your school.

Reading Chapter 5 will provide you with a new insight into how teacher's expectations of boys and girls have a significant effect on their attitudes, self-belief, and outcomes. You'll also gain a greater understanding of how gender stereotypes negatively influence the way we deal with boys' behaviour in class.

By lifting the lid on boys' often disturbing attitudes towards sex and females, Chapter 6 explores the impact of pornography on young boys. You'll also see how sex and gender education are important factors in breaking down the foundations of misogyny found in schools across the UK.

Chapter 7 will take you into the classroom, addressing the way that the resources we use in lessons shape our ideas about gender roles. This section will also provide answers to two key questions regularly thrown up during debates about boys and underachievement: *do boys need to be taught by male teachers?* and *would boys do better in single-sex environments?*

From Chapter 8, you'll gain a more nuanced appreciation of why males are more likely to commit acts of violence, using the essentialist vs socialisation debate as a backdrop. You'll see what can go wrong when schools deal badly with incidents of aggression and be given a detailed explanation of violence-intervention programmes that can reduce physical displays of aggression in your school.

The first part of Chapter 9 looks at the often damaging nature of boys' relationships with each other, providing you with a detailed understanding of the blurred lines between banter and bullying. It also addresses the thorny issue of what happens when "banter" between staff goes wrong. The second half of the chapter looks at how you can develop positive relationships with boys in lessons, giving hands-on advice about how to ensure a warm, calm and insistent presence.

In Chapter 10, we introduce other voices from the world of education, giving you insight into areas beyond our experience. Stories about boys and boyhood shared by people whose experience of masculinity in schools goes beyond our own, will enable you to build up a bigger picture of the full range of viewpoints and responses to masculinity in schools.

What about behaviour?

You might be surprised to notice there isn't a chapter entitled "behaviour". Surely, you might be thinking, that's the area where teachers struggle most with boys? Actually, behaviour is the spine that holds the book together. Each chapter offers insight into how you might avoid problematic behaviour by boys, with lots of helpful tips along the way to help you address poor behaviour when it happens.

The aim of the book

This book is written for classroom teachers and school leaders. We both know what it's like to teach a five period day, bookended with wet morning playground duties and even wetter after-school CPD[2] sessions. The advice we provide is intended to be practical enough to bring about short-term enhancements to your classroom practice and begin improving the culture of your school. Yet, we are realistic enough to accept that this book grapples with huge societal concerns; we recognise that simultaneous incremental shifts are required to bring about lasting change to the way schools think about masculinity and education. Throughout the book, you'll see that while we've been able to provide you with "quick wins", we've also been honest enough to point out that certain solutions involve a long-term strategy to truly shift the sands of gender in schools.

Notes

1 Loire, T. (2017) *In praise of tender masculinity, the new non-toxic way to be a man.* Available at: https://electricliterature.com/in-praise-of-tender-masculinity-the-new-non-toxic-way-to-be-a-man-7bb4f0159998 (Accessed: 24th September 2009).
2 Continuing professional development.