

## Book Review

# Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place, and the Gender Gap in Education

By Edward W. Morris

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**Reviewer:** Freeden Oeur, *Tufts University*

A perceived “crisis of young men” has both commanded popular attention and been the focus of sustained educational research in recent years. Worries that boys are lagging behind their female counterparts in schools resonate in the larger belief in “the end of men,” to borrow Hanna Rosin’s provocative phrase. Critics point out that while a new gender gap may be reflected in higher rates of academic achievement among girls, men still hold a disproportionate number of positions of power and privilege in society. And an academic gender gap indeed exists, but those underachieving the most are class-disadvantaged boys and boys of color.

In *Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place, and the Gender Gap in Education*, an ethnography of two high schools, Edward Morris fine-tunes the debate on the academic gender gap. The author finds that while masculine beliefs and practices helped sustain the power of boys over girls, they had hidden costs, impeding young men’s academic achievement. These findings avoid what Barrie Thorne has called a “seesaw logic” in studies of gender inequality that claims that if one gender group is up, then the other must be down. *Learning the Hard Way* admirably overcomes this boys versus girls framework by revealing masculinity’s numerous contradictions (boys, for example, are viewed as naturally smarter than girls even though as a group they perform less well in school) and how a gender gap emerged in different locations.

Morris spent a year and a half at two high schools that were both low income but differed in their location and the racial composition of the student body. Woodrow Wilson High was located in a large city and was majority African American. Clayton High resided in an isolated stretch of rural Appalachia and was nearly all White. Including a sample of the White rural poor is particularly welcome since, as Morris points out, urban Black boys are normally the focus in studies of the gender academic achievement gap. This variation in “place” allows Morris to show how rurality and urbanicity

accentuate gender, race, and class differently, and gives the analysis a compelling intersectional framework.

Some of the aims of masculinity converged at the two high schools. For instance, students at both schools struggled to achieve a sense of dignity in their peer cultures. At Clayton High, young men experienced tremendous anxiety over their social class positioning and fought outsiders' perceptions that their community was backward. The boys at Wilson High were conscious of how their school resembled a jail and resisted stereotypes of Black male violence. At both schools, the young men gave the impression that they were less interested in schooling than were their female classmates. Morris calls this "contrived carelessness." Boys, for example, were more likely to be tardy and not complete schoolwork, and to joke about and flaunt how unprepared they were for tests. This "too cool for school" attitude had a kind of *cooling-out effect* on achievement, as boys on average performed less well than girls at both schools. (In different circumstances, masculinity had a *warming-up effect* when the boys were compelled to fight and be physically aggressive.) Interestingly, people—students and adults—at both schools believed that boys were naturally smarter than girls. This was one of several intriguing examples of how "central features of hegemonic masculinity endure across contexts" (127). The performance of contrived carelessness, however, waxed and waned. For example, two African American boys, Wesley and Donte, were inclined to do their schoolwork when they were not under the watchful eyes of their peers.

Morris also charts the distinctions between masculinity at the two schools. At Clayton, physical labor power had historically been core to dominant masculinity. Young men took on a stoic and aggressive "redneck" masculinity that included conservation notions that men should be the main household provider. They saw little worth in book smarts that ill prepared them for jobs after school, and resisted the perceived modernizing forces that a school orientation represented. On the surface, norms around masculinity appeared more progressive at Wilson High. The young Black men there, for example, believed that book smarts were integral for success and accepted the possibility of egalitarian roles in the family. Still, the boys followed race-based scripts of "gangstas" and "clowns" (jokesters) that defied school rules and white, middle-class norms, bolstering masculinity but also harming academic achievement.

Interestingly, the "boys are smarter" narrative had a positive impact on young women at both schools. The young women did not accept their perceived academic inferiority; instead, they worked harder and more diligently than the boys, developing and implementing academic strategies that resulted in academic success. School was a site of empowerment and independence for young women, in a process that Morris terms "conscientious resistance." Compared to the boys, young women embraced schooling as a way of resisting gender subordination.

*Learning the Hard Way* joins a long tradition of ethnographic research on low-income boys and builds on more recent qualitative work on students of color and the academic achievement gap. And with its distinctive focus on "place" and its urban-rural comparison, the text should serve as a benchmark in research on the gender gap in education. While it would have been helpful

to hear more about gender-non-conforming students at the schools, the book should still hold wide appeal for scholars and students of education, gender and masculinity, and childhood studies. It's also worth noting how Morris manages to balance a number of gender theories, most notably intersectionality but also the "doing gender" thesis and the theory of hegemonic masculinity. Instructors in methods courses looking to teach qualitative work that effectively uses theory to breathe life into data will find plenty of examples in *Learning the Hard Way*.