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Review

Identity, Neo-liberalism and Aspiration. Educating White Working-Class Boys by Garth Stahl, Abington; Routledge, 2015, x + 179 pp, £95.00 (Hardback) ISBN 9781138025875

Michael R.M Ward,

Cardiff University

wardmr@cf.ac.uk

Over the past forty years, amid a backdrop of social, economic, cultural and political change, education systems across the global north have undergone considerable transformations. Various UK governments have introduced, and re-introduced, educational measures and structures designated to enable future workers to be highly competitive in a global knowledge based economy. However, in these neo-liberal, post-industrial times, it would seem that not all young people are able to benefit from such changes equally. One notable group often labelled as ‘feckless’, ‘lazy’ and ‘underachievers’ by the media, politicians and policy makers, are white working-class (WWC) boys, unwilling to embrace late modernity. *Identity, Neo-liberalism and Aspiration* provides the reader with a contemporary look at educational issues facing this supposed problematic group, across three school sites in South London, all of which are based in former industrial communities. Over a period of nine months, using qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations and ‘mixed-methods’ such as photo elicitation with 23 young men aged 14-16, Stahl explores the relationship between his participant’s identity production and their relationship to school and education more broadly.

The book is divided into two interlinked sections, broadly theoretical and empirical. Part I begins with an historical account of WWC boys’ educational engagement and those who have studied them across the sociology of education since the Second World War. This is a neat little chapter and summarises many of the key issues and provides an overview for those unfamiliar with the debate. Stahl weaves in here many important facets that are often missed in the ‘underachievement’ discourse, such as the role of local culture and place being highly important in how WWC boys see themselves and others around them and also how masculinities are performed and displayed

by young men. Chapter Two then lays out Stahl's theoretical perspective, and the work of Bourdieu. Following in the footsteps of his mentor (Diane Reay) Stahl highlights how Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field, impact on the learner identity of WWC boys and how WWC boys are seen by others e.g. the middle-class, as problematic. In Chapter Three, Stahl then proceeds to outline the studies main findings and how Bourdieu's concepts of habitus will be used throughout the remainder of the book to theorise how WWC boys construct their identities and their concepts of aspirational success and failure. Stahl clearly and articulately explores how the participants adopt what he terms a 'egalitarian counter-habitus' to the dominant neo-liberal discourse operating within and beyond educational institutions at present. Rather than romanticising WWC resistance or counter culture, the book argues here how WWC boys gain a sense of value through collective well-being and 'sameness', which Stahl suggests could be one way to combat neo-liberal individualisation.

It is in Part II where I believe that the book really comes alive and the young men's narratives about identification, class, gender and aspirations are really explored and Bourdieu's theories (so well outlined in the previous section) are interwoven. Chapter Four begins the section by discussing the relevance of social class to WWC boys. What struck me most when reading this, was that while Stahl's participants had severe difficulties with the term 'working-class' and defining class, it was clear that these young men were painfully aware of social inequality in contemporary Britain. For anyone familiar with the past literature on WWC boys and educational engagement, Chapter Five will come as no surprise. Here Stahl highlights how WWC boys have to juggle between multiple identities to maintain their social class background and learner identity, but are not always successful at achieving this. What also comes through is how painfully unaware some of these young men are about the changes to traditional markers of working-class masculinity, such as access to stable, regular, manual work. Chapter Six takes the reader outside the school gate and turns the focus of the book towards youth culture more broadly and how in order to create a hegemonic working-class masculinity, an 'other' has to be created by young people in order to feel a sense of self-worth when the former certainties of an older industrial era are no longer available.

I found Chapter Seven to be the most depressing part of the book as even though many of Stahl's participants have academic and non-academic aspirations of moving into stable and secure jobs, in a saturated graduate labour market, and a shrinking manufacturing industry, coupled with a lack of social and economic resources, 'success' could be hard to come by for these young men and I feel their futures are uncertain. In the final chapter of the book, Stahl powerfully articulates how he does not see the 'underperformance/poverty of aspiration phenomena as a problem to be solved' (pg. 167), the real issue is a much larger UK problem. The proliferation of free schools, academies, more structured curriculums, longer school days, 'better' teachers in Stahl's opinion are not magic bullet solutions. These constant changes and teacher attitudes (which of course are themselves created and fostered by this system) do not offer solutions, but are part of the problem in a neo-liberal era. As Stahl puts it 'the boys knew the value of education, but the majority of the participants saw education as a risk, rather than a certainty, whereas their educators saw education as the certainly and low skilled employment as the risk' (pg. 167).

I believe this to be an excellent contribution to the field of boys' education and the 'underachievement' and aspiration debate. This timely book should be read not only by undergraduate and postgraduate students studying the sociology of education, but by others working within the broader field of gender studies as it provides the reader with key insights into complex educational issues and marginalized masculinities. My only small criticism is that I couldn't help but think when reading the book that I wanted to know more about the author! Apart from being told a few times by Stahl that he is an American, who studied at a prestigious UK University, and taught young men similar to those who appear in the book, I feel I did not get to know how this impacted on the data collection phase and how the author felt as an outsider in this 'alien' world. Rather like the British TV personality, Louis Theroux when interviewing Americans in their own country, I think Stahl's non-Britishness was a key tool in his researcher practice. My only other issue with this book is the layout, which I am sure has more to do with the publishers than the author. Each chapter is followed by a reference list, instead of one complete list at the end of the volume. This essentially means lost word space, as some references appear multiple times, it is in this space where I feel the author could have told us more about himself to accompany the young lives he excellently portrays.