“BOYS WILL BE BOYS” . . . BUT IN WHAT WAYS? SOCIAL CLASS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG BOYS’ SCHOOLING IDENTITIES

INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: Do you think it’s important to go to school?
Cameron: Nooo!
Davey: Nah!
Interviewer: Why? Does it not matter if you go to school or not?
Davey: No
Cameron: I hate it
Interviewer: In school what about sums, do you like doing sums?
Adrian: No
Tommy: No
Interviewer: Why?
Adrian: Because too boring
Interviewer: What makes it boring?
Adrian: Because you have to, like/
Tommy: /You have to, you have to think about it and write the number— a hundred plus a thousand and all
Adrian: I know
Interviewer: And do you find it hard or easy?
Adrian: Hard
Tommy: Hard
Interviewer: What about reading, do you like reading?
Jamie: No
Cameron: No
Interviewer: No? Why not?

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Cameron: I don’t
Jamie: It’s wick! It takes my memory away

The discourse on boys’ underachievement is now pervasive in government and educational policy circles across much of the Western world (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 1993; Johnson, 1996; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998a; Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Martino & Berrill, 2003). Moreover it is a discourse that tends to be characterised by a crisis account with boys being seen to be falling ever further behind girls in public examinations (Gorard, Rees, & Salisbury, 1999, 2001; Connolly, 2006b). The types of perspectives introduced above, of boys being disillusioned with and alienated from schooling, are all too easy to find and help to shore up and feed the moral panics about boys and education that have been generated within many countries over the last decade. At the risk of fuelling such panics further it should also be noted that the boys above are not adolescent boys facing their final public exams before leaving school but 5- and 6-year-old boys just beginning their schooling careers.

However, there are other perspectives on education among boys that tend to receive far less attention, either within political or educational circles or even within academia, but are also as easy to find if one looks. Consider the following discussion among another group of 5- and 6-year-old boys:

Interviewer: Do you think it’s important to go to school?
Stephen: Yeah, it’s really important.
Interviewer: Why?
Stephen: Because if you didn’t go to school you wouldn’t learn anything.
Robert: And because you wouldn’t even know what maths is!
Stephen: Yeah and you wouldn’t even learn to read or anything/
Robert: /And you couldn’t even say the alphabet
Stephen: No, or you couldn’t say numbers.
Interviewer: Is that important? Why does it matter?
Stephen: Because it’s very, very good to go to school because you learn a whole lot of things.
Robert: When you grew up you wouldn’t be smart or anything.
Interviewer: What would happen then? If you didn’t go to school at all what do you think would happen?
Robert: Well, you would get very, not smart and then you wouldn’t know anything