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**Constructing and Deconstructing Masculinity in the Early Years:
Mediations of Social Class, 'Race' and Ethnicity**

Paul Connolly¹

Abstract

This paper begins with a discussion of the important contribution that feminist poststructuralism has made to our understanding of dominant forms of masculinity among young boys and the need to encourage boys to deconstruct these and to develop alternative ways of 'being boys'. It will argue, however, that such work has tended to unnecessarily reject developmental theories out of hand as well as not giving sufficient emphasis to the very different forms of masculinity that exist and also the broader social and economic structures within which these are located. In the light of this the paper proposes a theoretical framework that draws together some of the insights found in the work of Vygotsky with those of Bourdieu and illustrates this through the use of a comparative ethnographic study of three groups of 5-6 year old boys located in very different socio-economic contexts. The notion of the 'Critical Gender Zone', derived from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, is then proposed as a way of orientating deconstruction work with young boys that can possibly help to address the concerns raised above. It concludes with a brief consideration of the use of Vygotsky in this context and the potential this raises for future work.

Introduction

Feminist poststructuralist analysis has provided an important critique of traditional gender equity work in the early years that has tended to be premised upon classical sex-role socialization models (Davies, 1989, 1993, 2003; Lloyd and Duveen, 1992; Jordan, 1995; MacNaughton, 1996, 1998, 2000; Francis, 1998; Browne, 2004). It has drawn attention to the way that such models are

¹ Professor Paul Connolly, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast, 69-71 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HL, Northern Ireland. Email: paul.connolly@qub.ac.uk Web: www.paulconnolly.net

built upon a particular image of young children as passive objects simply absorbing, and eventually reproducing, the gender stereotypes that surround them. For those working in the early years this has often restricted gender equity work to an emphasis on organizing the setting so that boys and girls have equal access to the full range of resources and play opportunities available and also ensuring that the environment itself (through posters on walls, the stories carried in books and so on) do not tend to reinforce traditional sex-roles. As has been found, however, such approaches to gender equity have often had limited impact with girls and boys tending to appropriate and adapt these more 'neutral' social spaces in more traditional gendered ways (Davies, 1993; MacNaughton, 1996).

The problem with these approaches, as feminist poststructuralist writers have tended to argue, is that they ignore the fact that gender is a much more fundamental aspect of the social world and one embedded in the routines, social practices and broader structures of society as well as in the attitudes, identities and desires of the individual (Yelland, 1998). Moreover, this emphasis on the passive socialization of children tends to ignore the very active role that they play in constructing and re-constructing their own gender identities (Davies, 1989). Thus, while it is important to develop ways of ensuring that boys and girls have full and equal access to the range of resources and opportunities available in the early years setting, this is not enough. Rather, it is essential that children are critically engaged with and that they are encouraged to reflect upon and deconstruct their existing identities and practices and to play an active role in beginning to construct and appropriate alternative and more open and inclusive ways of 'being' girls and boys (Jordan, 1995; Francis, 1998; Lowe, 1998; MacNaughton, 1998; Browne, 2004). One of the most influential proponents of this approach to deconstruction is Davies (1989; 1993) who has argued for the need to:

introduce children to a discourse which enables them to see for themselves the discourses and storylines through which gendered persons are constituted, to see the cultural and historical production of gendered persons that they are each caught up in. In this different approach, children can be introduced to the possibility, not of learning the culture, or new aspects of it, as passive recipients, but as producers of culture, as writers and readers who make themselves and are made within the discourses available to them.

(Davies, 1993: 2)

Very similar sentiments have also been expressed by MacNaughton (2000: 129) who has argued that:

Long-term change in children's gendered behaviours is more likely to result from remaking their gender discourses. Creating dialogic communities in which children hybridise their gendered storylines offers one vehicle through which to do this. If teachers can remake the gendered possibilities within children's storylines they can, in part, remake their gendered discourses.

According to this work, therefore, gender is not a closed and complete project but one that is necessarily open and always in the process of being constructed. It is thus not a fixed set of ideas, beliefs and practices that boys and girls simply learn and internalize uncritically but is forever evolving and adapting and is continually being produced and reproduced by the children themselves (Thorne, 1993; Danby, 1998). It is this broad approach to understanding the dynamics of gender that underpin this present paper. However, there are particular aspects within this perspective that could be usefully developed further. The paper begins, therefore, by outlining what these are before then suggesting some additional conceptual tools, drawn from the insights found in the work of Vygotsky and Bourdieu, that can potentially address these issues by helping us understand a little better the actual mechanics by which discourses on gender work upon young children. A comparative ethnographic case study of three groups of 5-6 year olds boys living in in very different socio-economic contexts is then used to illustrate how this framework may be applied in practice. The paper concludes with a consideration of the findings from the case study for working with young boys to deconstruct their dominant forms of masculinity and to 'help them learn how to desire and to celebrate different, non-hegemonic ways of being masculine' (MacNaughton, 2000: 144). More specifically it proposes the notion of the 'Critical Gender Zone', derived from Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, as a way of helping to orientate this work in such a way as to begin to address the issues raised in relation to existing feminist poststructuralist work described earlier. A final brief comment is also made on the use of Vygotsky within this context and the possibilities this opens for further work in the area.

Traditional child development models and feminist poststructuralist alternatives

The critique of traditional developmental models of childhood, exemplified through the work of Piaget, is now well-rehearsed (Donaldson, 1978; Henriques *et al.*, 1984; Morss, 1996; Prout and James, 1997). Alongside the underestimation of young children's social competence and cognitive skills, the key problem with such models is their tendency to see child development as

occurring through stages that are universal and invariant. From such a view, all children are seen to follow the same developmental route (albeit some more quickly than others) regardless of the particular cultures and social contexts within which they are located. This has two specific implications for gender equity work in the early years as highlighted through feminist poststructuralist accounts. On the one hand it has tended to construct what Mac Naughton (1997) has termed a 'developmental gaze' among those working in the early years that interprets children's behaviour strictly on an individual basis against key developmental milestones. It is therefore a gaze that focuses on *how* children think rather than *what* they think. There is thus little room for a consideration of gender and how it tends to influence and shape the way girls and boys think and behave. On the other hand, this emphasis on children moving 'naturally' through key developmental stages also provides a powerful deterrent to those wishing to undertake direct work with young children around issues of gender (Browne, 2004). Within this model the focus is on self-directed play and the role of those working in the early years tends to be limited to providing a rich and diverse environment within which this can take place. Any attempt to adopt a more proactive role and intervene more directly in children's activities is therefore to be discouraged and often labeled as 'bad practice' (Mac Naughton, 2000).

Given such problems, it is not surprising to find that child development models have largely been rejected by many feminist poststructuralist writers who have, instead, focused their attention on questioning and deconstructing these 'regimes of truth' on children's stages of development (Davies, 1993; Yelland and Grieshaber, 1998; Mac Naughton, 2000, 2005). There are three potential problems with this approach however. First, it has tended to overlook other developmental theories – most notably those inspired by Vygotsky (1978) – that may still have something useful to contribute to our understanding of the processes by which gender operate in early childhood and what models of practice can be developed in response to these (Walkerdine, 1990; Burman, 1994; Morss, 1996). Moreover, and much more pragmatically, if there are ways in which such work can be developed and employed in understanding gender in the early years then this is likely to be more meaningful to those already working in this area given that these are likely to be the theories familiar to them. It is a much more difficult task to encourage those working in the early years simply to leave behind the knowledge of child development that they have come to learn and see as part of the foundation of their professional identity and to replace this with poststructuralist theory (although see Mac Naughton 2005).

Second, while poststructuralism has played an invaluable role within feminist research in the early years in helping to question and deconstruct that which has often been taken-for-granted, it has been less successful in providing the analytical tools for understanding the role of broader

social, political and economic structures in generating and reproducing these discourses on gender (and social class) as highlighted elsewhere (Connolly, 1998, 2004; Skelton, 2002). The emphasis placed on language and meaning and on children's agency within this can sometimes imply that children are absolutely free to re-define their sense of selves and thus to construct alternative ways of thinking and acting. There is certainly a hint of this in the quote from Davies (1993) reproduced earlier. However, this is not to suggest that authors like Davies are not aware of the significance and effects of broader structures. Indeed, and as Davies (1993: 200) has argued:

The struggle towards the new in gender relations is not just a struggle that can be left in the hands of the children or of writers, nor one that can be resolved through a different way of interacting with children. The weight of the current structures of interacting and the desire to be competent within their terms is strong. Structures need to be changed in both the children's and in our own worlds. Political changes, equally radical to the changes in patterns of interaction envisaged here between teachers and children, need to take place.

However, the problem here is that this extract is taken from the final paragraph of Davies's book and thus issues of structure are relegated effectively to little more than an afterthought to the main business of developing ways of deconstructing gender among children. While the weight of social structures may be strong, therefore, little by the way of theoretical insights or conceptual tools are provided in order to help understand what makes them strong. Nor, given the lack of prominence afforded to them, is the reader particularly encouraged to focus on or problematise these structures in any meaningful way.

This tendency to focus attention on the children themselves partly at the expense of a consideration of broader social and economic structures is also evident in Mac Naughton's (1996, 1998, 2000) work and reflected in the quote earlier. Having said this, Mac Naughton does address the importance of working with parents by 'creating open and ongoing opportunities for parents and colleagues to discuss gendering' (Mac Naughton, 2000: 196). However, there remains a sense in which even this acknowledgement only takes us part-way in recognizing the nature and importance of broader social and economic structures – structures that impact as much on the parents as well as the children.

Third, and following on from the last point, the approaches currently being suggested for deconstructing dominant forms of masculinity (and femininity) among young children has to date tended to focus on the use of fiction and story reading and writing as ways of challenging existing

understandings and encouraging children to explore new ways of being boys and girls (Davies, 1989, 1993). What has tended to be missing is a sense in which very different approaches to deconstruction may be needed for differing groups of boys, depending upon the particular social and economic contexts they are located in and thus the very different forms of masculinity that are hegemonic there.

Vygotsky, Bourdieu and the internalization of gender (and class) identities

It is with these three points in mind that it is worth looking again at the work of Vygotsky (1978) and how it can possibly be developed to help understand the broader contexts within which young boys tend to produce and reproduce particular forms of masculinity. For Vygotsky, children's learning and development is a fundamentally social activity. The way children develop cannot be understood apart from the particular social networks and relations that they are located in. More specifically, it is through their active participation in these networks that children first come to experience and undertake new ways of thinking and practice. Through time, and as they become accomplished at these, they eventually come to be internalized as specific cognitive schemes (i.e. ways of thinking about and responding to particular phenomena). As Vygotsky (1978: 57, original emphases) wrote:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.

How a particular child develops, therefore, depends upon both the precise sets of relationships and social contexts within which s/he is located as well as the specific role s/he plays in interacting with others. Vygotsky's work therefore provides a way of understanding how children learn and develop without the need to invoke universal stages of development. Indeed as Vygotsky (1978: 55) argued, this approach 'refutes the notion that development represents the mere unfolding of the child's organically predetermined system of activity'. Rather, nothing is predetermined in relation to children's development. As he went onto argue:

[C]hild development is a complex dialectical process characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative

transformation of one form into another, intertwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes which overcome impediments that the child encounters (p. 55).

However, there remains a sense in which the notion of the social in Vygotsky's work has remained largely undeveloped. For example, there has been a tendency for neo-Vygotskian work to focus on inter-personal relations, particularly those between mothers and their young children (Henriques *et al.*, 1984). While this has certainly helped to draw attention to the very different child-rearing practices that exist between different communities and cultures, it has tended to ignore the broader social processes and structures that create the contexts within which these individuals are located (Wertsch, 1991; Morss, 1996; Skelton and Hall, 2001). Partly as a result of this, there is little sense in such accounts of the way that individuals tend to be limited and constrained by the wider social structures that surround them. As Morss (1996) has argued, for example, there has been a tendency for individuals to be regarded essentially as free agents able to engage voluntarily in relationships with others. In addition, this neglect of wider social processes and structures has tended to result in the broader cultures that are focused on simply being taken for granted with little space available to gain an appreciation of the conflicts and power relations that tend to characterize those cultures (in terms, for example, of gender, social class and ethnicity) and the consequences of these for how young children learn and develop (Urwin, 1984; Morss, 1996; Duveen, 1997).

It is with this in mind that it is useful to develop Vygotsky's overall approach further with some of the insights provided by Bourdieu and, in particular, his concept of the habitus. In fact there are a number of similarities between this notion of the habitus and the process of internalisation proposed by Vygotsky described earlier. In essence the habitus refers to all of those cognitive schemes that an individual has acquired and come to internalize through their interactions with others. It therefore represents the largely unconscious 'habits' and predispositions to thinking and behaving in certain ways that s/he has developed through their previous experiences and which now tend to influence the way they make sense of and respond to new experiences. According to Bourdieu (1990: 53) then, the habitus is a system of:

durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures, predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

Moreover, there is a strong correspondence between the processes surrounding the acquisition of the habitus and those associated with Vygotsky's notion of internalization as described earlier. It will be remembered, for example, how Vygotsky (1978: 57) explained that 'every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level'. Compare this to the way Bourdieu outlined the relationship between the habitus and the wider social relations within which it is located (what he termed 'fields'):

The relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On one side, it is a relation of *conditioning*; the field structures the habitus ... On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value ... Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127, original emphasis)

Overall, this notion of habitus has the potential to extend Vygotsky's work in three ways. First, it actively encourages us to locate and understand the habitus within the context of broader social networks and structures rather than just those immediate inter-personal relationships that an individual is involved in. While there is no space to discuss them here, Bourdieu has provided a number of related conceptual tools – most notably 'field' and various forms of 'capital' – that certainly help to contextualise the habitus in this way (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990). Second, the habitus also encourages us to think beyond a child's acquisition of relatively specific and discrete cognitive schemes to the acquisition also of broader cultural values and practices. In other words, it allows for the study of children's identities, of how they are acquired and also how they can then predispose children to developing certain, more specific, cognitive schemes over others (Connolly, 2004).

Third, the notion of habitus also provides important insights into the structural limits on individual agency. To put it simply, while individuals are free to act, their actions are necessarily limited by 'what they know' at any particular point in time, in other words by their habitus. This is not to imply that individuals are strictly confined to particular ways of thinking and behaving but simply that their current practices will inevitably be limited by their previous knowledge and experiences. As Bourdieu explained:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It's durable but not eternal.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133, original emphasis)

It is with these concepts in mind – Vygotsky's process of internalization as enhanced through the use of Bourdieu's notion of habitus – that it is now possible to understand a little more clearly how young boys acquire and reproduce particular forms of masculinity. The paper will do this by drawing upon data from three different case studies of 5-6 year old boys: one drawn from a primary school in an economically deprived inner-city neighbourhood in Northern Ireland that continues to experience paramilitary activity and sectarian violence (North Parade Primary School); another in a similarly economically deprived neighbourhood but this time in an English, multi-ethnic city (East Avenue Primary School); and finally a school located in an affluent middle class area of Northern Ireland (South Park Primary School). In all cases an ethnographic approach was adopted with the author spending approximately one day per week in each of the two Northern Ireland schools between October 2001 and June 2002 and about three days per week in the English school during an earlier period (between January 1992 and June 1993). Alongside observations of the boys through all aspects of the school day, a number of largely unstructured small group discussions were conducted with friendship groups of between 2-3 boys in each school. More details on the methodology used in the larger studies from which these data are drawn can be found in Connolly (1998, 2004).

Given the limitations of space, the following discussion is offered more as a brief illustration of the dominant forms of masculinity found among the respective groups of boys and the way in which Vygotsky's notion of internalization and Bourdieu's concept of the habitus can help to explain these forms. It is not meant to imply that all boys in each of the three settings are the same and have thus acquired and share the same forms of masculinity (Mac Naughton, 2000). After briefly outlining the nature of these two forms of masculinity, the paper will conclude with a discussion of how some of the related ideas found in the work of Vygotsky – particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – can be employed to provide the basis for work with these boys aimed at encouraging them to deconstruct these dominant forms of masculinity.

Masculinities at North Parade Primary School

The working class boys in this study live in North Parade,² an estate ranked within the bottom 20 per cent of the most deprived wards in the region and which, in many respects, is rather indicative of many other isolated, working class areas that have been decimated by economic recession. The area is characterized by relatively high levels of long-term unemployment, low levels of educational attainment and poor levels of health. The estate itself is physically isolated from its surrounding areas with only one road leading into and out of it. There is a distinctly desolate feel to it with few shops and local amenities and significant patches of wasteland and litter. Some of the housing is run-down with a number of dwellings boarded up.

North Parade has also experienced relatively high levels of sectarian tensions and violence over the last three decades of the conflict in Northern Ireland. 25 people have actually been murdered on the estate as a direct consequence of the present violence. It is an overwhelmingly Protestant community that continues to feel isolated and under threat.³ This has tended to translate itself into a strong sense of territoriality as the area is marked out as distinctly loyalist with British Union flags flying from lampposts and several houses, kerbstones and railings painted red, white and blue (the colours of the Union flag) and also sectarian graffiti offering support to local loyalist paramilitary organizations. In fact loyalist paramilitary groups have a strong presence locally, tending to 'police' the area and also continue to command the support of a significant proportion of the local community.

This, then, is the immediate context within which the young boys are forced to negotiate their sense of identity. As seen, it is an area offering few opportunities and one that continues to be overshadowed by violence. This violence is certainly something that some of the boys were acutely aware of as the following comments from Martin illustrate:

² All names are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

³ Given the limitations of space, it is not possible to provide any meaningful explanation of the conflict and continuing divisions that exist in Northern Ireland. This is provided elsewhere (see Connolly, 2004). It will suffice to note here that there are two main groups in the region – Protestants that constitute the majority and Catholics the minority. Protestants tend to be 'unionist' politically in that they favour the continued political union between Northern Ireland and Britain, whereas Catholics tend to be 'nationalist' in that they are more likely to favour Northern Ireland breaking its ties with Britain and being 're-united' with the rest of Ireland. The present phase of the conflict began in the late 1960s and continued until the main paramilitary 'ceasefires' of the mid-1990s. Over 3,600 people died during this time as a direct result of the conflict. Alongside the British army and an armed police force (formerly known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary), paramilitary organizations emerged (or became increasingly active) during this period on both sides. On the Protestant side these paramilitary organizations are collectively known as 'loyalists' and on the Catholic side they are collectively known as 'republicans'.

Martin: There's bad men up at that shop there! There's all UVF⁴ an' all there.

Interviewer: What's the UVF?

Martin: Bad people! They've got guns and they shoot at people for nothin'.

Interviewer: Do they?

Martin: They want to shoot people for fun. They kill people and then go running away.

They shoot people. That's all the writing up there [*referring to the UVF graffiti on the shop walls*]

North Parade then is an area where some of the boys are living with a real sense of threat. It is therefore an area where they need to grow up quickly and to develop the strength and ability to protect themselves. For some – including Martin – this leads them to identify with the local paramilitary organizations who tend to become valorized as Martin and Lee indicate later on in the same discussion:

Interviewer: What do you want to do when you grow up?

Martin: Join the UVF!

Lee: [*laughs*]

Martin: UVF! [*chants*] U-V-U-V-F! U-V-U-V-F!

Interviewer: What's the UVF?

Martin: They fight! They shoot guns!

Interviewer: Do they?

Lee: They have big guns!

More generally, being a boy in this context tends to be equated with being strong and able to fight and thus to protect oneself. This is clearly evident in a separate discussion involving Davey and Martin:

Interviewer: Would either of you two like to be a girl?

Davey: [*laughs hysterically*] Nooo! No! No!

Martin: Nooooo!

Interviewer: Why not? Why do you like being boys?

Davey: Cos.

Martin: Cos its better.

⁴ Ulster Volunteer Force – one of the main loyalist paramilitary organizations.

Interviewer: Why is it better?

Davey: You get to play wrestling.

Martin: You get to go to BB [*Boys' Brigade*].

Davey: And you're allowed to fight! Remember when I punched you and you slammed on your knees and I hurt you? Remember once I bit you and you were bleeding! [*laughs*].

Martin: [*No response*].

For some of these boys, this type of masculinity with its emphasis on strength and fighting had clearly become internalised and consequently embodied and expressed through the way the boys tended to present and hold themselves and also in their routine and taken-for-granted forms of behaviour. Some of the boys had short and stylised haircuts, wore designer clothes and also earrings and other pieces of jewellery. They would be found spending a significant amount of their time on the playground carefully practicing and rehearsing their fighting techniques and demonstrating their physical strength. For some of the boys the skills they had developed in terms of the postures and mannerisms they had acquired and could effortlessly and routinely reproduce meant that they were able to re-enact particular forms of fighting and violent behaviour extremely realistically (Connolly, 2004).

More generally, the predominance of such levels of violence, even if largely stylised and rehearsed, did tend to create the context within which a certain aggressive and intimidating manner was becoming internalised by some of the boys and would sometimes be expressed unconsciously, as a habit. This can be seen in the following discussion between Billy, Lee and Martin where their conversation soon included aggressive and misogynist themes:

Interviewer: What do you play in the playground?

Billy: Fight!

Martin: Steal money!

Interviewer: In the playground? No, what games do you play?

Billy: Power Rangers and Space.

Interviewer: Do you play with girls and boys?

Billy: [*laughs*]

Martin: We pull her trousers down! I know!

Interviewer: What?

Martin: We burn something! I know, pull her trousers down and burn her!

Lee: We pull her pants down and burn her!

All: [hysterical laughter]

Interviewer: You do what?

Lee: I know, get her later and burn her bum!

Billy: I got one – burn her arse!

Masculinities at East Avenue Primary School

In some respects the area within which East Avenue Primary School is located shares much in common with that described in the previous case study. It is also a relatively isolated and economically-deprived, inner-city housing estate. The majority of residents on the estate are economically inactive and the age distribution is skewed with higher proportions of very young children and elderly people. The proportion of single parent families is high and the estate has gained a reputation as a ‘problem area’; having the highest levels of violent crime and domestic violence within the county. The sense of the estate being a dangerous place has also become reflected in the immediate environment with security gates running through the estate and the blocks of maisonettes being cordoned off from one another.

In other ways, however, it is very different to the local neighbourhood that North Parade Primary School is located in as described above. Being located in an English city it is obviously free from the type of organised paramilitary violence associated with parts of Northern Ireland. Moreover, while the area within which the North Parade boys live is almost exclusively White, the neighbourhood within which East Avenue primary school is located is much more ethnically-diverse with about half of the residents on the local estate being White and about a quarter African Caribbean and a further quarter South Asian. During the fieldwork, a number of racist attacks targeted mainly towards members of the South Asian community on the estate took place, with a number of incidents being recounted by the parents of being verbally and, at times, physically harassed.

This then is the context within which the boys at East Avenue are left to negotiate their masculine identities. In a similar way to the last case study, given the realities of life within the local neighbourhood it is not surprising to find that dominant forms of masculinity within the school tended to be based around competent displays of physicality, especially strength and the ability to fight. This can be seen in the following discussion where Paul and Daniel discuss a fight they were involved in on the playground with a group of other boys:

PC: You said when they [*the other boys*] came up to you to start with; you were playing with some girls?

Paul: Yeah, I had some fighting but he [*Daniel*] didn't!

Daniel: Yes I did!

Paul: No you didn't!

Daniel: Jason [*one of the other boys*] pushed me in a puddle!

Paul: Yeah, what did you do? Nothing!

Daniel: No!

Paul: So you didn't fight, did you? I did! Cos I got, erm, one of them over.

Daniel: Yes I did fight! When I was running, I was going to kick them.

Paul: But missed them, didn't you!

Daniel: What?

Paul: Missed them!

Daniel: No I never!

Paul: Well, I got, I got, I had two people over from them.

PC: You had what, Paul? What did you say – you had two people what?

Paul: Down!

PC: Down?

Paul: Three! – Sean, Craig and Jason

Daniel: Yeah, I, I, you got Sean down by kicking him, didn't ya?

Paul: No! He ran and I got my foot out so he tripped over.

Daniel: Yeah, and then he was going to kick you, weren't he?

Paul: Yeah, but he couldn't – he was running and trying to get me but [*Paul stands up to rehearse the actions, Daniel also stands up*]/

Daniel: /But he missed, didn't he?/

Paul: /I put my foot out and he went over! [...] Then I tripped Karl over, and I punched James down so he was, so he was down!

What is clear from the above discussion is the way in which the development and performance of masculinities is an ongoing and highly contested project (Connell, 1995), with significant value being placed on the ability to fight and thus struggles over who can make claim to this. Within this context significant efforts were made by some of the boys to police and control other key avenues through which masculinity could be demonstrated and displayed, most notably in relation to games of football (soccer) on the playground (see also Skelton, 2001;

Renold, 2005). This can be seen in the following discussion that took place with a friendship group of four boys: Stephen, Jordan, Paul and Daniel. In this particular case the discussion began with me asking them who played football with them:

PC: So I'm just trying to figure out who plays [football] - so Prajay [*South Asian boy*] plays does he?

Paul: Yeah

PC: [...] What about, er, Ajay and Malde [*two South Asian boys in another, parallel class*]

Daniel: Urrr no!

Paul: Nah!

Daniel: They're rubbish!

Jordan: They're always playing crap games!

PC: Why are they rubbish though Daniel?

Daniel: Because they're Paaa-kis!/
/

Stephen: /No, no no! Because they can't run fast! [...]

Paul: Because they're small! [*laughs*]

Stephen: No! [...] Cos, cos they're Pakis and Pakis can't run fast!

PC: Why? Why aren't they the same as everybody else?

Daniel: Don't know!

Stephen: Cos ...

PC: Well they are aren't they?

Stephen: [*Shouting frustratedly*] Cos they're slow and everything!

Jordan: An' they want to be on your side cos you're fast ain't it Stephen?

PC: [...] But you let Prajay play - is he slow?

Paul: No!

Stephen: He's quite fast!

PC: Yeah but he's Indian?

Stephen: Yeah, so, he ain't got a dot on his head!

Jordan: His mum has!

PC: Yeah but Ajay hasn't got a dot on his head!

Stephen: Yes he has!

Daniel: No he hasn't!

Stephen: He's got a black one so there!

What is evident in the above discussion is the racialised nature of the dominant forms of masculinity found among the boys at East Avenue and how they tend to be based upon the exclusion of, and thus constructed in opposition to, South Asian boys. Indeed the type of racist discourse evident in the above was fairly typical and a common feature of the boys' peer culture. As can also be seen in the following discussion taken from a separate interview with the same boys, constructions of girlfriends and notions of attractiveness were also fundamentally racialised. It began with one of the boys (Paul) teasing another (Stephen) about Annette being his girlfriend:

Paul: Annette does love you! Annette does go out with you!

Stephen: I bet! Is that why ... Alright then, if Annette goes out with me then Nazia goes out with Daniel!

Paul: You have two girlfriends - Nazia, Kelly [*African Caribbean*] and her, Annette

Stephen: And I know, and I know you go out with Rupal, Rakhee and [*saying last name slowly and pulling face*] Neelam!

[...]

Daniel: You've got a Paki girlfriend!

Stephen: Who?

Daniel: That one there with that dot! [*on another poster*]

Paul: [*laughs*]

[...]

Stephen: You go out with Neelam!

Daniel: And so do you!

Stephen: You go out with all the girls in our class!

Daniel: You go out with all the Pakis! [*laughs*]

Stephen: I said you go out with everyone in the whole world mate!

Daniel: So do you [*laughs*]!

Stephen: How can you say I do when I've already said you do!

Daniel: You do!

Stephen: You do!

Daniel: You go out with all of the Pakis, I go out with all the Whites [*laughs*]

Stephen: You go out with all of the Pakis! Because I, do I look like a Paki though - you do! You go the Mosque mate where all the Pakis go!

[*general laughs*]

Masculinities at South Park Primary School

In contrast to North Parade and East Avenue, South Park is a relatively prosperous, middle-class area. Economically it is ranked within the top 10 per cent of the most affluent wards in the region. It is a suburban community comprising semi-detached and detached properties with substantial gardens and streets lined with trees. While like North Parade it also a predominantly Protestant area, the area has tended largely to avoid the effects of the violence and there is no visual evidence of conflict or territoriality. Indeed it would be difficult to distinguish South Park from many other leafy suburban areas found in England. A significant proportion of residents in the area are employed in professional and managerial occupations and levels of health and educational attainment are both high. This is also partly reflected by the presence of a number of specialist shops and boutiques within walking distance. Overall, the local area is well-kept and generally free from litter and graffiti.

This is therefore the immediate context within which these middle class young boys are located in and from which they are required to develop their own sense of identity. It is a context characterized by opportunity, diversity of experience and educational achievement and these provide the backdrop against which they have developed a very different form of masculinity. It will be remembered that when the working class boys were asked what it meant to be a boy they emphasized physical traits such as strength and ability to fight. Compare this with some of the middle class boys:

Interviewer: If you had a choice would you want to be girls or boys?

Adam: Boys!

Michael: BOYS!

James: BOYS!

Interviewer: What's good about being boys?

[...]

James: Because boys get to do much better stuff than girls.

Interviewer: Like what?

James: Well, [*pause*], they get to go on rollercoasters and girls are scared of it.

[...]

Adam: Boys can do more funny things than girls.

Interviewer: Like what?

Adam: Being a clown. Being a magician.

James: And boys are better doing sports.

Interviewer: If you were a girl couldn't you do everything a boy could do?

James: No.

Adam: NOOOO!

Michael: No way!

Interviewer: Why?

Michael: Cos, cos they don't know how to do it!

Compared to the very limited emphasis on physicality and fighting, it can be seen that some of these boys tend to define themselves in a wide range of ways reflecting the resources and opportunities open to them. A sense of competitiveness is still evident as will be seen below. However, that competitiveness tends to be expressed less through appeals to strength and physicality and more through the command of specialist knowledge and technical skills. Within this, personal computers and fantasy games tended to attract significant attention as the following discussion highlights:

Interviewer: And what do you like about the computers?

Nathan: You can do maths and there's also word games and you have to do sums to get past things. You have to get the diamond and the eye and when you get the eye you can press on the eye and then you get the demon. But if you land on the demon you have to do lots of sums/

Harry: /Six sums/

Nathan: /But if you get them right it banishes away

Harry: And if you're on Level 10 there's 10 demons and 10 diamonds. [...] The first level's very easy, there's just one, two, three, four gates to open.

The significance of fantasy stories and films and the status that accompanied detailed knowledge of these can also be seen in the following discussion with Michael, James and Oliver:

Michael: I went to see Harry Potter!

Adam: We're going to see it!

James: And I'm going to the pictures maybe tomorrow to see the Lord of the Rings!

Adam: I don't like the Lord of the Rings very much.

Interviewer: [to *Michael*] Did you like [Harry Potter]?

Michael: Yeah! At the end, at the end Harry was on a chess set and his friend got killed and Harry became a rich boy!

James: Remember, remember Harry Potter sticks his wand up the Ogre's nose!

Michael: Yeah! [laughs]

James: And remember when he pulls it out all the snot and everything!

Michael: It was disgusting!

[...]

Michael: It was Christmas day and Harry Potter got this new cloak and if you put it over you you'd turn invisible don't you?

James: Yeah, yeah. And he went down to the library and got the Book of Spells and he put a spell on the Ogre, when the Ogre came.

Michael: And he found this book and opened that and this big monster head came out!

[...]

Interviewer: Has anybody got any Harry Potter stuff at home?

James: Yeah! Me! Me! Erm, Harry Potter pen, Harry Potter gameboy and/

Michael: /I, I, I'm getting the Harry Potter thing you make stuff in

James: Oh! I'm getting that and I'm getting the Harry Potter Book of Spells

[...]

For some of these boys, therefore, they have acquired and reproduced a very different form of masculinity to their working class counterparts. As can be seen, the opportunities and diverse range of resources available to them that characterises their local community is what they have come to internalise in relation to the emphasis they give and the value they place on knowledge and technical skills. The ability to master computer games, to do well in school and to demonstrate technical knowledge and skills are all part of the taken-for-granted habits of some of these boys. Moreover, it is a particular form of masculinity that actively disassociates itself from the displays of aggression and forms of violence associated with some of the working class boys. This is clearly evident in the following discussion with Benjamin, Oliver and Simon where they attempt to distance themselves from 'bad boys':

Interviewer: Why do you think school's important?

Benjamin: Because you learn lots.

Oliver: You learn lots of things.

[...]

Simon: And if you don't go to school you get put in the bad school.

Interviewer: Oh! And what's the bad school?

Simon: It's where you go every night and you have to sleep in the bad school an' all.

Benjamin: And the lady, if you speak when she tells you not to speak then she whacks you with a chain. She gets this big chain and whacks you on the bottom [*laughs*]

Interviewer: Do you know anyone that goes to the bad school?

Oliver: No. It's not called the bad school it's the bad boys' home. You stay there until you learn to behave!

[...]

Interviewer: Do you know any bad boys?

Simon: If you shoot somebody or if you stick a knife in somebody that's where you go – bad boys' home for you! If you're a bad boy!

Benjamin: The bad boys beat you up!

Interviewer: Are there any bad boys in this school?

Benjamin: No way!

Simon: They wouldn't allow bad boys here anyway! [...] [They're] boys with knives and guns.

While some of these boys would still be seen racing one another in the playground and, at times, wrestling and playing shooting games, there is little sense of the choreographed and carefully-practiced displays of physicality found among their working class counterparts. Some of these middle boys tend to lack the physical competence that some the working class boys are forced to learn. What they have internalised, therefore, is a very different form of masculinity that expresses itself in terms of the mastery of knowledge and technical skills rather than the mastery of the body. What some of these boys tend to lack in terms of physical competence they have gained in relation to the more highly-developed and by now taken-for-granted skills associated with computers, PC games and intricate forms of knowledge of fantasy stories and their associated characters.

Deconstructing masculinities: working within the 'Critical Gender Zone'

These three case studies, while necessarily brief and incomplete, do illustrate the active role that young boys play in producing and reproducing their gender identities. Moreover, they also highlight quite graphically the importance of understanding their emerging masculine identities

within the broader social and economic contexts provided by their respective local areas. It needs to be stressed, however, that what has been outlined above are the dominant forms of masculinity found in the three respective areas. Not all boys recognized or embraced these particular forms of masculinity to the same extent. An emphasis on fantasy play and PC games was found, for example, among some of the working class boys in North Parade and East Avenue as was a focus on strength and physicality among one or two middle class boys in South Park. However, what have been described above are the dominant (or hegemonic) masculinities in each respective area that tend to provide the immediate backdrop against which the boys are forced to negotiate their own particular forms of identity. While not all boys conformed to these, there were sometimes significant costs involved in adopting specific identities that conflicted with them (Thorne, 1993; Connolly, 2004).

As has been shown, the three hegemonic forms of masculinity sketched out above tend to reflect the differing social contexts that these two groups of boys are located in and thus which they have come to internalize. The relatively narrow and limited emphasis on physicality and being able to fight found among some of the working class boys is a reflection of the violence in the area and the lack of resources and alternative opportunities open to them. Moreover, the particular inflections these took within this – in terms of an interest in paramilitary activities in North Parade and the adoption of racist discourses in East Avenue – tended to reflect the particular sets of relations and histories of the respective areas. In contrast, the emphasis on specialist knowledge, demonstrations of technical expertise and fantasy play among some of the middle class boys are all a reflection of the much wider range of opportunities and resources available to them. One telling way of contrasting these different forms of masculinity is to compare the boys' future career plans. While these are only five and six year old boys, the ways in which they are already beginning to imagine and internalize their respective futures – as detailed overleaf in Table 1 for the boys at South Park and North Parade schools – gives a real sense of their respective forms of habitus and thus demonstrates clearly the way in which they are already internalizing the objective structures that surround them.

Returning now to the problem that was raised in the introduction to this paper – the need to work directly with young boys to encourage them to deconstruct their dominant forms of masculinity and to envisage alternative and more positive ways of 'being boys' – it is clear from the above that different approaches will be required for different groups of boys. Davies (2003), for example, has emphasized the usefulness of using stories to encourage girls and boys to step back from and reflect upon their identities. Within this she has also stressed the importance of story-writing as a way in which young children can begin to imagine alternative ways of being.

From the case studies above it would certainly appear that the middle class boys in South Park may well be favourably disposed to such an approach. As shown, they have already internalized relatively advanced literacy skills and thus the emphasis on reading and writing stories and the use of fiction would very much represent a natural extension to their existing cultural practices and habits.

Table 1. What the young boys said they would like to do ‘when they grow up’

Working Class Boys (North Parade)	Middle Class Boys (South Park)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Build houses’ • ‘Fix cars’ • ‘Footballer’ • ‘Kill rats and get a gun’ • ‘Join the UVF!’ • ‘Work with my daddy’ • ‘Make stuff with wood’ • ‘Join the Army’ • ‘Fireman’ • ‘Clean carpets’ • ‘Just go to work’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Professional skateboarder’ • ‘Doctor’ • ‘Jet pilot’ • ‘Footballer’ • ‘Racing car man’ • ‘Scientist’ • ‘TV presenter’ • ‘Artist’ • ‘A person who finds dinosaur bones and fossils’ • ‘Sea-diver’ • ‘Policeman’

However, it is not as clear whether such an approach would be equally applicable to or effective for the working class boys in either North Parade or East Avenue. As has been shown, their social worlds tend to be very much more immediate, real and physical. They are therefore much less likely to be predisposed to an emphasis on fictional reading and writing. Also there are very specific concerns that need to be addressed in each of these two areas – sectarian conflict and paramilitary violence in North Parade and racist harassment and exclusion in East Avenue. It is with this in mind that more emphasis needs to be placed generally on not only understanding the dominant forms of masculinity expressed by boys in particular contexts but also how these forms tend to have been internalized and thus the very different predispositions, ways of thinking and cultural practices that specific boys will have acquired. Gaining a better understanding of this is therefore the necessary starting point for developing specific programmes aimed at deconstructing dominant forms of masculinity for particular groups of boys.

It is with this in mind that Vygotsky’s (1978) work, and particularly his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), can be developed further in relation to gender equity work with young children in terms of what can be called the ‘Critical Gender Zone’. Just as with the ZPD, the Critical Gender Zone emphasizes the need to begin where young children are at and to build appropriately upon their current experiences and levels of understanding. In terms of gender,

therefore, the Critical Gender Zone would represent the distance between what a child has already come to internalize in terms of their current experiences of gender relations and identities and the degree to which they are able to reflect upon and deconstruct these with the encouragement of others.

As regards the deconstruction of dominant forms of masculinity among young boys, therefore, this emphasis on the Critical Gender Zone encourages us to begin with careful observation to clearly map out what the existing predispositions and cultural practices are for particular groups of young boys. Moreover, through the incorporation of the notion of habitus, it also encourages us to identify the broader social and economic structures that tend to give rise to these. All of this will, in turn, allow for the identification of the most appropriate strategies for beginning to encourage the boys to question and critically reflect upon their existing masculine identities and, moreover, the most effective and meaningful methods for doing this. In this sense, such strategies will need to be located at two levels – the interpersonal level of direct work with young boys and then the broader structural level of work within families and local communities.

As regards the interpersonal level, for example, one general and relatively simple approach to take is to promote among children what Francis (1998) has termed the ‘discourse of innate equality’ between boys and girls. This would, as the term suggests, involve challenging boys’ and girls’ belief in innate gender differences in skills and abilities. However, how this is done with specific groups of young boys will depend upon their particular cultural practices and thus what is meaningful for them. Thus, for the middle class boys at South Park, a significant challenge for them would be for girls to take leading roles in some of the fantasy stories they could possibly be introduced to. This could then form the basis for encouraging the boys to explore the characters further, possibly through beginning to discuss and construct their own stories with these characters. For some of the working class boys in North Parade, however, this may well be a less successful strategy given that they appear to have much less interest in or dispositions towards fantasy stories and also that the discussion and construction of additional stories are tasks that are less meaningful to them. Rather, it may be more effective to place some of the focus on physical activities where, for example, girls and boys are encouraged to play particular sporting games together thus providing the opportunity for boys’ limited perceptions of girls’ abilities can be challenged. This, in turn, can then form the basis of further discussion. An example of this can actually be seen in the discussion with the boys at East Avenue around football as described earlier. In this context attempts were made to encourage the boys to reflect upon and challenge their existing racist attitudes and practices through reference to concrete events that they value and are engaged in.

While some very important and effective work has been developed at this interpersonal level (see Davies, 1989, 1993; Jordan, 1995; Francis, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000), much less work currently exists at the second level involving the need to engage with broader social and economic structures. And yet, as Davies (1993) has remarked, discourses on gender are not just to be found in the minds and practices of children but also in the family, local community and broader economic structures that exist. While we can be under no illusions regarding the enormity of the task ahead, the present case study clearly highlights the fact that these broader contexts and structures can no longer remain an afterthought when working with young children to deconstruct gender but must be seriously engaged with. It is difficult to envisage, for example, how some of the young middle class boys described above can be encouraged to adopt differing and more open and positive ways of 'being boys' when they remain located in families and broader economic cultures that are highly competitive and aggressive in their ethos. Similarly, how can it be realistic to encourage some of the boys in North Parade to adopt differing ways of being masculine that rely less on physicality and strength when they remain in a highly dangerous and violent context? These are precisely the issues that require more detailed consideration and may well point to wider approaches to deconstructing masculinity that have a community development emphasis to them.

Conclusions

There are a number of key arguments underlying this present paper. First, and in line with existing feminist poststructuralist work, that in order to begin to promote gender equity in early years settings it is not enough simply to provide equal access to resources and play opportunities for girls and boys. What are also needed are strategies that engage directly with young children with the aim of encouraging them to reflect upon and to begin to deconstruct the dominant forms of masculinity and femininity that exist and thus to begin to construct and take up alternative and more positive and open ways of being male and female. Second, and in the context of this present paper, in order to understand the dominant forms of masculinity that exist among young boys it is important to locate these within the broader social contexts and structures within which they exist. It is with this in mind that the paper has suggested using Vygotsky's (1978) notion of internalization as enhanced with Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the habitus. The application of these concepts was illustrated through the comparative case study of working class and middle class boys that showed how some of the ways in which particular forms of hegemonic masculinity are reflective of the broader social and economic contexts within which they exist.

Third, and with this last point in mind, the paper has argued for the need to develop differing methods of deconstruction for differing groups of boys, methods that reflect their particular dispositions and cultural practices and that also recognize the broader social and economic structures that give rise to these. In arguing this, the paper has suggested that it may be useful to return to Vygotsky and to extend his concept of the ZPD to the notion of the Critical Gender Zone. As argued, the Critical Gender Zone requires a strategy to be developed at two levels. At the interpersonal level it emphasises the need not only to carefully study and map out existing forms of masculinity among young boys but also to then develop strategies that are focused on elements that are meaningful to these boys as well as the use of methods that relate appropriately to and aim to build upon their existing ways of thinking and behaving. The examples given of what this might mean in practice are meant for illustration only. They are not meant to imply, for example, that we simply avoid engaging working class boys in literacy work or, for that matter, that we avoid more physical activities with middle class boys. Both of these activities would represent further ways of beginning to undermine the boys' existing (class-based) forms of masculinity. Rather, the main point simply is that in developing effective strategies for deconstructing masculinity among young boys, such strategies need to be meaningful to the boys themselves and thus to begin with their experiences and activities and to use methods that they are familiar with and currently disposed towards. It is with this in mind that the Critical Gender Zone is being suggested as a way of encouraging this.

While much is still required to begin to develop such strategies at this interpersonal level, the groundbreaking work already done in this area by feminist poststructuralists at least allows us to begin to imagine the types of activities and processes that could potentially be engaged in and used for differing groups of boys in particular contexts. However, the biggest challenge relates to the second level – that of the broader social and economic structures that give rise to dominant forms of masculinity – where very little work has been undertaken to date. And yet, the findings from the present case study would suggest that the 'upper limits' of the Critical Gender Zone are not just determined by what young boys, in this case, can effectively achieve with the help of others but also by what changes in their behaviour and ways of being are realistic and sustainable given the wider contexts of the family and local community within which they live. By ignoring these broader structures the effective space available within the Critical Gender Zone – between where young boys are at now in terms of their masculine identities and practices and what they could be encouraged to become with the help of others – will remain severely limited. One of the greatest tasks ahead, therefore, is for us to begin to widen our focus, to consider ways of engaging with these broader contexts of the family and local community that can effectively help to extend

the spaces available within the Critical Gender Zone and thus the opportunities that exist to make effective headway in deconstructing gender among young children.

Postscript: And where next with Vygotsky?

For a paper within a session on ‘critical, post-modern, and post-structural lenses on young children's lives in schools’ it may have appear a little odd to find the work of Vygotsky (1978) figuring so prominently. Indeed much of my earlier work has been much more explicitly sociological and has made extensive use of the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and it could well be argued that his core concepts of habitus, field and capital are more than sufficient to help understand and interrogate the case studies described above without the need to revert back to a classical developmental psychologist (see, for example, Connolly, 1998, 2000, 2003, Connolly and Healy 2004a, 2004b). However, my turn to Vygotsky is deliberate and for two reasons. The first can be seen as strategic in the sense of attempting to ‘use knowledge tactically’. As Mac Naughton (2005: 43) has suggested, for example: ‘tactical use of knowledge produces spaces for progressive social and political change in our truths and, thus, in our relationships; and it can shift knowledge/power relationships embedded in specific regimes of truth.’ In this sense this paper and the broader project that underlies it is inherently political; it seeks to draw attention to, problematise and encourage change in relation to dominant forms of masculinity found among boys in early years settings.

How this is done is as much a tactical question as a theoretical one and requires us to consider how best we can engage with early years educators and care-givers to bring about change and encourage an emphasis on equity and social justice. There is obviously no single or correct answer to this question. However, one possible approach – and the one used here – is to engage directly with some of the existing truths that inform and structure early years practice and to encourage alternative and more critical readings and re-definitions of these. Vygotsky, and particularly his concepts of internalization and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), have clearly become foundational aspects of early years discourse. The task of using knowledge tactically in this regard is therefore to encourage a re-reading and use of Vygotsky in different ways. In doing so it is possible to make use of some of the existing canons of early years discourse to expand and disrupt existing taken-for-granted beliefs and to create alternative ways of understanding young children’s lives and development. As has been attempted in this article, by encouraging a re-reading of Vygotsky that places an emphasis on his often overlooked historical materialist method (see for example Vygotsky 1994) it is quite possible to create an alternative developmental discourse that undermines any claims to universal truths, that de-

centers children as subjects, that stresses the diversity and complexity of young children's lives and that, ultimately, draws attention to the relations of power and inequality that underpin all of this.

The second reason for advocating a return to Vygotsky however is more theoretical. As an educator I am ultimately interested in the implications of research for practice and, in particular, the use of research to challenge inequalities and promote social justice. What Vygotsky's work offers is a way of extending existing sociological work with these more explicitly educational goals in mind. The use and adaptation of Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development in this current paper is one simple example of the possibilities in this regard. Moreover, the use of Vygotsky also creates the space to begin engaging with and incorporating a whole body of work within sociocultural theory that can be seen, in large part, to be continuing the legacy of his work (see, for example: Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wertsch *et al.*, 1995; Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1998). This would not just be an extension of the desire to 'use knowledge tactically' as described above in the sense of taking some of the key themes of Vygotsky's work and thinking radically about their implications for how children learn and develop. It also provides the opportunity for extending our understanding of the nature and mechanics of such concepts as Bourdieu's habitus through the use of ideas within sociocultural theory such as mediated action and distributed cognition (see Connolly, 2006). In doing so, there is a real opportunity to not just develop theoretically sophisticated and nuanced accounts of young children's lives but also of educational initiatives aimed at enhancing these lives and promoting social justice.

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