Introduction

An Invitation to Meet the Class

We first met the class at the end of a sunny afternoon in July in the quiet of a London suburb. We found ourselves addressing a blur of teenage faces turned expectantly toward us. We explained that we wanted to find out how they lived their lives at school, at home, and online, about their friendships and their learning. We quickly got a conversation going. Who, we asked, used Facebook, and who had a mobile phone? Most hands shot up, although Toby made a point of saying no to Facebook. Some faces were animated, some were blank, and the students began nudging and whispering to each other, as curious about us as we were about them.

All seemed willing to participate, and we were relieved, one crucial hurdle passed. For although Catherine, their class teacher, was enthusiastic about our project, the headteacher (school principal) had been particularly skeptical, and we had no idea yet what the parents would say. Most important, we had yet to gain the class’s trust, and we could not know in advance how the project would unfold.

On that day, all the young people looked alike in their school uniform, and although we had interrupted their lives in full flow, we had no idea of their histories of friendship or hostility, achievement or struggle. Gradually, they became better known to us over the year we spent with them, so that now it is difficult for us to return to that first meeting, knowing the young people as well as we do now. But then, as we met those 28 young people for the first time, we naturally searched for ways to identify them. The most obvious was gender, although typically for a London classroom, the ethnic and racial diversity also caught our eyes (see the appendix). The boys and girls sat in same-sex pairs with boys outnumbering girls almost two to one. It was obvious that some pairs were closer to each other than others.

Among the girls, Megan and Adriana muttered to each other at the back of the room as we were being introduced to the class; both were
discreetly made up, with earrings and nail varnish. One girl, Lydia, sat by herself and seemed withdrawn from the others. She was pushing at the boundaries of the school-uniform regulations with visible makeup and socks pulled high over her knees—something the teacher had already commented on. Sara and Giselle appeared good friends—sitting under the teacher’s nose and exuding confidence. Another ethnically diverse pair of girls, Alice and Jenna, did not seem at all close to each other, but we later discovered they were great friends, unlike as it turned out Sara and Giselle. Dilruba and Salma sat amicably together, while Abby—a larger young woman than her peers—seemed rather dazed.

Two boys stood out for us instantly because of the way they were marked by the adults. Aiden, a small, quiet, dark-skinned boy, had a classroom assistant with him, having had trouble at his previous school. Toby had somewhat wild hair and turned out to be registered with special educational needs; although he answered our questions directly and politely, he did not seem to integrate or talk with other members of the class. Three boys sought to engage with us one to one. Sergei, taller and more physically mature than his peers, spoke to us in a likable and engaged, if rather formal, way. Sedat caught our eye quickly and wanted to ask us lots of questions. He constantly put his hand up to seek reassurance about the simplest of tasks, and already we could see how he tended to annoy those around him. Nick, a polite and light-skinned mixed-race boy whose grandmother had replied very positively to our initial letter about the project, seemed popular with everyone.

The rest of the boys were a bit of a blur. Many were quiet, shy, and clearly nervous about meeting us. Yusuf, a giant of a child, sat with Hakim. Both boys flushed when spoken to and muttered back to us in monosyllabic replies. The same was true of Mark and Joel, both of whom seemed quiet and serious. Two of the boys, Dominic and Sebastian, had fashionably spiky hair, were well turned out, and spoke with middle-class accents. They were chatting with Jamie, a Chinese-looking taller boy, who was always talking with his peers but reserved with us. Large and self-conscious, Shane grinned rather vacantly at us. He sat next to Fessehaye (Fesse), a dark-skinned and lively character who seemed a bit dazed as he replied to us and who was the butt of jokes from several teachers; he appeared to have a bit of a reputation—we were not sure for what—but it all felt very friendly. A small, very self-composed boy, Max,
seemed not to have any close friends. A fringe fell over his eyes, but his eyes followed us; and he was evidently very curious about us, replying to questions precisely, in middle-class tones. Adam, tousled haired and sleepy looking, seemed to typify those adolescent boys who do not want to get out of bed; and Gideon was quiet and focused.

We return to these characters often as our book unfolds. We realize that it is difficult for readers to recall each of them from these quick sketches, just as it was for us at the start. There is a list with everybody named in the appendix. We realize, too, that our sketches are full of personal, often superficial assumptions about social class, ethnicity, and all the other cultural indicators that we as “natives” pick up on, just as teachers do when faced with a new class. But this is part of the point: our book unpacks the first impressions on which much of social life is based, to reveal the deeper patterns, influences, and relationships.

This knowledge is the researchers’ privilege. After all, teachers know little of the students out of at school, and some do not know them well in school either; so first impressions, even stereotypes, may have lasting effects. Then, a child known so well to his or her parents can appear very different at school, and it became important to our research method to note the different personae that the young people projected, or were known by, in different settings. By mapping continuities and disjunctures in our experiences of the class across settings, we hoped to grasp the connections and disconnections that mattered to them and those around them. How are their lives shaped by themselves and others? What opportunities and constraints do they face, growing up in these early years of the 21st century?

What This Book Is About

This book is about a class of 13- to 14-year-olds at an ordinary urban secondary school in London, England, over the school year 2011–2012. It is a tricky age, difficult for parents and teachers and for the young people themselves. What do young people want, how do they see the world, and how do they find a path through the opportunities and constraints they face? Much depends on them, but it also matters how they are supported or undermined; and this, in turn, depends on a society that is itself changing, often questioning what it can or should offer
young people. Increasing social inequality, along with historical processes of globalization and individualization, give rise to considerable uncertainties about the future, and frequently the media report crises of confidence in the family, contested visions of educational goals, and a host of anxieties about norms and values. To throw some light on the many competing claims about youth today, this book asks, What matters to them? How do they approach life at home and school? Is it really a matter of “all change” in the so-called digital age? What vision of the future do they think their parents and teachers are preparing them for?

After outlining our project to people, it becomes apparent that the very notion of “the class” has a curious fascination, implying a seemingly closed, intense, yet fragile world. Fueling this fascination are the plentiful fictional portraits of school life in our culture. Perhaps their appeal is that they invite us to remember—or reimagine—the intensely felt, bounded world of childhood. Indeed, part of our contention is that much of children’s lives are relatively inaccessible to the adults around them—their teachers know little of their home lives; their parents know little of their life at school. We wanted to understand the ways in which young people build their own meaningful worlds, how these intersect with those of others, and how they imagine their future.

The study of one class provided a useful means of doing this, and we should take a moment to explain the notion of “a class” in relation to the British school system. As is common, although not universal, the class we studied was one of eight in a year group of 250 at a large secondary school of some 1,500 11- to 18-year-olds. We use the term “year” where the US would use the term “grade” to describe a level and year of schooling. Having arrived at the school aged 11 and been assigned to “their” class, the students had spent the first year often together in their lessons, being divided by aptitude for a few subjects. Now in Year 9 (or Grade 8 as it would be in the US), they were divided for all of their subject lessons depending on aptitude or simply to mix them with others in the year group. But a key continuity with previous years was that every day began and ended with “tutor time,” 15 minutes in which they assembled in “their” classroom with Catherine to prepare for or review the day as “a class.”

In exploring the lives of these young people within and beyond the bounds of the class and the school, this book offers a rich portrait of the
young people’s everyday lives. Most simply, we wanted to get beyond the many fearful claims circulating among adults about today’s youth—that they are so immersed in the online world that they cannot concentrate on learning, that they neglect family life, that they disrespect their parents and teachers, even that they no longer establish their own values or sustain a sense of privacy. These claims—often crystallized in adult dismay over young people’s enthusiastic use of digital technologies—matter because they make parents worried about their children and teachers critical of their students, leading them to restrict opportunities that could otherwise be fruitful for the young people.

We include “in the digital age” in the subtitle of our book not because we believe the world has been radically transformed by the advent of ubiquitous digital networks but to address the prominent public and policy discussions linking digital media and young people. “The digital” focuses public attention on the complex changes of late modernity opening up opportunities and stimulating critique and debate about what it mean to be young and to grow up. Some of the ways in which digitally networked, convergent technologies have entered people’s ordinary lives may facilitate socially progressive change—supporting youth participation and creative and learning opportunities and providing resources designed for disadvantaged groups. At the same time, there is reason to fear that those same technologies are, with perhaps greater force, being actively reinvented by powerful elites to ensure that political and commercial logics dominate. However, in drawing attention to technologies in this way, we emphasize that they gain their meaning through particular practices and contexts of design and use.

But it is not just digital technologies that make for change between the present and previous generations—many other changes have shaped the possibilities for and influences on young people in recent decades, and these changes have been more thoroughly researched and theorized, as we discuss in chapter 1. The school was situated in a London suburb, and as we shall show, living on the edges of a multicultural world city shaped the young people’s experiences too. So while their lives were often intensely local, we wanted to understand how such experiences might make sense within a framework of grand claims about the increasingly globalized, individualized, and consumerist society in the counties of the global North. In such analyses, people have become detached
from their traditional roots in social class, ethnicity, or neighborhood. While this potentially frees them to construct their own identities, make their own choices, and forge their own direction in life, a growing body of research shows that this is far from liberating. Increasingly, individuals must bear the risks of managing their lives under conditions of reduced support or security and increasing complexity and uncertainty. As educational and economic opportunities, jobs for life, supportive communities, welfare consensus, and trust in institutions are all in one way or another undermined, the prospects for young people seem bleak.

Some people respond to these pressures by adopting a stance of competitive individualism, on the grounds that if life is becoming more uncertain and safety nets are withdrawn, it is better to try as hard as possible to win these diminishing rewards. Education represents a prime resource in this competition, as do the diverse and unequal economic and cultural resources provided by families and communities. Such a response is associated with our current phase of neoliberal capitalism, and critics argue that such behaviors are precisely the response that the state desires.

Yet our research with the class leads us to identify a further stance enacted by some of their families. We call it conservatism with a small c, to distinguish it from any political party. This is the view that the seemingly inexorable process of change can be slowed or stalled by bolstering the authority of established institutions such as family, school, community, and church and endorsing their traditional values. This stance draws on a language of fairness and civility, as we shall show; yet the outcomes can be far from fair.

Neither of these two stances dispels any pessimism toward the future—hence our interest in a third, more progressive stance, based on the capabilities and potentialities of network connections, especially those that aim to foster new and collaborative forms of community, creativity, and civic participation. “Connection”—a buzzword heavily cited in government statements, advertisements, and public policy rhetoric—currently has a particular appeal. In this discourse, connection is good, and disconnection is bad. Schools reach out to parents, education policy embeds schools in their locale, youth workers link up community sites, and parents join groups to support their children’s play, sports, and after-school clubs. Many public and private hopes center on the pos-
sibility that digital networked technologies in particular can engender positive connections for the benefit of youth and society.

Yet here, too, research into how young people actually live their lives can help tease out the rhetoric surrounding such hopes. While some observers hold that digital networks render life more superficial, fast paced, and inattentive, others worry that commercial (rather than public) interests are increasingly driving living and learning in the digital age. It is society’s embrace of digital networks that extends the power of commerce into once-public processes of learning, knowledge production, and civic participation.

These commercially owned networks are becoming ever more important in once-private processes of identity, personal relationships, and pleasure as well as being implicated in state surveillance, and this is why, in this book, we pay attention to the concept of identity. Identity, it is argued, has taken on a different kind of burden under the stress of individualization. This could be said for everyone living in the relatively affluent, multicultural, highly modernized countries of the global North. But exploration of different aspects of identity and their intersections is particularly absorbing for young teenagers. We worked with the class for over a year and came to conceptualize their identities as simultaneously situated and relational. By saying that identities are situated, we mean that they are not just expressed in but also constituted through what happens in particular places—usually home, school, and community. For young people, these are all contexts heavily shaped by parents, teachers, and the wider structures of society. But as we shall see, young people are keen to seek out “in between” places, whether visible or hidden, sanctioned or transgressive, to retain a measure of autonomy—for example, by taking their time over the walk home from school, hanging out on Facebook, or putting a “no entry” sign on their bedroom door. By saying that identities are relational, we mean that young people’s identities are developed and performed through social interaction—especially with family, teachers, and peers. People figure out who they are through their relationships with others—and these relationships may be demanding or complacent, constructive or problematic.

Many aspects of identity are at play in this book—family identity, learner identity, peer identity, cultural and ethnic identities, urban identity as Londoners, digital identity—all these must be contextualized
within the different spheres and relationships that make up young people’s lives. In late modernity, scholars have talked of “the project of the self” or of “self-making,” which helped us focus on how teenagers, as much if not more than everyone else, are reflexive about this process.9

Significantly, for young people in the early 21st century, never have so many visions been offered—of who they could be, what they could achieve, what they might want. Thirteen- to 14-year-olds are situated between dependence and independence, their ambiguous and often difficult social positioning being particularly interesting. Indeed, this in itself gives us some difficulty in referring to them in this book, since they no longer wish to be called children; “adolescents” seemed to us too clinical; “teenagers” or “kids” seemed too patronizing; thus we settled for the neutral term “young people.” Of course, to their parents they are still children, and to their teachers they are students.

Our Approach

Since our study is of a school class, we began our investigation with the school, an institution that plays a defining role in young people’s lives. We soon realized that how they made sense of their classroom experiences and school life was largely unaffected by the fierce discursive struggle going on above their heads among governments, pedagogues, technologists, and pundits seeking to redefine the purposes and practices of education in the digital, networked age. But school had, nonetheless, been reshaped by these struggles in ways that mattered for the students, making their school experience in some ways continuous with that of their parents but in other ways very different.

As we go on to consider, home and family occupies another important part of the picture, and here, too, there are lively public debates about transformations in childhood. These were evident in the teachers’ speculations about students’ home lives—since they rarely gained the direct insight into the home that we were able to. Debates about childhood and family life were also visible in the parents’ anxieties (more so than in their children’s accounts)—often surfacing in their fraught reflections on managing the influx of digital devices into the home. For young people, the peer group is the third and crucial element. In some ways, this was the hardest for us to observe directly; yet it was the sphere
of life that the young people were most keen to tell us about as they got to know us. Here we try to capture the range of their relationships, from personal friendships through to the largely civil relations among members of the class, their wide and diverse digital social networks, and, for many in the class, family connections with their country of origin as well as connections within various diasporas. Each of these spheres—or increasingly, networks—of school, home, and peer groups is now substantially mediated by mobile and online technologies; yet as we found, the forms taken by these mediating processes were sometimes surprising, working both to connect and to disconnect in complex ways.

Around these three intersecting spheres, we can draw the wider circle of community and culture, shaped by urban, regional, and ethnic influences and crosscut by social class. Beyond this is the wider society, a world that the young people know partly through the news, film, television, and social media and partly through living cheek by jowl with others from all walks of life. To grasp as much of this as we could, we observed the class, both as individuals and as a group, interact during and around lessons, and we visited their homes and families, joined in some out-of-school activities, and peeked into their digital worlds. The first impressions with which we opened this chapter set up a host of possibilities to be explored as the research progressed. For instance, we could see instantly that the class was diverse in terms of ethnicity, but we did not yet know what the markers of either ethnicity or, indeed, social class (beyond how we picked up spoken accents) might mean for the individuals, the school, or the families we were to meet later on. We could also see straight away that some young people were seen as a source of trouble, like Lydia and perhaps Sedat; some young people had a reputation for being a joker, like Fesse, although most appeared to be good, compliant students, notably, Sara, Giselle, Dom, and Sebastian. Differentiating the rest was difficult, and working out what kind of identity they possessed for themselves, for their peers, parents, and teachers occupied us for some time.

As explained in chapter 1, we grounded our analysis in the detailed descriptions of the texture of the experiences and the various economic, social, and cultural resources that members of the class could draw on—the houses they lived in, the bedrooms they had to themselves or had to share, or the kinds of technology bought for them by their parents.
We also listened to the many expectations, hopes, and anxieties that intertwined and held them and those around them, shaping their trajectories. These details seemed to ground the young people’s experiences of living and learning in the digital age, while also challenging some of our readings of the data we collected. We therefore went back and forth between data and interpretation and between fieldwork and writing. Yet we have tried to keep our analytic narrative fairly light and accessible, presenting the fieldwork in ways that provoke and unsettle the customary discourses around education and family and sometimes inviting multiple readings precisely because what it means to live and learn in the digital age can be thought about from so many perspectives.10 We imagine that some readers of this book might be interested in the stories from the class from different perspectives: as students, teachers, parents, policy makers, or, of course, fellow scholars.11

We have enjoyed the challenge of conveying the range of perspectives, the variety of personal histories, and the diversity of social experiences that we witnessed.12 By following the young people at school, into their homes, and around their neighborhood, we have prioritized the links and contrasts among the different social worlds that this group of young people inhabited and yet shared with each other. We were especially stimulated to do this since few studies based in schools include any mention of children’s lives at home. Equally, most studies of life at home rarely follow children outside it, tending toward a portrayal of the home as a rather closed world. We could continue: research on informal learning settings is often poorly related to research on learning in school; and research on engagement with digital networks tends to focus on online interactions only, struggling to show how online and offline interactions are linked. There are, of course, significant exceptions, and several of these inspired us, as we discuss during the chapters that follow. But the task of pursuing the actual and potential connections and disconnections across places in young people’s lives—where they themselves were often the link—became both a major challenge and a major theme of this book.

To bring the views of these young people alive, we invite you to engage with the class as you might with characters in a novel. Unfortunately, however, we are not fiction writers: we are not going to make up dialogue, we cannot offer you an omniscient narrator’s point of view
to tell you what everyone is really thinking, and doubtless our writing style lacks elegance. But we prefer not to follow the sociological convention whereby research subjects are categorized primarily in demographic terms—their gender or ethnicity, for example, although these and, especially, social class emerge as important themes at various points. Instead, we borrow from the literary tradition that introduces the dramatis personae through their roles in the action (and you can find details about all of them in the appendix). We have also tried to learn from the tradition of ethnographic writing so as to depict young people’s experiences of living and learning in the digital age in cities in the global North a decade or so into the 21st century.

Overview of the Book

This book aims to answer abstract historical and sociological questions with the everyday experiences of our class. Our premise is that the young people’s experiences simultaneously ground and yet are illuminated by wider debates about how young people themselves interpret and negotiate their pathways across the times and places that shape their lives. It does so at a particularly interesting point in late modernity, in which the contrary forces of socio-technological innovation and the reproduction of traditional structures (the school, the family, social class) threaten to pull young people in different directions.

Chapter 1 frames our inquiry in terms of theory. Curiously, our central concepts of connection and disconnection—which we see used everywhere in academic, policy, commercial, and public discourses—have been remarkably little theorized. Their value connotations are clear enough and rarely challenged, but why is it good to connect, whether the connections link people, places, or ideas? Our starting point is that meaning itself is generated through connection. Identities are relationally constituted. Learning extends across sites and experiences. Today, more than ever before, the networks of connection that enmesh us seem both unlimited and increasingly flexible. Yet, arguably, the claims of the network society—underpinned by digital transformations, open to both emancipation and exploitation—are overstated: identities are not infinitely flexible, institutions impose boundaries, privilege reproduces itself, and cultures are rooted in tradition even as they open up to new
routes and flows. To interrogate and critique the significance of connection and disconnection for today’s youth, chapter 1 builds a framework for understanding both the shifting interrelations among identity, knowledge, and power in a digitally networked age and the forces of social reproduction that sustain continuities with previous times. As we discuss, we find the analysis of individualization and the risk society helpful in capturing the dilemmas and tensions that young people experience and that adult society projects on them and structures for them. However, we acknowledge the critiques of these theories, especially insofar as they appear to overstate individual agency, undervalue historical continuities, or celebrate the emancipatory potential of late modernity even as, simultaneously, they foretell a gloomy vision of our future.

Chapter 2 explains our research process. At the outset, we envisaged young people’s lives in terms of a Venn diagram, with three more or less interconnected circles, representing school, home, and peers. To understand just how these circles within circles work in the lives of 21st-century children, we mapped these three domains onto the three terms of the school year, resulting in a sequential research design that occupied us from the summer before the fieldwork year until the autumn term following it. Thus, we began in the classroom, then followed the students home, and lastly explored their connections with friends and peers, extended family, or other activities in a range of places both online and offline. In each place, we were as much interested in the intersections—for example, how home was talked about in school—as we were in the places themselves. Primarily, our method sought to recognize young people’s agency and voice, although the strong influences and constraints they faced demanded that we also attend to the views of their parents and teachers as well as of the wider society, not least because these also found their expression in what the young people said to us. Thus, we began to think more of education and family as the two dominant institutions within and sometimes against which young people negotiated their present and future possibilities. On this view, friendships—pursued online and face-to-face, including in the in-between places in and around their home and locale—allowed for the exploration and enjoyment of alternative modes of connection and disconnection. We bring the main steps of our research methods to life by
reflecting on a typical “day in the life” and “year in the life” of the class, leaving the methodological details to the appendix. This allows us to introduce the important themes in the young people’s lives and, therefore, for the empirical chapters that follow.

We begin, however, with a social network analysis of the class, using this as a heuristic to unpack the reconfiguration of young people’s social, learning, and online networks in the digitally networked age. Social network analysis is currently popular for offering insights into the “big data” produced by social network activity or other large-scale records of interactions and transactions. But here we draw on the long tradition of sociological inquiry into small and relatively bounded networks such as our class. People create and re-create patterns of sociality—of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection—through their everyday routines of meeting and greeting, giving and receiving. The network is, therefore, a way of grasping how the ordinary practices of daily life shape more or less durable structures, structures that in turn pose both opportunities and constraints to daily life. Chapter 3 constructs a “whole-class network,” finding that through the young people’s own practices of mutual connection or disconnection they have sorted themselves into some relatively stable groupings that fit their personalities and interests, on the one hand, and yet are strongly differentiated in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, on the other. But when we explore each class member’s “ego network,” his or her position within the class turns out to be significant only for some and superficial for many. More important, it turns out, are structures of friendship and family.

While young people’s experiences of life at home or school are greatly influenced by parents and teachers, they have rather more control over their friendships. It is thus no surprise that teenagers experiment with different aspects of their identity, trying out possible selves and finding ways to build relationships under the radar of the adult gaze, the subject of chapter 4. Although such activities give rise to considerable public anxiety about young people’s values and practices, especially in relation to digital networking, we found the young people to be rather cautious and sensible in building their friendships. They prioritized face-to-face communication as a still manageable and private means of connecting with others, and despite having many contacts on social networking
sites, those whom they called “friends” comprised a handful of people well known to them and trusted by them. This is not to say that digital communication played no role in their lives—far from it. But rather than a simple online/offline boundary, the young people were exploring ways of relating to others in different social situations, each of which spanned the online and offline in particular ways, depending both on the nature of particular online platforms and on the interests or motivations of the young people.

Since the sites or places of young people’s experiences have far from been overtaken by the flows of their experiences within networks, in chapter 5 we examine the texture of experience in the contemporary classroom, a place where children and young people spend many long hours and yet that few parents see. Classrooms vary, of course, although the dimensions of difference can be articulated. At Victoria Forest School (henceforth VFS), located in the cosmopolitan suburbs of London, a typical class encompassed wide variation in socioeconomic status and ethnicity and, therefore, in parental aspirations and resources as well as cultural values and traditions. Our fieldwork revealed an overriding concern for maintaining social order—to enable both effective learning of the curriculum and also, more subtly, learning what has been called “the hidden curriculum.” We analyze this in terms of the demands of civility—how students are required to fit in and get along with each other, at least superficially, although as we also show, these normative demands are nowadays far from “hidden.” Is this a matter of democratic, even cosmopolitan, ideals of an open and tolerant community? Or is it a way of ensuring conformity to white middle-class norms among a diverse population? Mass media were used by teachers—and tolerated by students—for offering a shared worldview, a set of popular culture resources and reference points that supports rather than disrupts the norms of civility that are considered paramount for sustaining a broadly positive, if undemanding, school experience. The chapter also examines how peer-to-peer relationships are valued by young people within the more authoritarian constraints of the school and how these were used in negotiating more authentic ways of being in school.

In chapter 6, we take a close look at something that surprised us. The classroom in VFS in 2011–2012, as in many other UK schools, was heavily framed by the measurement system implemented in support of the
government-mandated national curriculum. The result was a discursive and practical focus on “levels”—with learning managed through a rigorous regime of quantification and standardization that extended across all subjects, even including out-of-school activities. As with the emphasis on civility, the focus on levels also served to bound the classroom as an inwardly focused space that impeded flexible flows of learning across home, school, and elsewhere, distancing parents and constraining teachers. Beyond the surprise of uncovering so endemic a language of learning, what surprised us even more was that the students, parents, and teachers all preferred to embrace levels rather than risk more diverse, creative, or networked visions of learning.

One of the most striking experiences for us was going home with the young people we had only met at school, the subject of chapter 7. Having formed our accounts of their learning and social identities in one setting, we had to revise our views of many of them when we saw them again at home—with their family, by themselves in their bedrooms, when they went online. As already foreshadowed by the network analysis, home and family was in many ways a more fundamental source of values and sustenance, but it was also a place of emotion. The media—both mass and networked—were heavily implicated in the domestic setting of values, emotions, and identities. Families sought to overcome the perceived threat the media posed to family boundaries by seeking, instead, to use the media as a source of shared understanding, a convivial experience of family solidarity that served further, however, to distance home from school. The array of disconnects that we uncovered between home and school—both chosen and inadvertent—was itself problematic for some young people, and yet these were sufficiently commonplace for us to begin also to wonder about those for whom home and school offered consistent and compatible experiences.

The next two chapters, 8 and 9, examine the opportunities for learning outside school that were made available, pursued, and rejected by members of the class. Here we particularly focus on the ways that families from different kinds of social backgrounds—traditional middle-class, more bohemian, and highly educated families, along with desperately aspirational parents, especially those who had experienced some of the tragedies of enforced migration, as well as those who live their lives embedded in community practices far away from the
classrooms of London—provided for, encouraged, and defined learning for their offspring. In chapter 8, we pay particular attention to forms of cultural capital, which is the kind of knowledge and expectations that stem from parental education and, of course, wealth. We describe how different homes construct opportunities for learning physically (how they arrange rooms and resources, especially technology), socially (how they establish habits and rhythms), and conceptually (how they see the purpose and nature of learning). The chapter concludes by setting these descriptions in the context of lively debates about whether and how digital media can be expected to overcome the more fundamental challenges faced by education in the risk society and by problematizing what connections between home and school mean in practice.

Chapter 9 examines more closely how social capital is created and enacted, by exploring six examples of music making out of school. Examining informal music making allowed us to see how ways of learning that are developed in school may or may not be carried across into cultural activities outside school, demonstrating both connections and disconnections in discipline and habit. While two of our young people, Megan and Adriana, became fed up with being made to do music by their parents, we sat in with Max as he pursued classical piano, and we contrast this with the more progressive pedagogy of Giselle’s music making across keyboard, vocals, guitar, and technology, paying particular attention to the ways that these two informal “classrooms” differ from or show continuity with the teacher-student relationships and attitudes toward school-based learning described in chapter 6. Our third pair of musicians tells a story of music making as entirely self-taught, on the one hand, and embedded in the Turkish community, on the other. Not only do both cases shed further light on these questions of pedagogy and connections with school, but they also challenge ideas of cultural capital being a solely middle-class property. Diverse forms of cultural capital help to nuance the distinctions evident in the class—both in terms of young people’s music learning and, looking back to the previous chapter, in terms of how parents try to equip the home so as to support school learning.

Our final empirical chapter shifts the frame from connections across the places of young people’s lives to connections or disconnections over time. We inquire into the pathways set out for the class by their school and homes, the trajectories they follow in practice, and the factors that
facilitate or block them. While our observations permitted an analysis that spans the fieldwork year, our interviews with the young people looked backward and forward over a longer timescale. By the age of 14, many of the young people were reflexively self-aware of the pathways and possibilities that faced them, and they were coming to terms with rather more mundane futures than the popular hyperbole of the digital age would suggest. Moreover, in this chapter, as in other longitudinal sociological and social psychological studies, the effects of social reproduction were clear. Here we struggle to reconcile an optimistic recognition of the possibilities still open to our class of young people with the body of research on the lack of social mobility in Western societies that suggests a more predetermined future for many of them.

Stepping back from the close analysis of young people’s sense making and self-making, our final chapter develops these normative concerns, to ask what can be said about the prospects for connected living and learning in the digital age. Our portrait of young people’s lives is in many senses a heartening one—they are generally sensible, thoughtful, and optimistic; doing reasonably well at school; largely happy at home; and having fun with friends. Encouragingly, we find rather little evidence of the competitive individualism that critics of neoliberalism fear, although we do show how the school especially seeks to instill competition into school life. We find more evidence of an adherence to conservative structures and comfortable pleasures. Is this, inadvertently, sacrificing the potential for radical alternatives that could undermine the seeming straitjacket of social reproduction, reconfigure pedagogic possibilities, and open up more diverse connections and pathways to opportunity?

Answers to such questions cannot be securely answered by the study of one class over one year, however detailed. But if we position our study within the wider analysis of social change, we are pessimistic in the face of continued lack of sustained social mobility or democratic educational reform, along with evidence of increasing labor-market uncertainty and commodification of both public institutions and the private practices of daily life. What we came to see in our fieldwork as the everyday yet apparently minor experiences of missed opportunities and broken pathways can, on this larger view, be interpreted as the routine reproduction of the boundaries between home and school. We could, and often
did, bemoan these instances, hoping that tentative expressions of interest would be supported or that new shoots of possibility would flourish. But in the end, we had to ask ourselves why this happened so rarely, since for most of our class, the promises of progressivist educational and societal reformers, newly invigorated by the digital optimists, remained just that, promising visions too little instantiated in practice to be a reality for most young people. Over and again, our fieldwork pointed up the entrenched anxieties about the risks of inappropriate or uncontrolled connection. And over and again, further exploration revealed the strong institutional and commercial interests at stake in reproducing traditional conceptions of school and home. Reimagining young people’s futures not only is a larger social project but also remains a challenge for individuals and their families. At this scale, everything is too risky, and thus most young people find a safer pathway somewhere between the competitive individualism invited by commerce and the state and the conservative embrace of familiar values and expectations that, for many, home and community offers.

Goodbye to the Class

Some 15 months after first meeting the class, we found ourselves back in tutor time asking for a final interview with everyone, at home or school, as they chose. It was the right thing to do—they appreciated something to mark the end of the project, and we gained some very thoughtful interviews in which the students relished the chance to be reflective, looking backward over the year and forward to their future. We could also follow up on puzzles or incomplete information revealed so far. Yet the young people were already changing, now in Year 10, with much to say on how learning was more serious or how interests they had had in Year 9 were now over. Faced with so many changes, we felt as if we should either continue forever or leave now.

When conducted at home, these final interviews also gave us a chance to thank parents. Over and again, our fieldwork notes record the sense of a warm reunion on our visiting homes for the last time, after the summer break. Several parents asked what we had found out, and we promised to write and tell them (which we did). The young people showed themselves impatient for a book (about them!) to appear and
were disappointed to hear of the glacial pace of academic writing and publication. Foolishly perhaps, in our goodbye to the whole class, we entered into a discussion about what the book should be called. We offered the usual mouthful of academic keywords, only to be firmly overridden by Megan, who confidently called out that it should be called “The Class,” of course. So it is.