Living and Learning in the Digital Age

Why is it interesting to examine the interconnected lives of a class of 13-year-olds now? How can we explore what matters about their lives—with what concepts and what questions? Public debate asks anxious and judgmental questions about whether families are “broken” or schools are “failing” or young people have lost their “moral compass.” These questions typically focus on society’s values, practices, and institutions in changing times and are often framed by (inevitable) uncertainties about the future. Such questions may resonate with young people and, more especially, those who provide for them and worry about their future. For the past twenty years, the rhetoric of “the digital age” has loudly claimed that the recent and rapid take-up of digital, online, and networked technologies is fundamentally reshaping homes, schools, and communities.¹ This rhetoric claims that society must find a way to prepare its youth for jobs that have not yet been invented and to live in ways—more digital, more connected—that the adults responsible for them cannot imagine.²

Yet there is a substantial disconnect between the public anxieties swirling around young people’s everyday experiences, persistently claiming dramatic change, and a sense of continuity with the past. This disconnect is evident to those who live or work with young people and who are often skeptical of the extreme emotions and oversimplified views expressed in discourses about youth. But this “noise” also conceals important questions. These ask less about the “state of youth” or “where society is going” but instead puzzle over the present in relation to the past. What has really changed between, say, the childhoods of today’s parents or grandparents and those of children growing up now? What aspects of change or continuity really matter, and over what timescale should changes be gauged?

This perspective pays more attention to what it feels like to be young now compared with previous generations, investigating the texture of home, school, or leisure experiences in order to reach a judgment about
what might have been lost or gained. These questions help to put “the
digital” in its place, asking just what difference it makes or whether it
is too soon to tell. Importantly, the answers tend to position children’s
own agency in constructing their identities and environments as part
and parcel of the more fundamental historical changes of modernity
occurring over recent centuries, rather than young people being subject
to radical transformation in a matter of a few years.³

In this chapter, we develop a framework that sets out our main con-
cepts, unpacks the debates we hope to contribute to, and refines the
questions that guided our fieldwork with the class. In terms of structure,
we will organize the framework loosely around the three core spheres of
young people’s lifeworld⁴ presented in the introduction, namely, home,
school, and peer group. In terms of analysis and evidence, we focus on
what is changing, including but going considerably beyond changes in
digital technology.

Understanding Change in Modern Society

Even when considering childhood over the past half century in the
world’s wealthier countries, academics, commentators, and policy
advisers have oscillated between claims of continuity and radical change.
The case for “all change” draws a contrast between now and then, with
“the past” often being only vaguely, even nostalgically, sketched. It sees
key changes only in terms of how recent they seem and emphasizes that
children know more about the digitally networked world than their
parents do; that public and private spheres are now blurred, with people
blurting out their intimate lives in public; that commerce is stretching
its tentacles into our private spaces and innermost thoughts; and that
while people used to be more confident about how they “fitted into”
society—in terms of social class, nationality, and ethnicity—now noth-
ing can be taken for granted.⁵

Yet social historians observe that the postwar period exhibited an
unusual degree of social stability across Europe and North America,
defined by a broad consensus over the legitimacy of the nuclear family,
the firm, the public sphere, regulated markets, and the nation-state
as the basic building blocks of society.⁶ Not only do we now tend to judge
the political, socioeconomic, and cultural upheavals of recent years by
reference to this period, but since it encompassed the childhood of both today’s parents and grandparents, it makes for a shared vision across the generations. Of course, even during this postwar period, much was in flux, radically accelerated by the neoliberal economic restructuring begun in the 1980s.

Theories of late modernity are helpful in framing questions that avoid this polarization between “all change” and “no change,” in that they address a complex balance of continuity and change over the past half century (or longer).7 In these theories, change is understood through a set of “sensitising concepts.”8 These focus on broad historical shifts regarding “individualization” and the “risk society” as well as some more specific concepts with particular relevance to our project—“the democratization of the family” and “the pedagogicization of everyday life” as ways of thinking about the changing family and school, and “the project of the self” as a way of rethinking identity as a task to be performed.

Scott Lash characterizes the post-Enlightenment period in terms of “simple” modernity—industrial societies striving for rational principles of growth and efficient exploitation of resources, prioritizing progress in knowledge and concentration of power for avowedly democratic purposes.9 Within this period, the individual came to embody the values of the society—self-serving but amenable to education, with rights to be protected and duties to perform.10 The 19th and 20th centuries saw increasing organization of both economy and society, a growing underpinning of welfare provision, and substantial trust in the key institutions of the state. With much fanfare, Western societies from the 1960s onward (roughly, “late modernity”) tore apart any consensus regarding the relation of the individual to society, with neoliberals advocating individual freedoms over the state management of communal goods and with radicals challenging postwar conventions of class and race, gender and sexuality, and political and cultural difference.

But these political debates can also be read as the latest manifestation of more fundamental shifts in the sources of power: from a centralized state to dispersed institutions of governance; from the heartlands of an industrialized economy to the impermanent (although still concentrated) networks and flows of an information economy; and from the primacy of the nation-state to new tensions between the global, regional, and local. The consequence, it is claimed, is a permanent sense
of instability, even crisis—in relation to the economy, the family, education, religion, political representation, and the natural environment. This is accompanied by a pervasive sense of personal insecurity and a disturbing lack of trust in the institutions tasked with fixing these problems. Meanwhile, the media, yet another set of institutions that have simultaneously consolidated and yet also dispersed their power through ever more channels and platforms, are increasingly implicated in how we make sense of our world.

The Everyday Experience of Living in Late Modernity

Theories of late modernity paint a vivid picture of large-scale social change. More than ever before, people are charged with charting their own course through life and taking responsibility for their own risks to a degree that contrasts markedly with previous eras, when they would have been “held” by social convention and tradition. In trying to cope with the many harmful consequences of modernity itself, they are beset by unprecedented levels of uncertainty— incomplete knowledge, conflicting experts, complex decisions, precarious alliances, complicit institutions, too little time, Yet socio-technological developments offer enticing prospects to resolve many of these difficulties, appearing to offer solutions to long-standing problems and greater life choices as well of more personal pleasures than ever before.

Ulrich Beck suggests that society is both fascinated by and ambivalent about socio-technological change. Modernity, he says, “has become the threat and the promise of emancipation from the threat that it creates itself.” Lash adds, “reflective judgement is always a question of uncertainty, of risk, but it also leaves the door open much more to innovation.” We are building new models of family life, enjoying new tastes and lifestyles, designing new pathways to civic engagement. Yet we worry ever more about the value of these changes, whether we are doing the right thing, and whether too much of value is being lost along the way. As a result, we are absorbed in ever more complex calculations of risk and preoccupied by the effort to manage it.

However, it is further claimed, people are exhausted by this task, with more information to gather, complex decisions to make, difficult priorities to weigh up. In reflexive modernity, everyone is inundated
with knowledge about the society they live in—receiving a plethora of advice, guidance, commentary, and popular social science that demand they reflect on their lives and make informed choices. To cope with these choices, people are expected to research the possibilities, consult wisely, and make rational decisions—about work, welfare, lifestyle, finances, contracts, and relationships. This chimes with many parents’ woes—how to manage the “choice” of school for their child, to ensure they are eating the “right” food, whether they “should” read more books or watch less television, how much sleep they “need.” There is plenty of advice out there to guide them, yet as information mounts, so too does complexity, while taken-for-granted assumptions unravel and certainty declines.

Significantly, individuals cannot afford to be passive, because the stable institutions and traditional communities that once provided for their welfare are in retreat, withdrawing lifetime guarantees and safety nets. As they withdraw, individuals have to take on the responsibility for managing their own uncertain futures. While individuals enjoy some new freedoms, choice itself has become burdensome—both in the process of choosing and also in its consequences, as the cost of mistakes falls on individuals too. What was once given is now seen as choice; to marry or not, to have children or not, to live in one country or another—there is no way to avoid such choices. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, “Modernity replaces determinism of social standing with compulsive and obligatory self-determination.” To make the point crystal clear, he cautions, “Let there be no mistake: now, as before, individualization is a fate, not a choice.” In facing our fate—the necessity to choose and to bear the full consequences—we are on our own, since traditional networks of support are no longer reliable or ever present.

Paradoxically, then, greater choice may not mean greater scope for personal autonomy. Certainly individualization is not imagined simply as a celebration of agency. Indeed, societal institutions are working harder to anticipate and control individual actions, rendering behavior predictable and steering it in particular directions so as to mitigate the collective costs of individual failings. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim translate the concept of Individualisierung as “institutionalised individualism,” their point being that the state (along with the many regulatory, supervisory, and public/private organizations to which the state has dispersed its power) builds into its operations a host of as-
sumptions about what individuals should know and do and what they need or may deserve:

On the one hand, individualization means the disintegration of previously existing social forms—for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood etc. . . . [On the other hand,] new demands, controls and constraints are being imposed on individuals. . . . The density of regulations informing modern society is well known. . . . It is a work of art of labyrinthine complexity, which accompanies us literally from the cradle to the grave. 18

In short, the complexity of today’s society renders the individual self-insufficient—almost the inverse of the “self-sufficient individual” celebrated by neoliberal positions that call for more choice and fewer regulations on either individuals or markets. Thus, “you may and you must lead your own independent life, outside the old bonds of family, tribe, religion, origins and class; and you must do this within the new guidelines and rules which the state, the job market, the bureaucracy etc. lay down.”19

Take the simple example of so-called school choice in metropolitan areas. There used to be little question where children went to school. Working-class families sent their children to the local school, and privileged families paid for their children’s education. In the UK, with the postwar introduction of state “grammar” schools, an element of selection through testing was introduced. But with the expansion of the middle classes and the advent of the policy of “parental choice,” parents supposedly could choose the school that best suited their child—more or less academic, more sporty or scientific, larger or smaller, and so on. A once-predictable interaction between educational provision and the behavior of individuals according to the dictates of social class has become far more complex. Parents must choose among schools on the basis of imperfect information about school characteristics and uncertain entry calculations. But not all get their choice, leading to a host of complaints, appeals, and workarounds—moving house to be near a “good” school or manipulating entry requirements by tutoring for tests or pretending a religious affiliation, all of which have unintended consequences of their own. While many parents worry, feel inadequate, or
try to play the system, schools and local authorities struggle to predict yearly intakes, with over- and undersubscribed schools causing problems for budgets and planning; thus, they try ever harder to direct parental decisions by rejigging catchment criteria or redesigning parental information.20

The trend, then, is for institutions to promise choice to the public, then to try to shape how they will respond and then build expectations of how people will behave into their operations. Institutions issue more guidance, dispersing their discursive and regulatory demands into every aspect of our lives and imposing penalties if we fail to act as expected. “The yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible or unrealistic seems to be the main contradiction of the ‘second modernity.’”21 As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim put it, the result is that people try all the harder, with escalating anxiety: “In order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one’s own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative—not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day. Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks.”22

Or must they? While the theory is beguiling, it is not without its criticisms. Two of the most prominent are that, first, the many claims made by these theorists are untested or do not address the evidence that contradicts them. Second, the evidence actually points to a major theoretical problem, namely, the continued importance of the processes of social reproduction that sustain traditional structures of power and inequality. In the following sections, we consider both the theory and its criticisms as they apply to children and young people in their three primary spheres of home, school, and peer cultures.

Home and Family

Crucial changes to home and family have affected children’s and young people’s lives over recent decades.23 Substantial demographic and social shifts have resulted in greater diversity in what constitutes family, strongly shaped by the increased participation of women in the workplace, control over their fertility, and the changed status of
The changing ethnic and religious composition of the British population has remixed cultural norms and practices in relation to family life. Teenagers are staying on longer at school, taking more exams, more likely to enter higher education, and leaving home at an ever-older age as a result of the collapse in the youth labor market. Social psychologists talk of the extension of adolescence or even of a new life stage—“emerging adulthood”—pinpointing new concerns over what happens during that period and how young people manage the transition to independence. As Stephanie Coontz has observed, “In some ways, childhood has actually been prolonged, if it is measured by dependence on parents and segregation from adult activities. What many young people have lost are clear paths for gaining experience doing responsible, socially necessary work, either in or out of the home, and for moving away from parental supervision without losing contact with adults.”

These large-scale social changes have implications for the private life of families. The design of the postwar home centered on public and family spaces (the formal parlor, the busy backstage kitchen, cold bedrooms never used by day). The design of the 21st-century home, by contrast, centers on the multifunctional family room and the individualized bedroom (notwithstanding that many children share). The postwar home was a place for men and children’s leisure and women’s work. Today’s home fuses work and leisure, study and entertainment, for everyone, although women’s domestic labor has not lessened. It is simultaneously a hub for interconnections that extend beyond it, even overseas, and a private sanctuary for intimacy, comfort, and escape. At the same time, “home” and “family” are no longer as neatly overlapping as they were just a few decades ago, with some children living in divided families and/or extended families and so sharing more than one home, and some children lacking a secure home of any kind. Many social statistics take the “household” as their unit of analysis and focus of policy planning, this bearing an uneasy relation to both “home” and “family.”

The effects of changing living standards, educational opportunities, and employment prospects fall unevenly on families, depending on social class and other forms of advantage or disadvantage. Sociologists point to long-term trends of increasing income inequality and social stratification, including the emergence of an entrenched underclass.
that disproportionately includes children. In Britain, for instance, one in six children lives in a home where no parent is employed, while some 10% are deemed to live in poverty. The future even for the once-comfortable middle classes is increasingly uncertain. But for people from disadvantaged backgrounds especially at a time of austerity, the routes to independent adulthood are ever more difficult.

Indeed, the UK government’s recent horizon-scanning report on young people’s social attitudes documents growing insecurity among young people: the expected returns on their now-considerable investment in higher education are not materializing; they are disproportionately affected by unemployment, low pay, housing shortages, and insecure work. As predicted by the individualization thesis, young people are becoming more focused on prestige, personal success, stimulation, and hedonism and less interested in religion, conformity, security, and universalism. This makes them more liberal in some ways—more tolerant toward homosexuality, for instance, and less racially prejudiced—but also more disengaged from civil and civic participation.

Strikingly, today’s young people belong to the first generation since the Second World War that does not believe they will enjoy a better life than their parents, although they expect better opportunities for education, travel, and living longer than their parents. They think it will be harder for them to find a good job, buy a home, and afford a reasonable standard of living. There is growing evidence from qualitative research in the US that parents are even more anxious than their children are. In an ethnographic portrait of family life among the American middle-classes, Elinor Ochs and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik (2013) portray a high, even pathological level of guilt, frustration, ambivalence, and stress experienced by many parents, caught in a bind between the increased time pressures of a dual-career, high-earning, insecure, long-hours culture and the unchanging traditions of normative family life centered on time together, shared pleasures, and mutual support. They paint a depressing picture of mothers especially, working hard to manage work and home and struggling to communicate with their children after school and work, while fathers, even when home, do so little domestic work that their presence may not even be noticed. What exists in middle-class America today may also exist in the mixed London suburb where the
class lived—or it may be coming tomorrow if it is not here already, as the theories of late modernity predict. However, trend data suggest that parents are spending more time than in previous decades caring for their children, although this goes hand in hand with increased parental monitoring and supervision (see Gardner et al., 2012). Ann Hagell, Stephen Peck, et al. (2012) finesse this point by claiming that young people spend more quality time with their parents than in the 1970s, although they eat together less often. Also interesting is that contrary to certain popular prejudices, the greatest increases in parental discipline and encouragement are found in poorer rather than wealthier homes; possibly, parents are responding to the growing difficulties and pressures experienced by children (Gardner et al., 2012).

So the evidence suggests that young people’s lives at home are broadly positive, even though they worry more than earlier generations did about the future—about what results they will get at school, whether there will be jobs, their parents’ finances, their popularity at school, their attractiveness, or being bullied. Ann Hagell and Sharon Witherspoon concluded from a wide-ranging national literature review that “any simple view that the lives of today’s adolescents are more ‘stressful’ than those of their counterparts of 30 years ago would be hard to substantiate.” We wonder, then, if young people’s worries about the future are founded in genuinely unsettling social changes or, instead, a reflection of the anxious discourses that surround them. The theory of late modernity is itself torn between stressing the problems of increased risks and also identifying some opportunities, noting that those who live in today’s ever more anxious, highly regulated, and ultimately unequal society nonetheless feel themselves to be agents fashioning their identities and life course with unprecedented degrees of freedom.

On the basis of our review, we are left with a series of questions for our fieldwork. What is it like growing up in an increasingly individualized society? How do young people perceive and respond to the demands made of them by their families and community? Are their lives still strongly shaped by their gender, social class, and ethnicity? Do social changes, including the advent of digitally mediated activities and networks, bring more (or different) risks or opportunities?
The Changing Role of Education in Late Modernity

Although the terms “learning,” “education,” and “school” are often used interchangeably, they are conceptually distinct. In this book, we particularly draw on socio-cultural perspectives within educational research, as they emphasize that school constitutes a culturally and context specific set of arrangements, norms, and expectations that are central to but not necessarily defining of what it means to be educated.46 This approach complements and even displaces accounts of learning as cognitive—purely a matter of individual understanding or memory, as something that only happens inside people’s heads—by recognizing that schools are social and cultural institutions. This perspective emphasizes how curricular knowledge and disciplinary processes, social conventions, and traditions all work to organize and accredit learning. These processes are, furthermore, culturally and historically dependent on societies’ visions of the purposes of education, and these in turn have been the subject of contested and seemingly continuous political reforms.47 Education, then, refers more broadly to how societies manage and organize knowledge and behavior and how a range of institutional and everyday practices, including but not limited to schools, implements such values. Learning is usually understood at the level of the individual, often emphasizing the learner’s agency, perspective, knowledge, and experience.

All three concepts are, moreover, much contested. We would point to debates over whether children learn better in school or out of school; or whether schools should prioritize common or personalized and individualized modes of learning (or whether such concepts even exist); or whether the purpose of education is to fit children for their future as conceived by the state or, instead, to encourage them to think creatively or critique the status quo. Particular concern currently centers on the commodification (or instrumentalization) of education. By this, we mean that access to education is provided and valued primarily for its instrumental economic benefits—to the individual and to the economy48—although other benefits to well-being may also be recognized.49 This excludes the many alternative or critical visions of education that emphasize the value of education for humanistic and liberal purposes, as periodically advocated passionately by progressivists and
educational reformers. For instance, the Germanic concept of Bildung conceptualizes learning not in terms of gaining discrete bits or even bodies of knowledge or skill but as a total and holistic integration with the development of the self so as to enable people to act as full members of the wider community. But such abstract values are difficult to measure in standardized outcomes (examination scores, school rankings, or the competitive PISA tables produced by the OECD) and so find little favor in mainstream Western education policies. Yet as Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel write, instrumental approaches “may help create an illusion of equality whilst masking the persistence of old inequalities,” since in practice, exciting new opportunities cannot be taken up equally if their promise centers on individual competitiveness.

While discourses of education encompass a range of purposes, some more idealistic than others, the practices of managing schools and assessing students favor individual competition. Schooling is also under increasing pressure to meet the uncertain demands of the risk society. So, on the one hand, schools are disciplinary organizations burdened with increased expectation to establish social order and produce “good citizens.” On the other, since the modern worker is now not necessarily valued for his or her unswerving obedience and compliance, as in the days of the mass industrial factory, schools are expected to foster the initiative, flexible thinking, and assertiveness required by the contemporary and future workplace. With a recognition of the new pressures on individuals to succeed in the risk society, much attention has been paid to how education now strives not to impose control but rather to facilitate self-control, supporting individual processes of self-regulation as part of a regime of power that works through internalized forms of self-motivation. Additionally and controversially, schools are losing their status as the sole route to success, since in addition to formal qualifications, young people must now demonstrate a capacity and willingness to engage in diverse forms of learning throughout their life.

As with the other demands on individuals in late modernity, these shifts suggest both opportunities and risks, and navigating these outcomes brings—for the theorists of late modernity, new forms of anxiety and individualized risk and, for theorists of social reproduction, more intense forms of social inequality. Nonetheless, as we approached our fieldwork, we were struck by the lack of close attention to young people’s
voices and experiences in these debates. So our fieldwork will ask, What does being educated mean for young people, their families, and their teachers in an individualized risk society. What learner identities do they take up and sustain? What do families see as the point of education, and what do they want from schools? Are they creating connections—across people, sites, or interests—that enable particular visions of learning? And how do they respond to the intense competition around school attainment and performance?

Peer Cultures On- and Offline

Young teenagers often seem to their parents to be absorbed in life with their friends, in their bedrooms, online, or inside the world created by their headphones. There is no simple term for this “place” as there is for family and school, yet we see it as sufficiently coherent to be discussed as a third sphere in our analysis. It is where young people “hang out,” an escape from the strictures of home and school. This may mean navigating some personal distance from that same peer culture, seeking a way of “being oneself” together with yet also distinct from peers. We include here the places where young people feel “private,” for as we shall see in chapter 4, these may be shared with peers on- and offline while being kept away from parental or public scrutiny. Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, John Thompson holds that “the private consists of those territories of the self, which include the environment of the self and information about the self, over which the individual seeks to exercise control and to restrict access by others.” In other words, the private need not be solitary or hidden. Rather, we explore the idea that what these various peer/private places offer is the opportunity to negotiate space for self-making that evades the often-dominating influences of home and school.

As sociologists of childhood have shown, children and young people find most opportunity to exercise their agency in the interstices of adult-managed timetables and spaces. William Corsaro emphasizes how children view the world through the lens of meanings created within their friendships and peer culture. In this analysis, the so-called new sociologists of childhood integrate theories of late modernity with the political effort to recognize children’s rights and hear children’s voices
by seeing children as people in the present rather than always viewing them—as parents and teachers tend to do—through the lens of who they might or should become.60 This includes recognizing the places and activities—both self and peer focused—that children strive to keep “under the radar” of adult supervision. In other words, it is precisely the point that there is no agreed term for our third sphere in this book, for this is the interstitial place in between recognized and approved (i.e., adult-managed) places.

A recent study of primary-school playground culture documented children’s reworking of television, computer games, films, and comics in their free play—in the stories they told and the games they played with each other together—resulting in a child-centered culture from which children gain value and recognition.61 Such work draws on a now-established tradition of identifying how young people imbue places with meanings important to themselves and under the radar of adults—bedrooms become places for self-making or the street an opportunity for meeting friends.62 Cultural geographers have supported the new sociology of childhood in showing how people transform places into symbolic resources by investing them with meanings; this in turn influences the role that places play in situating people as social actors within wider networks, as we explore in chapters 3 and 4.63

While social scientists have studied “adolescence,” “youth,” and “peer culture” ever since the recognition (or emergence) of these very phenomena 50 years or so ago,64 in just the past decade, one particular activity has seemingly rewritten the norms and practices of teenage communication, being adopted with astonishing rapidity by the vast majority of young people—the use of online social networking sites. From about 2005 onward, it has been implausible to examine young people’s friendships and peer networks without recognizing their sudden absorption in sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Tumblr, and more.65

It does appear, however, that the more offline spaces are controlled, the more young people turn to online spaces and networks to conduct their identity work and to experiment with relationships, thereby also altering (or “remediating”)66 how their relationships are enacted offline.67 In such spaces, children and young people can be reflexive in their identity work—or what Jerome Bruner calls their “self-making”; like adults, they talk themselves into being, as it were, by drawing on the genres,
tools, and narratives available to them. Jeffrey Arnett adds that, while the available “authorized” narratives of the self from parents and school are often moralistic and teleological, young people themselves prefer to control the resources that inform their self-biography, and so they turn to the media or, as danah boyd argues in relation to social media, to the collective conversation among peers online.

Whether, as popularly claimed, the advent of online social networking makes for a transformation in the nature of friendship itself or merely a new site for the exercise of familiar practices was a guiding question for us in this book. Thus, we ask, what is distinctive about the texture of young people’s self-making and social relationships, compared with previous generations? How do young people make sense of and negotiate ideas of self-making, for the present and as they anticipate the future? Are young people affected by concerns about surveillance, and what does it mean to be private at the age of 13? Are their activities, preoccupations, and aspirations familiar or new, and are they facilitated or constrained by home and school, on- and offline?

Identity: Being and Becoming

As each young person moves among the three spheres of daily life (and others), they themselves are the crucial link among the roles, meanings, and potentials that characterize each sphere. As the structures and practices underpinning each sphere change over the decades, so do the resources and constraints that shape the processes of identity formation and identification. Much current theory thus assumes fluidity and change, emphasizing the complexity of “who people are to each other.” As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, “‘Individualization’ consists in transforming human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’” since rather than inheriting fixed identities based on employment or social roles, people now have to work at making themselves simultaneously distinct from and yet connected to each other.

How, then, do children and young people create a sense of themselves at home, school, and with their friends. What ways of being and participating do the institutions of family and school offer them? For us, identity is constituted through discourse—for example, through talk about the self by individuals and by those around them, including at the level
of wider cultural pronouncements on certain categories of people (girls, musicians, students, “digital natives,” etc.). Since discourses vary across contexts, identities, too, are expressed in different, though overlapping, ways. In part, individuals cannot control this—they are defined by others, and they “give off” meanings that they may not have intended. But people also actively undertake “identity work”—enacting who we are to each other, coconstructing our own and other identities according to particular desires or interests.

Much of young people’s identity work is necessarily tactical, given the power of adults to determine the main structures within which they live. Young people may evade, circumvent, or even resist the ways that parents and teachers manage the spaces and timetables of their everyday lives, but they rarely assert a more strategic authority over their own lives. By contrast, schools are arguably inflexible or unresponsive places, from young people’s point of view. They are as much concerned with the maintenance of social order and the production of social selves as with the overt purpose of teaching and learning. Critics have examined how certain social transactions and disciplinary practices are used to ensure social-class-based reproduction where academic “failure” is as much a desired outcome of the system as “success” in a world that needs a stratified labor force. Empirical analyses have revealed how forms of discipline and control at school work to produce particular kinds of class-based identities (for example, how working-class boys “learn to labour” or how girls took up new opportunities in the burgeoning service industries as labor markets changed in the early 21st century).

Thus, a “being” perspective—which we want to recognize—cannot entirely evade one of “becoming.” In this book, we document various disciplinary practices at school—for example, how and where young people sit, when they can talk, what they wear, and how they are punished—which are intertwined with the discourses that explain how learning is valued and by whom and for what ends. In short, communication and social relationships in school are not innocent; they embed hidden and implicit values and rewards in order to mold and direct preferred social values and identities. A similar case may be made regarding the home and family life, for although families vary, how domestic life is ordered, valued, and explained, especially by adults, is often the most significant influence on children’s social development.
In *Inventing Adulthoods*, Sheila Henderson et al. showed how the constraints and expectations of family and neighborhood similarly shape the trajectory from adolescence to adult independence. Their point is not that social structures are simply determining in a mechanistic way, because not all young people straightforwardly reproduce the circumstances they were born into. Rather, they argue that what matters is how young people come to understand themselves and their potential—through processes of meaning making, self-efficacy, and validation from others. “Inventing adulthoods” appears to allow individuals choice while, in practice, closely managing “the process through which the appearance of choice and control is created.” Nonetheless, a measure of flexibility in late modernity means that, rather than simply reproducing the norms and behaviors of previous generations, “old forms of inequality such as class, gender and race are being remade in new ways”—a process we were able to observe in the class.

**Social Change or Social Reproduction**

In the face of widespread and indeed increasing social and economic equality across the world, the persistence of social class and the power of social reproduction to keep the socially advantaged and disadvantaged distinct is much debated among late modern theorists. For Anthony Giddens, in “post-traditional” society, the established norms of gender, generation, and social class are being rewritten: people can no longer fall back on what people of their gender or generation or social class have always done—nor do they want to. Thus, he coined the phrase “the project of the self” (see also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s “choice biography” or “do-it-yourself biography”) to capture the efforts devoted to creating and sustaining a desirable and plausible identity. The array of potential resources for building such an identity is expanded by global media cultures, allowing for possibilities far beyond those directly encountered in daily life.

But, as critics have observed, these claims make too little reference to a sound evidence base, and where there is evidence, it suggests a far slower and less linear process of social change. At the heart of this debate is the continued social reproduction of social class. Contrary to some misinterpretations of Beck, Giddens, et al. as overly celebrating
agency and choice, there is agreement on all sides that the unevenness of the resources that individuals can call on only increases socioeconomic and other inequalities. But for Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, “social inequality is on the rise precisely because of the spread of individualization,” so we must now recognize “the non-class character of individualized inequalities.” Their point is that while inequality is still with us, the “processes of individualization deprive class distinctions of their social identity,” resulting in the “individualization of social risks.”

Indeed, there does seem to be evidence that it is class-consciousness that is fading, thereby undermining the potential for collective political resistance. Although people still use the labels “middle” and “working” class, the meaning of these terms is changing: the traditional mapping of working and middle class onto left and right wings of the political spectrum or onto labor and management or even onto poor and wealthy is less secure. And these terms no longer predict simple differences in educational and financial resources; instead they seem to refer to a looser notion of social status (or, perhaps, “perceived” social class), encompassing forms of cultural knowledge, social capital, and a host of practices—ways of speaking, dressing, or behaving; knowledge of how institutions work; and so on. Some sociologists argue that the population can still be meaningfully segmented into distinct groupings but that new groupings are emerging, no longer defined in traditional terms. Others argue for the intensification of control mechanisms that perpetuate the social reproduction of advantage and disadvantage and extend the power of institutions ever further into private life.

For instance, in the postwar efforts toward social reconstruction in the 20th century, many progressives hoped that education would enable people to escape hardship and poverty, for their own benefit and also for the wider benefit of society. Yet social mobility—the chance for young people to improve on the material conditions of their parents—has ground to a halt in recent decades, and developed countries can no longer promise future generations increased prosperity or quality of life. Schools’ strongest critics hold that they exert “symbolic violence” by employing pedagogic processes that work deliberately to exclude whole swaths of the population so that, as we noted earlier, the idea of individual failure is in some ways part of the wider function of schools to differentiate among people to sort them for a stratified labor
market. As Basil Bernstein has shown, the ways in which education “re-contextualises” knowledge works to ensure success for young people from middle-class homes compared with those who are less privileged; thus, education serves as a key instrument of the social reproduction of inequality, notwithstanding that it professes “fairness.”

Related arguments have been made regarding processes of social reproduction at home, attuned to the ways in which ordinary or tacit knowledge has become grist to the mill of disciplinary processes, evaluated according to formal and arcane modes of expression, as leisure becomes “curricularised.” This has implications for the different ways that families with different economic and cultural capital work to sustain social distinctions. Privileged parents act competitively to get their children “ahead” in what has been termed hyperparenting or the “offensive” sociality of the new middle class (and the “defensive” sociality of the disadvantaged). For example, Annette Lareau’s in-depth study of 12 families shows how the rigorous schedule of adult-organized out-of-school enrichment activities (“concerted cultivation”), practiced by middle-class families, breeds a cumulative sense of entitlement in their children that helps them get ahead in institutionalized settings such as the school.

There is no easy resolution to this tension between the case for social change and the one for social reproduction. One question is how far postwar stability has changed, with social class hierarchies less in evidence and more flexible pathways opening up to ever more varied opportunities. We take this as an empirical question to explore in this book. But, as an important rationale for our approach, we note that both theories of individualization and analyses of social reproduction agree that the problems of social inequality are becoming more, not less, acute, and thus finding ways to account for social processes is even more important.

Conclusions: From Theory to Research

For the total texture is what we begin and end with. There is no Archimedean point outside it whence we can survey the whole and pronounce upon it.

—Isaiah Berlin
This book is simultaneously wide ranging and tightly focused. We examine the lives of one class of schoolchildren to understand where, when, and how they live, learn, socialize, and dream. Our theories and methods are designed to capture the “total texture” of their lives, insofar as we are able. But we conducted this analysis to investigate the larger changes that preoccupy our times, offering our portrait of the class as an empirical study with which to test claims about young people’s social life, the meaning of the education they experience, and the nature of the networks in which they are embedded. As Isaiah Berlin wisely cautioned, we must beware of assuming an all-seeing eye from which we can pronounce definitively on young people’s lives and social change. Thus, this chapter has laid out the framework of concepts and questions that we used in our fieldwork.

In general, we are convinced by the growing weight of discussion and evidence suggesting that individualization has become a dominant feature of late modernity. Through this and related processes, people are facing an ever more uncertain and risky future, while also becoming detached from the established norms by which, traditionally, they have brought up their children. Digital technologies are far from the only sources of change in an otherwise stable society. Many vital dimensions of childhood are changing: established values are being challenged, and traditions are being reinvented, shaking people’s confidence in the future and leading them to redouble their efforts to control the risks it threatens. For today’s young people, the possibilities for work, travel, relationships, identity, and lifestyle are more varied than ever. But at the same time, they face growing uncertainty and insecurity that, combined with deepening social and economic inequality, means they may never benefit from the exciting opportunities that seem to beckon.

The growth of social and economic inequality suggests that traditional political settlements have become inadequate to the challenge of social injustice and economic inequalities. Indeed, questions about socialization, identity, and learning have become ever more urgent, as schools, homes, and communities, as well as the state, attempt to plan for a seemingly rapidly changing future. Given the importance of these larger contexts, we have not endorsed the fashion for all things digital, as this can distract society from addressing the root causes of childhood poverty and exclusion, the lack of jobs, or insufficient investment
in education. The structure of this book thus places the digital inside the texture of everyday life, enabling us to see it as an interlinking element in our understanding of how and why the families of the class and the young people themselves “chose” to live their lives in the ways they did.

In the introduction, we observed that, faced with a strong sense of change, people may instead cling all the more to the structures and practices they are familiar with—making them what we called “conservative with a small c”; we also suggested that various kinds of network connections were the hallmark of living and learning in a large cosmopolitan city like London. This chapter has reviewed some of the social, institutional, and identity changes that might motivate this conservatism and that explain how forms of connection might be furthered or impeded. To progress these ideas further, we now turn to the fieldwork.