A Year of Fieldwork

Progress Day: Exploring Connections

An illuminating moment in our fieldwork took place a few weeks into the first term. On “Progress Day,” parents met the class teacher to review their child’s progress and to set targets for the year. This complemented the practice of sending home termly written reports; the annual evening in which parents met subject teachers in a lively and complicated carousel in the school hall; and ad hoc year-group meetings to learn of upcoming decisions (for example, selecting subjects for end-of-school qualifications). For Progress Day, each student was expected to bring one or both parents for a ten-minute appointment. The conversation was highly structured. Catherine, the class teacher, sat across a table from the family, and each student was asked to review his or her previous year’s self-assessment, while Catherine commented on the student’s grades. She then pressed the students on their participation in school life, encouraging extracurricular activities and calling on them to find ways to “shine,” to “realize their potential,” and to make the school proud. Depending on the circumstances, the interview might conclude with other general comments about the student’s enthusiasm, engagement, or, where relevant, disciplinary issues. These rapid-fire interviews were not always straightforward, making for a demanding and at times emotional day for Catherine and for some of the families—and a fascinating day for us.

Being present meant we could meet the parents face-to-face in order to get permission to visit the students at home, to convince them of our integrity and the value of our project. Throughout the day, we sat at the back of the classroom, and Catherine introduced us as each set of parents entered the room so that, once her interview with them was over, they could come to us to ask any questions. We reminded them of the letter we had sent them earlier in the summer, explained our methods in more detail, clarifying in particular how we would ensure anonymity and confidentiality for all participants.1

Second, this was an opportunity to witness an important day in the life of the school. Indeed, the interviews could be seen as revealing how
“school” was performed for the families. Progress Day also brought out some of the challenges faced by students, teachers, and parents as they all tried to make sense of the school experience from their personal perspectives. This alerted us to the value of listening carefully, not only to what students, teachers, and parents each had to say but also to how each imagined the others—what each thought was important to the others and where he or she anticipated misconceptions or problems.

The review of academic attainment generated some confusion as parents sought to understand how their child was doing in terms of the national curriculum’s system of levels. A student’s progress in each subject was graded four times over (minimum acceptable grade, maximum anticipated grade, norm-based predicted grade, and actually achieved grade) on a scale from $3e$ to $8a$ (where $8$ is higher than $3$ but $a$ is higher than $e$). While a number of parents nodded vaguely as they were told of their child’s grades, one mother—recently arrived from eastern Europe—was persistent in trying to understand the meaning of the grading system and its implications for the different system used for formal examinations at age 16. She especially wanted to grasp why her child was not top for each subject, and after some time trying and failing to explain, Catherine had to call in the director of studies for Year 9 to explain the process.

From this tense and increasingly irritable conversation, we learned that the system was complex, if not arcane, to many parents. Equally interesting was how clear the system was to teachers and students, as illustrated by the following exchange between Catherine and Dilruba:

**Catherine:** Your commitment has been excellent this year. Let’s make that a target. How would you like to go into Year 10?

**Dilruba:** I’d like to reach my minimum targets.

While it seemed the students were at ease with such talk, the conversations held across the day revealed diverse responses from parents. Many appeared to trust the school’s management of learning, but some made it clear that they had strong goals of their own that might conflict with the school or, we later discovered, might be pursued independently. Several middle-class parents were frustrated at how difficult the system made it for them to discover their child’s ranking within the class, and
they persisted in trying to find this out by asking Catherine about policies for setting (sorting by ability) or assessment criteria or what might count to allow further progress.

In the small amount of time for parents to raise individual issues, we saw a painful exchange between Catherine and Alice’s mother, concerned that the school had failed to recognize her daughter’s dyslexia. For the mother, this not only explained her daughter’s uneven grades but also pointed up the need for the school, rather than the girl, to try harder. Catherine listened politely and took the opportunity to generalize about teacher-student interactions and the school’s policy regarding special educational needs. We saw a similarly polite yet blank response when the parents of some of the bilingual children (Adam, Adriana) urged the school to enter them for an extra examination in their first language (German, Spanish, etc.). Shane’s mother had a difficult discussion about her son’s poor behavior, and again the head of Year 9 was called in to support Catherine. This mother was so fired up about perceived injustices and the way that the school dealt with her that, when she came over to talk to us, we were seen as honest brokers to whom she might express her criticisms.

A few families challenged our preconceptions. A whispered conversation between Abby, her father (a much older parent than the others), and Catherine hinted at past difficulties. Quiet Joel had parents with hippie clothes and dreadlocked hair, suggesting a home life little recognized by the school. Lydia—who we had already witnessed in several disciplinary contretemps—was the only child not to turn up at all. Such observations alerted us to family experiences that we might need to discover. Indeed, the entire fieldwork experience was one of catching threads that led in multiple directions, comparing our experiences as we went along, so as to formulate further questions for future encounters.

Different issues arose in relation to the students who turned up at the meeting without a parent in tow. Yusuf’s mother did not speak English, and his father was at work. Fesse and Jenna were each accompanied by older sisters tasked with reporting back to non-English-speaking parents. Hakim and Sedat brought their non-English-speaking mothers with them and acted as interpreters for Catherine. But even when parents were native speakers, their confusion about the school’s systems meant that the student’s voice was often prominent in these
interviews, since the young people understood the system and thus played a mediating role between parent and teacher.2

Power relations shifted when the interviews turned to extracurricular activities. We were struck by the young people’s reluctance to discuss these, sometimes dutifully participating, sometimes mutely resistant or hoping to get away with easy promises. Far from encouraging youth-led interests, what seemed to be at stake was resisting a certain kind of school-sanctioned behavior. This alerted us to the young people’s strong desire to keep some time for themselves, especially when faced with their teachers’ and parents’ apparently insatiable call on them to do ever more. We could see how spontaneously mentioned interests were seized on, potentially grist to the mill of individual achievement.

However, the exceptions were also interesting—Sedat’s expertise in playing the saz,3 which we found out about later, was not acknowledged, so he appeared as a boy with no outside interests; and indeed, as we return to in chapter 9, it was mainly the young people from middle-class homes who were asked about musical accomplishments. The interviews ended with the students being called on to set their own targets for the year ahead, and we observed some confident, middle-class students enjoying the opportunity, neatly deflecting the demand to achieve even more. By contrast, Shane, from a much poorer family, focused on football (that is, “soccer” in the US; we call it “football” in this book, as did the class). These were the kinds of observations that opened up for us the subtle workings of social stratification at school, while also raising questions in our minds about young people’s potential to negotiate the path ahead.

An Ethnographic Approach

Progress Day illustrated some key themes of this book: the different perspectives of student, teacher, and parent on the value of formal and informal learning; differential power relations, shaped by socioeconomic status; and possible connections and disconnections between home and school, especially in relation to the young person’s identity. We have already seen, in chapter 1, how such themes are important in conceptualizing young people’s lives in what has been called the age of
individualization or the risk society. We pursue these themes across the chapters that follow.

But Progress Day was just one day. In this chapter, we go back to the start of our fieldwork to set the scene for these and other encounters. We explain how we entered the lives of members of the class, what we did, and how we learned what we did about living and learning in the digital age. Our chosen method for *The Class* is an ethnographic case study of young people’s lives. We set out to immerse ourselves in the lives of the young people over an extended period of time, also acknowledging the views of their parents and teachers and the wider context of all their lives. In the past few decades, ethnographic research has been undertaken by social scientists working “at home,” in their own cultures, adapting the long-standing tradition among anthropologists of studying “other” cultures. The idea is to uncover the significant patterns immanent within the taken-for-granted nature of people’s ordinary practices. This means talking to people in order to get insight into how they explain and interpret their actions but also observing their actions in context, recognizing that talk and action may not match. We were particularly interested in how talk may be more performative than descriptive; in other words, talk can impact on and create social contexts.

Our fieldwork encompassed school, home, and “peer spaces” (in the neighborhood, online, and in the interstices of other, more regulated spaces such as the child’s bedroom at home). Building on an imagined Venn diagram of these spheres, we explored how everyday practices might interconnect these spaces in particular ways and with particular consequences. In a digital age, researching connections means exploring the online as well as the offline lives of participants. But overall, none of the places we studied were far apart, as children do not travel far in their daily lives; they walk, catch a bus, or are shuttled around by parents, and apart from occasional trips, they live within a geographic span of a few miles. Thus, the project was also, as in more traditional ethnographic studies, strongly located in one neighborhood.

But before researching a class in all its depth or breadth, we had to find one willing to work with us. On the basis of available government statistics, we approached a mixed community school with no particularly distinctive features and of average size (see the appendix). A personal
connection to one of the assistant headteachers helped us get access to the school we selected. Gaining entry took some months, however. We had to gain approval from the headteacher and governing body, to get enhanced certificates from the Criminal Records Bureau (Child Protection), and to meet the requirements of our university’s Research Ethics Committee.

Each of these required us to clarify our research processes, to anticipate problems, and to think through some “what if” scenarios. To develop these, we discussed the project with the class teacher (Catherine), the head of Year 9, the deputy head of school who was responsible for child welfare, and the assistant headteacher, our primary “gatekeeper.” After all of this, we reached that summer’s afternoon described in the introduction when we first met the class. Even having met them, we still had to obtain written permission from each member of the class and his or her parents, doing this initially for the research based at school and then again for the research at home.

Throughout the project, we elaborated our research methods, staying responsive to the opportunities or restrictions that the fieldwork itself brought up. In particular, we sought to capitalize on our complementary expertise as researchers and to pay attention to what the other found surprising. Sonia has spent much of her career with families at home, seeking to understand their media lives and exploring the dynamics of gender and generation in the home. She has been especially interested in children’s construction of private spaces for the imagination or identity, including their bedrooms and, more recently, on the internet. Julian has spent much of his career with students and teachers at school, exploring the conditions by which media use at school and elsewhere could enable creativity and knowledge by connecting formal and informal spaces or otherwise sidestepping the constraints of the formal curriculum. This meant that for Sonia, the contemporary classroom was an unfamiliar place, and she felt very visible, even when sitting at the back of the room. For Julian, the classroom was a familiar place of work, so keeping out of the action did not come naturally. We both had to figure out how to comport ourselves—for example, whether to line up for lunch with the students or jump to the head of the line with the teachers. The students also had to solve this problem: as Julian observed, at school they called him Sir, but in the park, it was Julian.
So what was the school like? Victoria Forest School (VFS) had around 1,400 students aged 11 plus, including the sixth form (students aged 17 to 18), and an above-average proportion of students with special educational needs. Nonetheless, the school was achieving above-average academic results. The school was located in a leafy Edwardian suburb some eight miles from the center of London, a journey that many residents might make only rarely. As with other London neighborhoods, there was a range of local shops, access to a public park, and good transport links. The streets in the neighborhood were not dangerous, although they were not risk-free—especially with regard to petty theft—and it was common for young people to walk short distances or to take buses to nearby larger shopping centers. However, VFS’s students came from both prosperous and deprived areas. Despite the affluence of the streets immediately surrounding the school, it was just a ten-minute walk from a train line and major road dividing rich and poor. Large areas of social housing and private rental accommodation fell within the school catchment area, and most of the students lived within two or three miles of the school in one direction or another, with roughly half on either side of “the tracks” (see the appendix for an account of the UK education system and its relation to socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity).

The school also included an above-average proportion of students for whom English was not their first language or who came from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds. As we were led to explore in chapter 5, where we consider the classroom as a civil space, it seemed noteworthy to have a child from a million-pound home sitting next to a child from a refugee family, with seemingly little notice being taken of this fact. It also seemed noteworthy that no single ethnicity dominated and that many young people were hard to categorize in simple ethnic or racial terms, having instead hybrid identities reflecting the complexity of contemporary British society. As we explain in the appendix, given these and other complexities, we refer to the members of the class as living in wealthier or poorer households rather than, simply, “middle class” or “working class” (or any other simple labels that we could assign unproblematically). Indeed, the shifting relations among social class, cultural capital, and ethnicity became a substantive theme throughout the book.
The school told us that the class they assigned to us was broadly typical, but without some of the “trouble makers” for whom our presence could prove intrusive. It had rather more boys than girls, and its exact composition fluctuated over the year—one boy was “excluded,” a new boy arrived early in the first term, and another girl joined later in the year. Thus, over the year, also taking into account the numbers who consented to the different fieldwork phases, the number of our project participants fluctuated between 25 and 28.

A Day in the Life—At School

We joined the class on the first day of the students’ third year at VFS. They were 13 turning 14 years old in the year we spent with them. Any secondary school is a busy place, especially at the start of the year, with corridors full of pushing noisy children and hassled teachers, classrooms loud with scraping chairs and a tide of instructions, and a melee of conversation, shouting, and ball games in the playground. We sat with the students or were silent at the back of the classroom, observing members of the class across all their different subjects as well as lunch breaks, the computer room, homework club, the library, the playground, the teachers’ staff room, and so on. We ate in the student canteen, observed the notices banning use of mobile phones, and generally tried to get the feel of life at school.

We used a smart pen for observations in school—usefully, the students loved this: they knew it recorded sound, but it looked like a regular pen for handwritten notes; and it also seemed less obtrusive than an audio recorder from the teacher’s point of view. We began simply, listening out for what the young people wished to tell us, along with any talk of learning, interests, or expertise and any use of or mention of digital or other media at school. We observed the style of interaction between teacher and student, noting the kinds of tasks students were given and their approach to completing them. We paid particular attention to how life at school might connect with the student’s life at home and elsewhere, recognizing that these connections may be more imagined than actual. We also formally interviewed all the young people over the term, individually or in pairs, mainly during breaks and lunch hours.
Getting to the school ourselves, we were often caught up in the tidal flow of young people converging on an otherwise quiet suburban spot, with the occasional anxious face of a teacher trying to prevent them from overwhelming local residents. The playground seemed at first to rock with the mass of uniformed bodies, but we began to discern various groupings within this larger constellation. When it was time for registration—announced by an air-raid howl wailing across the neighborhood—teachers positioned themselves strategically at entrances and on the staircases to impose their authority and to calm down the pupils. It seemed to us that students were generally positive in and around the school, responding to such forms of control with good-humored banter. They did not seem to mind having to line up outside each classroom before being allowed entry, with the teacher standing at the door to his or her room, greeting each individual, and checking that he or she looked and behaved correctly. At any point, as the teachers walked around the school, we saw them admonishing students and maintaining order in the crowded corridors and playground.

We knew, of course, that the school day began with the effort to arrive on time—even to go to bed early enough the night before. Day after day, we saw Fessehaye (Fesse) turn up late, seemingly surprised that he had to pay for this by staying after school in detention. He told us he played Xbox or watched television late at night and first thing in the morning, often oversleeping or losing track of the time. Other students seemed more in control of the transition from what we came to see as the relative freedom of home to the controlled world of school. Salma told us with pleasure that she always walked to school with the same group of friends and that they texted each other to synchronize meeting up and walking in together.

The class spent the first and last 15 minutes of each day together in tutor time for registration. While this was often more informal than lesson times, it depended on Catherine—if she wanted total silence, she got it, and chat was only allowed when explicitly sanctioned. Often we saw a quiet passive resistance that teachers seemingly ignored. Reading a novel on Tuesday mornings was often a case in point—while some of the students read with evident pleasure, most went through the motions, easily distracted and rarely making much progress. Lydia fiddled
with her hair most of the time, while Max—whom we later discovered to be a keen reader at home—stared blankly out the window.

Students’ attention in class was generally focused on the teacher at the front of the room, including the smart board. Teachers varied in how much they used small-group work, although all used assigned seating plans, and students varied in their skill in muttering quietly or in getting away with a bit of cheeky chat with friends or even teachers. However, much of the classroom interaction was between a designated student and the teacher, in a set question-and-answer format, rather than in collaborative or other kinds of free-flowing work. Group work in Science or Design and Technology almost always offered the opportunity for carefully controlled social talk under the teacher’s radar.

A few days into the term, we also met the teachers in their collective induction meeting—another sea of expectant, if politely skeptical, faces. The headteacher reminded us that he thought the whole idea “mad,” but he was relaxed, seemingly no longer worried about our impact on school life. It did not take long before the other teachers welcomed us in the staff room or stopped us in the corridor to chat about the project or to tell us something about the school. No doubt it helped that Julian had been a teacher, that we came from a high-status university, and that we seemed friendly. The school was anticipating a government quality inspection, which had everyone in a state of high anxiety, notwithstanding the headteacher’s motivational cheerleading in the twice-weekly staff meetings.

Some teachers needed reassurance that we were there to observe students rather than to criticize them; some students needed to see that we would not “tell tales.” Occasionally, we supported the teacher or guided a student, but mostly we watched, writing down all we could. And while we sought to prioritize the young people’s experiences, hearing also from their teachers (and, later, their parents) added to our understanding. Our field notes are full of observations about classroom life, capturing the mix of experiences that made up any student’s day. We were struck early on by the incessant mention of achievement levels (as discussed in chapter 6). We were also particularly surprised to discover the young people’s commitment to their teachers’ incessant focus on assessment, leading us to reflect on the interests at stake in sustaining so individualistic a discourse of learning.
We followed the students as they moved through a variety of lessons each day, each lasting an hour, with gaps for a morning break and 45 minutes for lunch. Being released from a classroom into the more liminal space of the corridor was always an interesting experience, allowing for the release of personal talk that had been bottled up during each teaching period. We saw quick flirtations, harsh and nasty words being exchanged, or just boisterous chatter as we followed the students around. Sedat often caught up with his Turkish-speaking friends at these moments, for example. But corridors and staircases quickly became jammed in the transition between classrooms, and teachers added to the hubbub by shouting instructions and trying to keep order. The bathrooms were not popular spaces; they, too, were slightly unfriendly, and although the bathrooms were not directly supervised, few students seemed to congregate there.

Lunchtime and after-school activities had to be fitted in, along with eating lunch itself, which for Year 9 students had to be done on the premises. The canteen, used by most students, offered thumbprint identification technology so that parents could top up the payment or monitor their child’s food intake. As the canteen was not large enough to seat the whole school, students spent much of their lunchtime lining up rather than in relaxed socializing, although we did see groups from the class, with others, chatting together over lunch. Shane liked to put his arm around the girls, but we saw little sexualized behavior. Students were sent out of the main buildings at break and lunchtimes.

We attended a range of after-school clubs, finding them more relaxed—even the astronomy class to gain an extra GCSE, for which Sara had been selected. Here, and occasionally in the banter between staff and students in the playground or even in some lessons, there was a leavening of the otherwise rather austere formal relations that dominated the day. For example, rehearsals for the school play were characterized by considerable informality and intimacy—joking or irreverence between student and teacher, flirtatiousness among a number of the students—marking a strong contrast to behavior in school hours. Such contrasts in the learning experience gave us pause for thought. In relation to the play (a popular musical), it seemed that the reward on offer was intrinsic—with mastery and expertise evident to all—although the final performance was also motivating. The learning identity on offer
in these rehearsals was different too: rather than disciplined bodies, the chorus was encouraged to be exuberant, the young people were to be sexy, and the stars were to shine.

The final act in the daily school routine was the journey home—often the last opportunity for the students to spend time together face-to-face, so there was a tendency to stretch out the time. We often saw young people hanging around the local shops a little away from the school. Such moments felt relaxed, although teachers sometimes patrolled the park, and the community police officers had accounts of violence or theft on the streets. These moments also illustrate the importance of being open to what the young people wanted to tell us about: listening to them talk about time spent away from school alerted us to the value of in-between spaces for them, characterized by a very different pace, mood, and sense of agency to that of the often demanding rhythms of the school day. As Giselle explained, it was “a slow journey” on purpose—to free themselves from the demands of school life. It was also peer time; Megan and Gideon told us that, should they find themselves walking home alone, they would pretend to be calling friends “for cover” so as not to look like “a loner.” When with friends, Abby told us, “we’ll, like, go shopping or just, like, go out to the park or something or just, like, just go do anything really that we feel like doing.” Transcribed, she sounds inarticulate, but her point is important—that this time was not determined by others, especially teachers or parents. And there seemed to be an unwritten rule that so long as they got home before their parents did, no questions were asked about where they had been. Since both home and school turned out to strongly define the young people’s activities and identities, recognizing when they felt more in control—in corridors at school, bedrooms at home, or with peers on- or offline—was important in grasping how they navigated the pressures on them (see chapter 4).

A Day in the Life—At Home

The feel of the project changed after Christmas as we left behind the busy world of the school, with its injunctions to behave and succeed, and immersed ourselves in the cluttered but quieter world of the home. As we saw even on Progress Day, the parents ranged between mildly
positive and very interested in our project. We were welcomed into the homes of all but two members of the class, although of course we had to reassure and account for ourselves with each family. The sheer diversity of household arrangements, styles, and provision struck us immediately, after our immersion in the singular world of school. Some homes were very wealthy, others poor. Some were formal, with tidy front rooms and inaccessible private spaces, while others had a sense of informality, with doors left open and people interrupting or chatting in our presence. In some, other members of the family came to check us out; in others, they kept their distance. We drank a lot of tea, asked a lot of questions, admired pets, poked about as much as felt comfortable, and explained our project as often as asked.  

Most, but not all, of the young people seemed at ease at home, although, as we have noted, many would delay reaching home and would even be glad to find what Megan called a “free house” (in other words, a house with no parents present), where they could gather with friends. Once home, they appeared relatively free to lie around and relax. Indeed, “relaxing” was a word they used a lot, referring both to the release from the exhausting discipline of school and to the ability to control their actions, even if this meant being bored or just getting something to eat and watching television—still the most frequent leisure activity. All the girls told us they changed out of their school uniforms first thing once back home, again symbolizing the shift from a public or official school identity to a private one.

Our visits home had to be fitted in around homework, after-school activities, family commitments, and a social life, and these often proved tricky to arrange. For example, Jamie went to tennis practice and Sebastian to drama. Jenna and Yusuf were regular attendees at mosque school, and Yusuf also had a two-hour science class at a local cultural center (see chapter 8). Fitting everything in was a challenge to the young people too, and several—especially some of the boys—seemed tired on reaching home. We could see that finding time for homework somehow meant returning to the demands and control of school—hence their tactics of procrastination or resistance. Keeping Facebook on while doing homework or alternating between homework and chatting to friends while playing computer games seemed to put the young person back in charge.
While triangulating observations and interviews permitted us to gain a deeper insight into the patterns of the young people’s lives at home, it took us quite a while to feel confident about the various family dynamics. We had to build up our portraits from informal observations as well as several interviews with the young people, their parents, and some siblings (see chapter 7 on family life). Talking to the young people at home would often cast a different light on what was said at school. At school, for instance, Megan and Adriana, interviewed together, bragged about how they never did any homework. But we were puzzled, knowing that their grades were good, and we rarely saw them in detention. Visiting them at home, however, showed us when and how some homework did get done, allowing us a fuller picture from different information sources. This not only revealed “the truth,” as it were, about doing homework but also the girls’ desire to act “cool” at school, something that shaped their orientation to most lessons as well as in the informal spaces in between.

In this phase of the research, we listened out for the role that digital media played in the young people’s domestic lives. We could not observe the entire day at home, of course, but we learned that, for many of the young people, time at home involved considerable media use—marking the start and end of the day, filling in time, accompanying other activities, all connecting the young people with their friends and peer culture. As one of our short in-class surveys revealed, all had a computer or laptop and internet access at home, although the latter did not always work. Lydia and her best friend were typical in turning their phones on—and not letting go of them—from the minute they left the school gates to when they fell asleep at night. Giselle “organized” her friends via social media, checking Facebook and Tumblr on getting home after school, before becoming absorbed in Minecraft. Dom checked Twitter first thing in the morning to see “what everyone was saying last night.” Abby appreciated the effect of music early in the morning, saying that this made her feel happy and more awake. From such snippets, we began to frame the detailed case studies that we explore in this book: Why was Dom an early adopter of Twitter? What did music mean? How could we interpret Giselle’s absorption in Minecraft or several of the boys’ love of Xbox?

The semistructured nature of the after-school period seemed magnified at weekends and holidays, with rules on time spent on television or
games relaxed and bedtimes later (see chapter 7). For some, this meant freedom to engage even more with screen media of one kind or another, but Shane spoke for many in relishing these opportunities: “Yes, I’m always out . . . [with] more of a social life now.” Social media were relegated to the status of filler. As Shane further explained, “Facebook, because, like, that’s, like, you know, when, like, you’re bored at home and you’re checking things to do—like, say, if I wanted to play football on the weekends, I’d like to talk to people and watch people, so that’s what I really do.” Conversations such as these contrasted strongly with the popular discourses of digitally obsessed youth that surrounded us—and the young people themselves—throughout the year. With expressions of urgent concern from parents, teachers, journalists, and policy makers about a generation supposedly lost in the digital world echoing in our ears, we would enter one home or another to find the teenagers itching to hang out with their friends face-to-face or telling us that social networking sites were becoming boring and that they would rather watch television with their family downstairs.

We learned that weekends and holidays did not just allow time to see friends or play computer games, but—even more important—they were valued as time under the control of the young people themselves. This was not always easy for the young people to explain, and we had to listen carefully to grasp their experience of agency. In the following exchange between Megan and Adriana, they define the key features of a weekend:

**Megan:** It’s not actually that different to [a weekday]. . . .

**Adriana:** Yes, it is.

**Megan:** No, it’s not, except I wake up earlier, and I see the people who I choose to see, because in lessons, it’s, like, you’re still, like, talking and stuff.

**Adriana:** No, but it is much different because you’re—you’ve got, like, a motive or something.

**Megan:** Yes, you have something that I will do.

They were trying to explain that agency lies not in what you do but in the fact that you decide to do it. That is what makes weekends “just kind of not at school,” as Max expressed it. Or as Shane said, “I’ve just got my own time [on weekends]. I can do whatever I want really.” And getting
together face-to-face always trumped media use, although “letting” the young people become more independent occasioned anxieties among their parents.28 We saw some evident gendering—the girls tended to talk of shopping, the boys of playing football or computer games—but we were also alert to the exceptions: Abby turned out to be a good football player; Giselle loved computer games.

A Year in the Life of the Class

Just as each day plays out to its own beat, the school year has its rhythms too. Teachers and students started the year full of good intentions, with lots of talk about targets and aspirations, establishing goodwill and long-term ambitions. Most students had not seen each other over the summer holidays, and they cautiously reestablished (or ended) friendships or alliances. As students felt out the disciplinary tone of unfamiliar teachers, the first few weeks of the new term were conducted carefully, although we saw some strange testing by some—Megan putting her feet on her desk, for instance. Gradually, this was replaced by the constant hum of conversation as the quiet of anticipation blurred into the everyday of routine. Tiredness set in at the end of each week and before holidays; tempers frayed, and the high hopes and lofty rhetoric of achievement faded from classroom talk as everybody focused on meeting weekly targets, completing homework, or preparing for tests.

Often in morning registration, Catherine would remind the students of the array of extracurricular activities on offer, encouraging the students to go along and try things out, checking if they had gone as promised—a message reiterated to every parent on Progress Day, as we saw earlier. But she seemed increasingly dismayed at how hard it seemed to motivate them to join in, although, as we reflected, this could have been precisely because participation was so closely monitored, rewarded, and desired by teachers and parents (see chapter 8). And over time, northern European gloomy mornings and gray evenings added to the general weariness as winter approached. We spent less time in the school through the spring and summer as our focus turned to the home. In any case, teacher workloads changed with the approach of summer, with more focus on preparing the older students for public (national) examinations and less concern with Year 9, this being often seen as part
of an internationally recognized “middle-school” problem—neither absorbed in the task of acclimatizing students to secondary school nor focused on the exams that “really count.”

Significantly, in Year 9, students and parents had to make some key decisions about academic direction—arts or sciences, languages, or practical subjects—beginning the narrowing of options toward the concentration on just three or four subjects by the age of 16–18. Following the parent-teacher meetings in the autumn term and the Progress Day meetings with Catherine, the spring term saw an “options meeting” for the whole year group, setting out the educational pathways ahead. By the summer term, key choices had been made, amid some anxiety on the part of the students. We examine how the students progressed during the year and how they began to envisage possible futures in chapter 10.

Other developments could be accommodated within the fieldwork year. At the start of the year, the students received a series of invitations to participate—in the school play (a popular musical), in an all-year fund-raiser to go on a “World Challenge” (see the conclusion), in a series of sporting opportunities, and in making a film of life at school, *A Life in the Day of VFS.* It was a distinctive feature of our research design that we could follow some of these over time. For example, we watched as several students from the class initially auditioned for the school play at the start of the year, although only Max and Dilruba followed through. And while some of the young people enjoyed filming *A Life in the Day*, the task of controlling them came to dominate the activity—from preventing Fesse from filming a teacher he thought terrible to not letting the students edit the resulting footage—because it would be too time-consuming and because it risked the final product showing the school in a less-than-ideal light. Unsurprisingly, Adam—whose teacher and parents had pushed him to participate once he expressed a mild interest in photography during Progress Day—complained that the whole thing had become “boring.”

These kinds of experiences illustrated something that we observed over and again during the year: how the promises and invitations made at the start of the year fall by the wayside due to lack of time, resources, or, apparently, “student interest.” Strikingly, we saw no instances of the converse; over the course of one year in the lives of our class, we saw several interests lapse, but no one developed an interest they had not already
had before. Most striking were the blocked or opaque pathways between formal (in-school) and informal (at-home) learning, as we explore particularly in chapter 9 in relation to music learning.

By the early summer, we had completed our fieldwork in class and in homes and had moved into the third phase: a more intensive and detailed exploration of extracurricular and peer-based activities. Travel plans in the summer holidays meant that families found it harder to make time for us, although when we could visit, the time we spent with the young people was often the most relaxed.33 Having become familiar with the class after spending a year together, the following autumn we decided to do a formal exit interview with each member of the class—inviting them to look back over the year, to reflect on the experience of the project, and to anticipate the next phase of their lives—we were welcomed back into their lives with enthusiasm. By this time, the young people were strongly focused on studying for public exams or on their (now) more intense social and personal lives. What the year had meant to them and what, in retrospect, seemed to have helped or hindered their progress is examined in chapter 10.34

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have offered an ethnographic portrait of a day and a year in the life of the class, with two linked purposes in mind. In terms of research methodology, our aim was to demonstrate the main features of our approach to the young people’s lives, making clear our own role along with the methodological decisions we made about the research. As readers will vary in their familiarity with the English state school system, the nature of British multiculturalism, or the character of London, further information is provided in the appendix. Demographic and other information about the young people themselves can also be found there.35 Knowing our dramatis personae should, we hope, permit you to follow their paths through a year in their lives and, thus, through the course of this book.

The second purpose of this chapter was to show how the main themes that occupy the rest of the book emerged from our research. Thus, we have signaled which particular themes will be addressed in each of the chapters to follow, while also acknowledging that they are all interconnected in the
young people’s everyday lives. What do we mean by saying that the book’s themes emerged? In some instances, our theoretical framework or prior expectations (as discussed in chapter 1) defined the themes we wished to pursue. In other instances, we were surprised or intrigued by what we encountered during the research itself, and this led to more in-depth exploration in the chapters that follow. Yet this is too neat a distinction. We had begun our research with the intention of exploring the connections among the practices and places of children’s social, digital, and learning lives. Thus, we designed a study focused on school and home, while being prepared to encompass such other places of importance to the young people. Just what we would find at home or school and what any of these places might mean to the young people was far from obvious at the outset, so while we had decided where to start looking, where we ended up and what we saw along the way all emerged over the year of fieldwork and, indeed, in the months of analysis and writing that came after.

In particular, until the fieldwork had progressed sufficiently for us to have accompanied the young people across these different places, talking to them and observing them all the while, we were not fully sensitized to the ways in which young people, parents, and teachers understood or misunderstood each other. So, having observed how teachers referred to parents and home, when we went home with the young people, we listened carefully to how school and teaching was discussed by parents. We were intrigued by the sense that students’ life outside school is, to their teachers, elusive, shadowy, and adversely dominated by media. Seemingly, the students materialize at the start of the school day and disappear on leaving the school grounds into a mysterious mix of family customs, homework, hobbies, friendships, television viewing, and Facebook use. All this seemed as vague yet worrying to the teachers as, we learned later, was the life of the school to parents, who tended to see their children disappear each morning to live out a day in which “nothing much happens.”

Meanwhile, we became increasingly curious about the young people for whom the places or spheres of life were neatly connected; Dominic and Sara became our two key instances, young people whose identities seemed harmoniously coherent whether at home or at school and, in Dom’s case particularly, across differing social worlds. For others, however, it was the disconnections between home, school, and peer group
that were most interesting, as well as the young people’s strategies—as often digital or online as well as offline—to manage these discordances or disconnections especially when it came to presenting themselves across these contexts. While at first we suspected that this self-management could be a matter of social class, with Dom’s and Sara’s confidence and achievement seeming to ease their paths in comparison to those who found life at home or school more difficult, our understanding of social class became more nuanced as we grappled with the many complexities and contingencies of economic, cultural, and ethnic differentiation among children’s lives in late modernity. What these mean for the social reproduction of relative advantage or disadvantage in the long run, and what economic and cultural capital mean for young people’s learner and social identities and experiences in the here and now, became a theme of the book.

The question of the “digital age” also runs across all the chapters. Given the widespread public and policy claims about the supposed differences that the digital makes, we could hardly approach this dimension of the research naively. Therefore we sought deliberately to put these often hyperbolic claims to one side, especially when observing and questioning the young people, although occasionally we referred to these claims deliberately as a means of provoking teachers or parents to think about the role of digital media. Only thus could we have found, as our portrait of a day and a year in the lives of the class already shows, that the digital is simultaneously endemic and mundane, neither all determining nor irrelevant. We began to question in what ways, if at all, living and learning is being reshaped in the digital age, in comparison to which previous forms of mediation, and over what timescale.

Thus, in terms of theory in chapter 1 and here in terms of methods, this book asks, what, if anything, is distinctive about the texture of young people’s lives today, and what identities are they forming? What does being educated mean for young people, their families, and their teachers in an individualized risk society? And what are the demands, resources, and institutional practices that facilitate or constrain young people’s agency as they seek to determine their future trajectory and life changes? We develop our answers through eight themed empirical chapters that follow. In chapter 3, we meet the class again, now using the lens of social network analysis so as to map their connections and disconnections in the digital age.