Life at School

From Routines to Civility

School can be a complicated and confusing place. Although it is often referred to as a monolithic institution—as in “school is boring” or engaging or repressive or enlightening—everyday experiences of school are more differentiated. On the one hand, students share the collective experience of school’s day-to-day routines and rhythms of life. But insofar as their actions are also shaped by the norms and practices of family and peers, each individual student may be treated differently and will respond differently to school. This can pose a challenge to the authority of the school and to the ethos it seeks to create. Outside visitors to schools are typically struck by subtle and seemingly accepted forms of behavior and control. Our first impression of the school’s day-to-day routines was influenced by the incessant scrutiny directed at the bodies of the students—what they wore, how they walked, when they were allowed to speak. Yet, although this raises questions of power and regulation of the self,\(^1\) we were also struck by the ways that young people found spaces for informality and practiced tactics of evasion—occupying the corridors, stairwells, and corners of school buildings as well as being “disobedient” in class in ways that provided some escape from relentless institutional arrangements that dictated relations between students and teachers as well as among students.

In this chapter, we portray the texture and quality of everyday school experiences for members of the class, to ground subsequent chapters especially for readers who have not visited a school recently. Building on the snapshot of daily life in school described in chapter 2, we examine the collective identity on offer from the school and how individuals take on the roles expected of them. We consider how particular learning identities—the young people’s sense of themselves as learners—were offered, although not taken up by all, a theme we develop further in chapter 6. Our emphasis is on the considerable efforts the school put into
creating the norms and ideals of a civil society, constructing itself as an egalitarian community precisely by closing itself off from engagement with the diverse and potentially disruptive realities of the home.

The idea of civility has been influentially theorized by Norbert Elias’s foundational work on the rise of self-restraint and self-control of speech and bodily functions in public, establishing a modern society that prioritizes manners and etiquette. Certainly, schools put considerable effort into ensuring well-mannered students who conform to orderly codes of behavior. While some critics read this as imposing middle-class social norms on the potentially unruly mass, civility can also connote positive ideas of tolerating or getting on with others. As Susanne Wessendorf observes of highly urban multicultural neighborhoods, such as that in which VFS was located, these places are “super-diverse” and thus demand “civility towards diversity” as a daily strategy of their inhabitants. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine forms of democracy that do not rest on a good measure of civility. In this chapter, we explore the various routines of school to show how the school both recognized and avoided social difference in order to sustain a harmonious vision of a “good society” to a degree that contrasted with—and deliberately excluded—the young people’s out-of-school experiences in family or peer contexts.

At the extremes, our class saw the professor’s child sitting next to the Somali refugee, with students arriving at school classically from either side of “the tracks”—since a major road and rail route divided the neighborhood, more or less, according to socioeconomic status. The consequences of these efforts could be seen in the nature of social relationships at school. Managing these could be seen, on the one hand, as a matter of disciplinary regime—this was the explicit discourse of the school—and, on the other, as a key means by which the students learned to get along with others, foreshadowing an adult future of interacting with the wider world; insofar as this was the school’s ultimate purpose, it remained generally implicit. The school used a range of strategies, including a rigorous focus on the life of “the class” as a unit, equally strenuous efforts to exclude external influences brought in via digital media, and ubiquitous references to popular culture as a taken-for-granted basis for sharing knowledge and forging common experiences in lesson time.
Learning Civility

Schools are expected to fulfill more roles than simply providing and accrediting learning. They are organized in ways that promote a particular way of being—as a member of the school community as well as becoming an academic learner (which we explore in chapter 6). Here we ask, What are young people learning as they adjust themselves to the school day—about themselves, about their relations with classmates, and about the institution of school? The members of a class are brought together not exactly by accident but by processes over which they have little control. They have to get on with each other, and in some cases, they have brokered what may be enduring relationships. How they learn to manage their relations with each other and with the wider community of the school will endure for the rest of their lives: we all remember our classmates even if we are not in touch with them. In what follows, we explore the mechanisms that the school developed explicitly to create membership of the school as a mode of participating in civil society.

Recognizing the wide diversity of backgrounds accommodated within the class, the school had good reason to emphasize a narrative about the students as a collectivity, as a means of addressing divisions wrought by socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnic differences. As their class teacher, Catherine, wanted to tell us, “They have a real sense of, you know, an identity as [the class], and I think that, for the most part, they’re quite proud of that.” Other teachers agreed; as one said, when asked about the relations among the wealthier and poorer students, “I don’t think it affects, necessarily, the way they interact with each other.” Yet VFS was typical of London schools for the diversity of its intake.5 The 28 students in the class came originally from as many as 13 different primary schools, since in the English comprehensive system, everyone living within a defined radius of the school is eligible to join, and in London, this radius includes a considerable diversity of housing.6 Thus, the class included children living comfortably in spacious houses costing one or more million pounds sitting next to children crowded into social housing and private rental accommodation.7

Being in the class meant that the young people had to negotiate a rather socially engineered “slice of life”; they had to learn to be citizens in a civil society. The young people were themselves aware of this expectation.
In a discussion about school rules, Gideon and Megan displayed their understanding of the school’s efforts:

**Interviewer:** Why have they got these rules? What are they about, do you think?

**Gideon:** It’s meant to not distract your learning. You’re not allowed to dye your hair certain colors so as your learning is not distracted and stuff.

**Megan:** It’s like being a community, because everyone is the same.

Indeed, the evident differences among students were remarkably little commented on by teachers, parents, or children. Rather, there was a strong, if implicit, emphasis on learning to get along with difficult or strange others. At VFS, we saw how the class had found a way of getting on with Toby, who had special educational needs, and its members had learned not to clash with Lydia, wary of her history of bullying. Individuals had found routine ways to be more or less accepted by the group—boys kicking a football around the playground, girls chatting in pairs or small groups. Yet, as we saw in chapter 4, this often meant little outside the school, nor was it required to: the commitment being sustained in class was to more “public” allegiances, not necessarily based on personal or deep bonds of friendship.

Although the term is awkward in relation to children and young people, it seemed to us that students were learning to be “collegial,” a phenomenon important to living in a large and diverse city like London. Despite the young people spending many hours together in the shared experience of school and becoming very familiar with each other’s ways and problems, few terms capture the relationship that results. This ranged from polite dislike through indifference, tolerance, or friendliness to positive warmth. In the art class, for instance, Giselle and Fesse knew that they were both talented, but although not unfriendly, they had no word to describe their connection: they shared an experience that mattered to them and valued the opinion of the other, yet they would hardly refer to the other as a colleague (as adult coworkers might), and they repudiated our suggestion that they were friends, without knowing what to say instead. The social geographer Ash Amin talks about “collaborating strangers,” although these, too, are
uneasy terms with which to acknowledge that complex urban societies must find ways to enable very different people to work with each other constructively.12

The parents supported this vision of civil collegiality. The middle-class parents had chosen to live in a mixed neighborhood and to send their children to the local school rather than to bring them up in a more privileged context. Some of the working-class parents had worked hard to give their child this chance to benefit from a “good school”; in any case, they were glad of it. Shane lived on the edge of the catchment area, and his mother told us of her efforts to get him into VFS as a way of extricating himself from the more problematic environment of his primary school. His new friends, she told us, were “lovely boys, all well-mannered kids”: “I think that’s part of the reason I wanted him to go to that school—all his friends that used to go to this [other] school, . . . and I was like, ‘You’re not going there’ . . . I said, ‘You don’t realize when you go to secondary school, within a couple of weeks, you make a whole new circle of friends,’ you know, which I wanted him to do. So he seems to have made a nice bunch of friends.” This strategy did not necessarily provide Shane with a straightforward route to “success,” however, as we will see later.

Managing Civility in Practice

Several strategies enabled this civil vision of the school community. The school sustained a principle of rational objectivity in its approach to the diverse composition of any class, employing a range of tactics. Students were generally not allowed to sit where they liked, and the beginning of each term was marked by instructions directing each individual to sit in a certain place in each classroom. Sometimes these arrangements lasted for the full school year. This varied from teacher to teacher, and some lessons, such as Design and Technology, were valued by the students precisely because they were established as more flexible, sociable situations. Catherine used deliberately to move students around each half term (so, six times a year) in order to encourage greater sociability among students who may not normally sit with each other and additionally to break up friendships that may have become too noisy for her to control. While this may have facilitated learning from the teacher, the
result, as Alice explained to us, was an environment that lacked warmth and friendliness: “I don’t like some of my classes, like, because . . . because we’ve got mixed up from our form—like, obviously, like, most of my friends aren’t in my form. Like, Jenna’s the only one that’s really my friend in my form. But, like, I’m not with a lot of my friends in my classes.” At a whole-school level, there was an online school newsletter and other forms of collective activity: a Christmas concert including dramatic performances at the end of the first term, a school fete in the summer, the Parent-Teacher Association meetings, and a whole repertoire of visits, concerts, and events. Together these practices demarcated a formal community about which we heard very little critique. Membership meant complying with a set of behaviors regarding standards of adult-youth and peer-to-peer interaction, with parents expected to support their children’s adherence to these standards. In return, the school was keen to show that it aspired to high standards of academic and extracurricular performance and attainment.

In short, school life was constructed as largely self-sufficient, with its own conventions and expectations. These included a persistent discourse about “the class” itself, even though this social unit was, as we saw in chapter 4, more valued for its rhetorical appeal than as the basis of relationships among its members. There was also a persistent yet tacit avoidance of talk about “home,” except in ways carefully managed by teachers or kept “under the radar” by students. The school’s concern to disconnect from life at home was made explicit in its ban on students bringing mobile phones or smartphones into school, along with a ban on the use of social networking sites in school. And as we saw in chapter 4, teachers were concerned that connected devices meant that “home matter spills into school, and that’s where that tension and the difficulty lies.”

So when Catherine talked of the class, she was positioning it as disconnected from home, given that the latter represented a world where more complex tensions might bring about conflict. As she saw it, this required a therapeutic slant; in the past, she had had to institute “quite a lot of bonding and unifying exercises”: “I think they’re a lot, lot better now.” Indeed, by the end of Year 8, the class had won the most commendations among all classes in the year group, and both their teachers and the students themselves reported to us a range of personal improvements in self-management and “anger management,” which were also
celebrated in discussions between teacher and parents at the midterm Progress Day and in the annual school report sent to parents.

Morning and afternoon class registration periods or tutor time were especially focused on civility and community. There was a certain amount of transactional business occupying these times—giving out letters, making announcements, and so forth—but there was also a series of rituals that worked to establish group membership and shared values. Catherine checked equipment and homework planners on Mondays. The students read their novels on Tuesdays. On Fridays, they watched and discussed the BBC news on the smart board. Catherine's style was to mix conversational scaffolding with a personal interest in the students: chatting about holidays, reminders to take things seriously as exams approached, asking who would see a new film over the weekend. Occasionally, too, she told them a little about herself, often self-consciously, as if modeling a well-balanced and orderly life for her students. One afternoon, she mentioned going to a birthday party and asked what the young people would be doing that weekend. Sedat volunteered that he was going to play in the garden, and the others talked about the fact that his family kept chickens, a level of knowledge about his home life that caused amusement and embarrassment. Another day, she talked about her journey to work or, bonding with Jenna and Megan, recalled crying over the film Titanic, just released in 3-D. Such personal interactions allowed for some differentiation among individuals, complementing their treatment at other times as equivalent members of a formal collective. To manage the interactions, students were invited to find a way to respect each other, although not all managed it. Nor were all comfortable with such performances of the personal: Lydia would rarely participate, for instance, and Sebastian expressed to us some wariness about the impersonal or staged nature of these exchanges.

Just before the students left for home, Catherine liked them to reflect on their experiences of the school day. A typical opening would be, “What did you learn today?” Depending on their mood, the students would reflect seriously or mess about. Alice and Max one day mischievously reported that they had learned in art about Frida Kahlo's bisexuality, and Dom chipped in that he had learned what a subtext is. While Catherine struggled for a response, Gideon saved her by launching into a complicated saga about a black boy in a white neighborhood seeing
a black girl, saying the wrong thing, and getting murdered. Catherine took a moment to work out that he had had a lesson about apartheid but did not open up this or the previous topics for further discussion. Such apparently open discussions were, in practice, often contained by the teacher’s more controlling and adult-led approach. One autumn morning, our field notes recorded this:

Catherine does an equipment check. “You’re very talkative this morning, you need to make sure your mind is ready for learning.” “Make sure you’ve done your Behaviour for Learning target” in planner. “Class Photos are being taken tomorrow.” Minor disciplinary stuff. “Maths Club starts today lunchtime”—Catherine encourages. Lydia hasn’t got planner correctly completed. Nick lacks a pencil sharpener. Detentions for the five who haven’t got their planner signed twice in a row by a parent.

A key point of joint ritual was the calculation at the end of each day of how many “commendations” or “concerns” (for achievement, good behavior, or the opposite, as recorded on the school information management system, SIMS) that each student had received, a topic we explore in more detail in chapter 6. This process simultaneously made visible to the class how each individual was progressing and encouraged a team spirit through explicit competition with other classes in the year group. Interestingly, given the potential for personal humiliation this process posed, the class usually responded with a mixture of good humor and indifference.

Catherine reads out the commendations from SIMS and tries to exhort competitive enthusiasm for the class to “win.” The kids are mildly interested. They veer between sneering and childlike enthusiasm. Catherine performs a sense of this being personal for her: “How Mr. X [the head of year] will sneer if I lose!”

They all share in SIMS, checking who has got most commendations; Dominic plays the team captain. . . . “Well done guys.” They can all see who is “of concern” on SIMS too.

These moments occasionally veered into the carnivalesque as familiarity and solidarity allowed for a certain amount of leeway with the rules. Birthdays were always celebrated by the group, along with rituals
such as Secret Santa at Christmas, adding to the carnival feel: “Raucous. Catherine not there.” They insist on singing Happy Birthday to Salma. They all get over-excited and try to use strategies to get away with it. They have a lot of fun and games with Yusuf’s name but it is all good-natured. Sedat as usual can’t control himself and gets into more serious trouble than the others but it’s not too bad.”

Popular Culture as Common Culture

Beyond the language of behavior management and interclass competition, the teachers had found a further and more positive language for creating commonality: that of popular culture. Once we were attuned to the routine referencing of popular culture in lessons, we began to notice mentions of it everywhere. The school and the teachers seemed to imagine that the experience of watching television programs or listening to music offered a kind of common culture, shared values, pleasure, and fun, drawing the whole school together in an “imagined community.”

For example, to motivate students in physical education, the teacher observed that they would do the same warm-up exercises as celebrity football players do. To advertise the science club in the year-group assembly, students were enjoined to find out “how an iPhone works.” To explain graphs in math, the exercises were to plot data on mobile-phone tariffs or Hollywood film profits. To judge work in geography, students were invited to act as judges on *X Factor*, a popular reality television show. To pick out a tune on the electronic keyboards, students could choose the theme from *Rocky* or *Chariots of Fire* (although these choices may say more about adult visions of popular culture than the students’ visions). As a strategy to build commonality, the school’s endorsement of popular culture said little about the students’ actual interests, which were—as we discovered later—both more current and more diverse than the somewhat dated, mainstream vision of teachers. For example, favorite television programs ranged from UK soap operas (*EastEnders*, *Waterloo Road*), US sitcoms (*Friends*, *Jersey Shore*, *Don’t Tell the Bride*), children’s shows (*Merlin*, *Horrible Histories*, *Cartoon Network*, *Doctor Who*, *The Simpsons*), sports, and reality shows (*The Apprentice*, *X Factor*, *Big Brother*, etc.). Of these, we heard only sports and reality television mentioned by teachers.
High-culture references, by contrast, were rather rare, although the headteacher was keen on using these aspirationally. A boy played Chopin on the piano as the students trooped into the hall for assembly. The headteacher gave a presentation of student achievements (getting into the University of Cambridge, a Shakespeare festival, etc.) to the sound of a Beethoven symphony. Just as important as raising aspirations, it seemed, was establishing a common set of reference points that could include all students, simultaneously orienting them toward the collective tasks of school life and yet acknowledging—in a contained way—their interests and habits beyond school. Certainly, it is not obvious what else the students had in common or which other cultural references could be safely brought into the classroom. Where they lived, what they believed, what they did with their time—all these could prove sources of conflict or inequality.

Pedagogically, the teachers were aware of the limits of the strategy of illustrating everything with a popular culture reference. For example, a history teacher worried that “media should only be included in lessons when it’s of a high quality, . . . for example, History used Pocahontas as an illustration for something to do with the Indian people of America. How do you know at the end of it that all 27 students have made the link, and how do you know at the end of the lesson that there aren’t ten kids in there that think that Pocahontas is a true story or that Disney is factually correct?” Yet we saw few critical reflections within the classroom about the use of such material; typically, film or television materials seemed to be presented as the famously misleading “window on the world.”

The idea that common culture offers universally shared experiences does not acknowledge social, cultural, gendered, and, importantly, ethnic or racial differences among the students. A problematic example of this was the use of some highly emotive resources to teach the history of slavery, as part of Black History Month. Our field notes recorded the following in one lesson:

The topic is well introduced—with images of slavery on the interactive whiteboard, including a present day rapper enslaved in Southern Sudan, a reference to the film Gladiator, a video of slave children in Haiti today. The lesson comes the day after news of slaves living in the UK, and the fact that slavery still occurs catches the students’ attention. But the lesson
begins to go awry precisely because of the students’ intense interest. Max asks why poor people have children they can’t afford to care for, another boy introduces the idea that slaves are not only exploited and beaten but also raped, Megan is puzzled by an image of a pretty slave with no manacles. These are difficult issues. We notice that the teacher makes no reference to the fact that one third of the class and all the portrayed slaves (except Russell Crowe) are black.

The predominantly white teachers seemed, over and again, to ignore the diverse ethnicities present in the class. Instead, the address was generalized, substantially reliant on popular media images to draw in the students. Yet it was apparent to us that ethnicity partly shaped students’ engagement. In another lesson on the same topic, the black students actually started naming their difference within the classroom in a way that challenged the teacher’s authority and appeared to subvert the seriousness of the topic and, perhaps, their own claims for political recognition. In that instance, when images of lynched African Americans were shown on the smart board, as part of a film using Nina Simone’s version of “Strange Fruit,” we noticed that several of the black boys in the class started attaching the names of each other to the bodies on the screen. The boys then started speculating what they would do if the Ku Klux Klan came to London. The boys could be seen as subverting the gravity of the lesson. Yet they were also articulating an emotional identification with the subject of the lesson and engaging with the idea of fighting oppression. But in this instance, the teacher was more concerned with what he called messing around, although, possibly, he was also concerned not to draw attention to very different stakes that members of this class had in this subject. Some of the white students were equally irreverent—an account of punishment for slaves led Dom to ask if you can still hear after your ear is cut off, resulting in a disruptive discussion about George Weasley losing an ear in *Harry Potter*—but this was merely an attempt to distract the teacher, with little deeper resonance.

It is hard to know what lies beneath the surface discussion, but the lesson was uncomfortable for us as observers and, it seems likely, for teacher and students also. The discomfort, it seems to us, stemmed from a refusal to acknowledge difference, as social awkwardness is preferable
to conflict. In such lessons, the aspirations for civility and for a disinterested approach to a universal curriculum were severely stretched by significant differences—actual and claimed—among the students. The fact that the students manifested their “otherness” through a challenge to teacher authority rather than as explicitly political acts allowed the school to avoid tackling the genuinely “teachable moment” and, instead, to support a veneer of civility.

Relationships and Resistances

How did these differences within the class affect social relations at school, and how did these relationships “feel” to the young people themselves? We saw Shane’s and Megan’s reflections on socioeconomic difference in chapter 3, suggesting that the young people were aware of how their differences may divide them outside the school. We also saw in chapter 4 that the intersecting networks of friendships and peer relations that hold within and beyond the class were primarily consolidated outside lessons—whether in school corridors, after school, or online. In lesson time, therefore, while the young people surely retained their wider knowledge and experience of each other, they gave remarkably little sign of this beyond meaningful glances and under-the-radar chatter. This was partly because they often did not sit with friends in lessons and also because of the strategies to encourage civil attention that were rigorously practiced by most teachers. Therefore, more important within lessons than peer relations were the young people’s relationships with teachers.

Abby, who lacked close friends at school, told us she cared little whether she worked by herself or with others. What mattered more was how she felt about her teachers:

Interviewer: What about—does it matter who the teacher is, about the lesson, or not?
Abby: Yes, I think sometimes the teachers aren’t, like, very supportive, so it doesn’t really help, like, in the lesson.
Interviewer: [Asking on the basis of watching her earlier that day] So, like, with maths, are you desperate for somebody to help you?
Abby: Yes, or, like, a new teacher, because I don’t really like my maths teacher.
We had been asking whether the young people preferred individual or group working, thinking that collaborative working at school might be more student centered and more likely also to generate out-of-school working relations. Yet like Abby, Mark expressed little interest in the social nature of the learning activities, saying he did not mind “working in a group or doing some writing” by himself. Again what mattered was whether students considered a teacher to be unhelpful or critical. This was possibly because they had little power to renegotiate their relationship with teachers if they did not find them helpful—certainly, playground discussions were often focused on highly personalized commentary about the teachers they did or did not find supportive. Gideon’s account of one of his teachers revealed his sense of powerlessness over how he was treated and, therefore, how well he could learn: “It’s quite weird because it’s kind of confusing because one second he’s really nice and supporting you, and then the next day if someone does something in the class, they kind of blame you. And then that’s frustrating, and then I just get angry at that and have an argument.” Megan, too, linked her relationships with teachers to her ability to learn in lessons:

**Interviewer:** Tell me about a teacher that you really like and really respect as a really good teacher, and tell me what’s so good about their teaching.

**Megan:** Mine’s like... I think a really good teacher’s Miss —— because she’s so nice. Like, even now she’s not my teacher, she’ll still say hi and talk to me when I see her. Like, other teachers, though, just, like, walk past you. But she’s not even my teacher anymore, and she’s still so nice. And I did learn a lot with her. . . . She, like, really helped me.

There was a lot of talk about how teachers made the students feel during lessons. Dilruba, who often appeared quietly diligent in class, revealed the importance of the emotional climate created by the teacher:

**Dilruba:** It depends how the teacher acts with you because then it affects your learning.

**Interviewer:** Tell me a bit more what you think about that.
Dilruba: Because if they’re, like, keep shouting at you, like, you feel like they’re picking on you, and you can’t really concentrate on your work.
Interviewer: What’s an example of that?
Dilruba: When . . . I don’t know. When you just do something, and the teacher’s like he’s picking you, and they don’t ask anyone else, and then you just think they’re like aiming at you.
Interviewer: And that makes you feel bad?
Dilruba: Yes.
Interviewer: Can you explain to me how a good teacher makes you feel, then?
Dilruba: Yes, when they’re like nice, understanding, and you can just go to them for anything.

Much of the time the students appeared to feel individually vulnerable in lessons, never sure when the spotlight would fall on them, remembering for a long time how they felt when a teacher shouted at them, keeping their heads down to avoid trouble. For some of them, when relationships with staff were not good, the role of friends in classrooms became more important. Indeed, where we saw a breakdown in class discipline, it was frequently made manifest through forms of peer-to-peer socializing, as if the young people took this opportunity to display their power to choose whom they spoke with and where they would direct their energy. Thus, the somewhat exaggerated displays of friendship that we witnessed in the classroom could be seen as enacting a kind of resistance to the teacher—bearing in mind that in happier circumstances, friendship was not made very visible in the classroom. As Adriana told us defiantly, “Some lessons you just talk. That’s, like, my science.”

In a science lesson, we observed how Max deliberately and ostentatiously struck up a conversation with Ruth, a girl he was friendly with in the school play. Our field notes recorded that: “Max is incredibly chatty with Ruth, who openly reads The Hunger Games in defiance of the teacher and the lesson. Max turns his back to the teacher and adopts a righteous indignation when rebuked. He knows all the answers and what’s going on. He is not uninterested in the topic.” Displaying friendship in this way is as much about opposing the teacher as it is about being sociable, a point borne out in this instance by Max’s continuing
poor relationship with the science teacher, leading to complaints and direct confrontation later in the term.

For some of the young people, such confrontations became habitual. Shane was frequently in trouble with the school and found it difficult to shake off his reputation as a difficult student. He spent a lot of time with his seemingly hyperactive friend Kier, who was also often punished for disruptive behavior in lessons. As the term progressed, we came to see Shane as a younger version of one of the working-class “lads” in Paul Willis’s classic study *Learning to Labour*. Willis described how the naughty boys at the back of the class prepare themselves for a hard masculine life in factories and on the shop floor through forms of male bonding and disruptive behavior. Willis suggests that working-class youth “fail” at school as a way of preparing themselves for the actual futures that await them. We observed Shane in a PSHE lesson about the United Nations:

Shane is pretty interesting throughout. He is very self-conscious when addressed and there is an underlying and on-going connection between Kier, Shane and another boy at the back. Any time one of them speaks it sparks responses from the others. Kier (who tells me he didn’t know Shane before VFS) is always on Shane’s radar and all of his [Kier’s] actions take this into account. It makes it difficult for Shane to escape this identity if he wanted to. He seems pretty motivated and keen throughout. He volunteers that that the UN is like FIFA—that it has a model of governance he is familiar with—a point acknowledged but not developed by the teacher. He puts his hand up a lot and gets much of the answers right. He and Kier rap to the phrase, “friendly relations between nations,” which gets them a frown. He asks a question about US & UK military intervention. However, he is so self-conscious that any seriousness always cracks.

But at the age of 13, Shane was still working out his options, torn between choosing to identify with the other lads as a form of identity work and not caring if he got into trouble—promoting friendship with other lads above the authorities—and the desire to succeed on the school’s criteria and, perhaps, to please his mother, who, as we saw earlier, so wanted him at this school. Unlike Max’s bad behavior in the science lesson, when he used his friendship with a girl, Ruth, to accelerate the
breakdown in the contract between teacher and student, Shane’s priority was to sustain his friendship with Kier, which he did precisely by enacting publicly how this friendship and the kind of identity that it signified for them both was of higher priority to him than the lesson was. Yet to us—who had discerned Shane’s evident interest in the topic and who, on another occasion, had heard his determination to avoid trouble at school—his ambivalence was palpable.

For Adriana, who was neither overly concerned about whether she would eventually succeed nor as angry as Max with how she was treated, a third strategy was deployed. Like the others, she interwove her participation in social relations with moments of academic learning, but this time using a kind of show-off strategy that demonstrated to anyone watching (perhaps mainly to herself) that she could handle anything and everything.

Adriana answers questions a lot, puts hand up and gets the central idea quickly. Later in the lesson I see her surreptitiously go on BBM under the desk. She tells me that she is chatting with a friend in another lesson. I ask her what happens if she gets caught. She says some teachers will confiscate the phone but give it back at the end of the week, and that since it is Friday she reckons it will be ok. After a bit of this, she switches back to the lesson, she asks, “Sir, what is the question” and then gives the answer. I ask her how she knows when she needs to know something, when to concentrate and how to put herself forward as a good student. She gets the question but can’t explain what kind of tacit knowledge—“class-craft”—comes into play.

Adriana’s somewhat insouciant attitude involved breaking school rules or behavior codes only up to a point, for she was carefully calculating just what she could get away with in her display of friendship in the classroom environment. Her point was less one of resistance to the teachers or school and more a display of “multitasking” competence to promote herself as a clever and successful student, showing command of the curious rules and regulations that students learn govern social life in school. Megan and Adriana articulated this balancing act for us with some pride:

Megan: I was bad and never got in trouble.
Adriana: Being bad and not getting in trouble is so good.
Conclusions

Since members of the class were embedded in diverse social networks that ranged across school and home, including dispersed or transnational family and informal peer groupings that extended offline and online, the potential to challenge expressions of difference within the class was substantial. This chapter has focused on how the school as an institution organized and influenced social relationships according to both pedagogic and sociopolitical visions of who the young people “should” be, as individuals and as a collectivity. Although school is usually considered primarily as a place for individuals to learn, with the relationships among students or between teachers and students valued only when they might affect learning outcomes, we were interested in how the school contextualized young people's social identity and social relationships, even constituting its own version of “society.”

We saw in previous chapters that the networks and social worlds that these young people constructed for themselves included less socio-economic, gender, or ethnic difference than existed in the neighborhood, although this is not to say that their ego networks were not diverse. But while, out of school, they could determine who to include in the handful of people important to them, we have also seen that at school, the young people were broadly committed to the vision of fairness and inclusivity offered them by the school. However, it took a lot of teacher management to implement this vision for the whole school environment. Some of the young people experienced this management as convivial, allowing a degree of warmth, fun, and comradeship in getting along together. Some found it more coercive or controlling, with students experiencing a degree of frustration, injustice, embarrassment, or alienation from the school's effort to ensure a rather impersonal sense of civility.

Over and beyond the task of studying, the school's everyday routines also prioritized the task of learning to be a citizen—of comporting oneself at school in a manner that accorded with the school’s values and practices of discipline, order, and getting along together. In the language of teachers and parents, this was expressed in terms of a continuous commentary on students’ behavior, constantly admonishing or praising. The young people discussed this more obliquely: What is So-and-So like? Who is it best to sit with? Why do some hang out with others? Few,
if any, dissented from the avowed aim of learning how to interact with very different others as integral to the civil vision of the school, whether or not they signed up to the wider moral project of public education to produce self-governing individuals able to harmonize social difference. In the “super-diverse” environment in which this very urban school was located, learning to get along with strangers was as important as academic achievement—and without it, the school would not be able to function as it wished.33

This chapter has identified several strategies the school employed to bring about its vision. One, as we saw in chapter 4, was to construct “the class” as a meaningful and coherent unit that confers a collective identity and sense of belonging. Another was the appeal to a shared imaginary of the wider world, as depicted in the familiar images of the mass media as a common culture in a globalized world. A third strategy involved finding ways to keep difference and conflict at bay, which in turn meant restricting what may pass across the boundary between home and school. And finally, the school made it difficult to recognize and name any kind of difference, whether economic, gendered, ethnic, cultural, or whatever, as if the very naming or making visible of difference itself could undermine the aspiration of equal treatment for all. While the microenactment of relationships among students and between student and teacher also contributed to this vision, it simultaneously opened up possibilities for tactics of distancing, renegotiating, or resistance. So, while we have used words like “control,” “discipline,” and “order” to refer to how power is organized at school, we have also tried to show how young people learn to consent, or not, in ways that still grant them some autonomy and personal space.34 This, too, is something they learned at school: to accommodate institutional demands and yet also to articulate individual freedoms.

Not all the students found doing so as easy as others did. And as our comparison of Adriana and Shane suggests, social class provides differential resources from which each young person resisted the impositions on him or her. Indeed, while there is no simple mapping of teacher treatment onto student background, we witnessed plenty of occasions in which we felt, along with so many scholars of education,35 that middle-class students received greater leeway, with teachers slower to judge Adriana, Megan, or Max, for instance, than they were to mark out Sedat,
Lydia, or Shane as, frankly, uncivil. Similarly, the moments when the disciplinary regime was relaxed—for example, in top-set math, the extracurricular astronomy class, or the school play rehearsals—were all moments when the middle-class students came to the fore, positioned to benefit from such opportunities.

The school’s construction of civility, then, seemed to require less overt displays of discipline for middle-class children. Similarly, how it maintained boundaries between home and school appeared to exclude what “different” (poorer, ethnically “other”) children might bring to lessons and to their collective life with peers at school. In the following chapters, we shall see how these efforts excluded crucial knowledge among young people from all walks of life; but still it is likely that the school’s concern to disconnect rather than connect with home life may negatively affect students from poorer homes.

However, we saw little in the school—at least in Year 9—of the disruptive forms of resistance or rebellion that some school-based ethnographies have documented in relation to the reproduction of school failure or an underclass of persistent low achievement. Some of the middle-class students resisted the school’s invitation to join in the common, civil space, while some of those from poorer homes enjoyed this invitation and appeared to benefit from it. Further, while most of the students had their complaints about harsh teachers or “stupid” rules, we heard no one disagree with the overarching ambition to sustain the school as a fair environment. Indeed, the absence of any single class-based opposition to the whole project of schooling shows how far all members of the class subscribed to the belief that formal education mattered and that they could rely on the school to provide it.

We have described how at VFS the vision of wider society on offer in the school was promoted explicitly and implicitly by the consistent efforts of the teachers and the institutional practices of the school. We also found that the parents generally backed this up, and as we have just suggested, so did the young people themselves. In the detailed practices discussed in this chapter, we can see evidence that supports Elias’s vision of civility as a form of learned self-restraint. Elias’s version of this kind of self-governing is customarily opposed to a vision of civil organization based on democratic engagement. But we did not see many deliberate efforts for democratic accountability initiated by the school—for
instance, Mark was the class representative on the school council, but he and others were clear that this was all but meaningless.

There may, certainly, be other and perhaps better ways of organizing school life. But this chapter has also shown how bringing differences from home into the classroom can be hazardous. As illustrated by Laurent Cantet’s 2008 award-winning film Entre les murs, translated as The Class, where the teacher did “bring the outside in” with disastrous consequences, in VFS, teachers constructed a version of civility that avoided difference, modeled tolerance, and preserved order within the bounds of the school. This can be read as an effort toward conservatism with a small c at a time when the relation of individuals to society is being reconfigured, accelerated by multiple macrosocial changes: uncertain labor markets, contested visions of education, global and cultural tensions, and so forth—as discussed in chapter 1. But it can also be read as a more modern response to the fact that such changes mean that, more than ever before, new forms of sociality are required. Today, everyone must relate to many others with whom they have no direct relationship. How society is imagined and how it functions is no longer governed by unquestioned convention or time-honored tradition. So for young people, school becomes a key place to develop convivial, collegial, cooperative, even collaborative or cosmopolitan values—aever more important in an age of individualization when values of inclusivity, tolerance of diversity, and civility become a necessity to avoid conflict.