The Class

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Making Space for Learning in the Home

The modern family varies in how it balances the desires of its members to live together and yet also separately, as we saw in chapter 7. One way is to exploit the flexibility of contemporary digital media to structure domestic time and space, building common rituals and yet allowing for individuality. But as we have also argued throughout this book, considerable flexibility is increasingly demanded of all the institutions that structure young people’s lives, including family, school, and community. In this chapter, we explore the changing arrangements surrounding the nature and place of learning outside the school and in the home.

We build on the argument of chapter 1 that the forms and ways of knowing in society are diversifying, complicating the traditional activities of schools (along with libraries, universities, museums, and other repositories of information and expertise). Education—frequently conceived throughout the 20th century as a public good to be managed by the state—has begun to fragment into a series of local, national, and (in the case of universities) international markets.¹

Markets in education encompass not only schools but also ancillary educational services, some of which seek to supplement schools while others appeal directly to families. In recent years, a host of publishing and educational technology companies both offline and online have developed in this marketplace.² Yet this mixture of entrepreneurial markets, which place a heavy emphasis on the responsibilities of the individual and on establishing comparable and measurable outcomes, by no means results in a simple or singular narrative replacing older values (variously humanist, meritocratic, social justice oriented) around learning and education. Taken-for-granted boundaries between educational institutions are being rethought, as are the relations between institutions and individuals, motivated by a sense of global opportunities and yet an intensified culture of anxiety over academic attainment and labor-market competition.³
Taken together, these shifts are reconfiguring the risks and opportunities that young people—and their parents and teachers—must engage with. In turn, this impacts on parental attitudes toward the authority of schooling and how families reconstruct the home as a new kind of “learning provider.” Since digital media pay little heed to physical boundaries of home or school, such technologies are often harnessed by commercial and policy rhetoric as the solution to deliver these new opportunities for out-of-school and lifelong learning.4

But do parents give time to reimagining the education system? They know that they must ensure their child gets to school on time, ready to learn. They know they must check their child’s planner and attend the periodic parent-teacher appointments. Many parents ask daily, “How was school?” even though the answer is often a grunted “boring.” Many set aside a time and place for homework, and most regard it as their responsibility to provide their child with internet access, even if they have never used it themselves. As Abby’s father told us, “It is the communication media of the age at the moment, so . . . if they can’t be switched on to that, they’re going to be in trouble and they’re going to miss out.” But some go much further in supporting learning at home and school, hinting at the general uncertainty facing parents: what support is most useful, and how much is enough? We explore their strategies in this chapter, bringing out how these reflected families’ differential economic, cultural, and social resources. Moreover, as the existing research literature makes clear, the more it seems that we are living at a time when fewer and fewer people trust schools, and so the more the responsibility for education falls heavily on parents.5

This chapter explores these themes by examining how different families construct opportunities for learning physically (how they arrange rooms and resources, especially technology), socially (how they establish habits and rhythms), and conceptually (how they see the purpose and nature of learning). As will become clear, varying conceptions of the relation between home and school learning were evident across the families, and these depended on their cultural capital. Although the idea of cultural capital is contested, we find it the most useful way of capturing the mixture of social-class-based assumptions, values, and beliefs that we observed to distinguish the families.6 Attitudes to education are passed through the generations, and they are also shaped by cultural beliefs.
While they are often instrumentally oriented toward employment, families are also concerned with their children’s well-being, happiness, and fulfillment, however defined, and they may or may not rely on the school to deliver this broader vision. Thus, the value that families accord to school depends on how they calculate its relevance to their children’s possible futures (not necessarily just a question of qualifications) and, in turn, on how they frame their hopes and aspirations more fundamentally.

As we spent time in the class members’ homes, we were provoked by research showing not only that middle-class families benefit more than other social groups from educational opportunities, formal and informal, but that they are responding to the competitive pressures of the risk society by striving ever harder to maximize such benefits, seeking distinction (in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms) for their child by multiplying enrichment activities as a deliberate strategy of what Annette Lareau has called “concerted cultivation.” While the existence of such middle-class anxieties is widely asserted in popular discourses, with growing evidence for concerted cultivation especially in the US, we were curious as to whether similar practices were evident in the UK. And we were even more curious about what we would find in the less privileged homes, for Lareau’s contention that working-class families simply conceive of their children’s development as a “natural” process seemed at odds with the widespread efforts of families over recent years to gain computers and internet access or to respond constructively to labor-market uncertainties.

Respecting the School’s Definition of Learning

Yusuf was the eldest of four children in a devout Muslim family that had emigrated from East Africa when he was little. His father had been a trained nurse but in London could only obtain work as a railway ticket inspector. His mother spoke very limited English, although the rest of the family was fluent. At school, we saw that Yusuf worked quietly and conscientiously in lessons. He was in advanced classes for math and science, which he enjoyed, although he received remedial attention for English and had previously received it for math and science, as well as being screened for learning difficulties.

When we visited him at home, we found that two distinct learning practices were high on his parents’ agenda. First, his twice-weekly atten-
dance at Quran school, which involved a considerable amount of rote learning (in Arabic) that he did not always fully understand, as well as more open discussion of moral and social issues. Here, progression was measured by learning the suras (verses of the Quran) by heart.

Second, his father had purchased an integrated series of math and English programs on CD for around £3,000—a considerable expenditure for any family and especially for one with such modest means as Yusuf’s. The CDs provided a series of graded activities and tests; when a certain number of tests have been passed, the company that makes the CDs issues bronze, silver, and gold certificates. At home, one of the bedrooms had been turned into a “classroom,” with large wall charts marking the children’s progress through the tests along with a careful arrangement of further educational resources: CDs, books, worksheets, and test materials. Yusuf’s father referred to himself as a sort of headteacher, and each child was expected to complete a certain number of tests weekly, filling in the appropriate cells in the wall chart. This demanded considerable discipline since Yusuf’s father was often absent on shift work, and his mother could not communicate well with the children.

Figure 8.1. Yusuf’s “study.”
Both the Quran school and the home investment in educational technology mirrored the emphasis on structured learning tasks and quantified indicators of progression that we saw at school in its implementation of national curriculum levels (chapter 6). Yet the school was unaware that Yusuf was engaged in either of these learning activities out of school. Nor was it clear to us that the family’s investment particularly aided his achievement at school or his learning for its own sake.

While Yusuf’s family, especially his father, went to great lengths to mirror at home their conception of learning at school, most families took a more moderate stance. One common strategy was to carve out one small part of the home and arrange it to look like school, building a home-school link through spatial design. For example, Shane’s mother had done her best to support Shane’s learning by dividing his bedroom into distinct activity zones: the bed in one corner, a small air-hockey table and a boxing punch ball in another, an Xbox in a third, and placed diametrically opposite it, a PC. This distinction between work and pleasure was repeated in several of the boys’ bedrooms; implicitly, a computer is for work, and the Xbox or PlayStation 3 is for fun.

Yet Shane barely used his PC, and when he did, it was mainly for fun. When we visited, he could not show us any software he used other than the browser, and his history revealed searches for YouTube, shopping, and Facebook. Moreover, the house had few books, and the only talk of focused practices that could be classified as learning concerned his serious engagement in sports, both organized and informal. Shane’s mother had come to a similar conclusion:

**Interviewer:** Okay, what do you think are the positive benefits of all the time he spends on the computer and the Xbox and stuff like that?

**Shane’s mother:** Don’t know, really.

**Interviewer:** So what do you think he gets out of it?

**Shane’s mother:** I don’t know, really. It’s all for his personal use, isn’t it? I don’t think it’s educating him, really.

While not all the parents had reached the point of disillusion, it was common that conversations about technology faltered when we asked what was good about it, what they hoped their children would gain
from it. The fear of “missing out,” it seemed, drove the acquisition of such goods more than any particular vision of their benefits.\textsuperscript{10} We were led to conclude that a positive vision of how technology—or, indeed, any other informal or extracurricular activities—might foster learning of various kinds was, in large measure, a matter of cultural capital.

Contrasting with both Yusuf and Shane, whose families were both relatively poor, was Adam. All three boys were obtaining grades around the middle of the class, but while Yusuf’s family in particular regarded this positively, Adam was considered by his teachers and parents to be underperforming. We have already seen in chapter 7 how Adam’s computer gaming had led to conflict in his family. As we then hinted, the problem was more than one of how to regulate his engagement with violent media but was also one of how to build on his enthusiasm for computer games since this was so at odds with his lack of motivation at school. His mother—an artist who welcomed unconventional ideas—was generally familiar with current claims that playing computer games can offer new and exciting ways to learn and even have a place in formal education.\textsuperscript{11}

Does the attitude of Adam’s mother account for our observation that Adam’s game playing was qualitatively different from that of the other young people we interviewed? Adam had access to PC gaming as well as an Xbox and was as interested in more exploratory, open-world games—like Skyrim and a skating game that allowed him to experiment with moves and sequences and to be led by the qualities of the game. The first time we visited Adam’s home, he was less concerned with leveling (proceeding through the levels of a game to define his progression) or with the social interaction facilitated by game play compared with the other boys and more focused on exploring the possibilities of the game. He showed us magazines, websites, and other resources that he drew on, suggesting that his gaming represented an organized and systematic form of knowledge acquisition.

Thus, it appeared to us that, for both negative and positive reasons, Adam and his family sought to construct his interest in game play as a form of learning, one that stood in opposition to what school offered. Yet this was a fragile construction, risking the accusation that they were finding justification for his troubling performance at school. Nor was it clear to any of them what exactly was being learned or where it might
Figure 8.2. Adam’s bedroom, showing places for work and play.
lead. As we also noted in chapter 7, when we visited Adam at the end of our project, he seemed to have moved on in two senses: first, he now positioned game playing as just a way of connecting with his friends, and second, he had become more involved in his schoolwork. For instance, he took one of his public (GCSE) exams early, obtaining a high grade, and was more positive about—and more successful in—school. Perhaps in consequence, his computer gaming no longer seemed a point of conflict at home.

Unlike Adam’s mother, neither Yusuf’s father nor Shane’s mother had any way of framing learning beyond that of the school. In this respect, cultural capital, as conceived by Bourdieu, matters: Yusuf’s and Shane’s families made certain investments to aid their children’s educational prospects, but they did not create a culture that recognized pedagogic values other than the instrumental. For example, although like Adam, Shane was a keen computer gamer, he lacked a language to talk about what he knew or how he might seek to improve his game performance, nor was he interested in metatextual practices such as reading magazines about gaming or looking up game cheats.

In short, although Yusuf’s and Shane’s cases exemplify different kinds of continuity with school definitions of learning, these boys did not find a way to escape that paradigm. Rather, their parents accepted the school’s highly instrumental approach to knowledge and, with little cultural capital to contest or qualify it, created a domestic environment that, to a greater or lesser degree, mirrored the school’s emphasis on external indicators of achievement.

Deploying Cultural Capital

Dom and Sara both came from affluent middle-class homes with parents in high-status professional occupations. Dom was a serious athlete, playing for the local cricket and football clubs as well as the school teams. Sara had several hobbies and interests, including taking an additional qualification in astronomy and performing in a Shakespeare workshop, both offered by the school as extracurricular activities. For their parents, the school was necessary but not very interesting, while home life took a lot of investment to support their high-achieving children.
The notion of investment here needs careful unpacking. Lareau’s account of middle-class parenting in the US paints a picture of a stressful schedule of enrichment activities that is highly demanding of both children and parents in the competitive struggle to maintain distinction. Yet we found that Sara and Dom had more flexibility and no less free time than Yusuf did. Moreover, unlike Yusuf, both were encouraged to undertake a wide range of activities, not simply for instrumental reasons, to develop their “curriculum vita,” but also from deeply held beliefs about the importance of a childhood that includes diverse forms of learning and engagement, beyond “just” academic success.

For instance, Dom’s progress in sports was considered as important as his progress in academic study. Shane played as much football as Dom did, but Dom was much more serious in his preparation for games, commitment on the field, and collegial relationships with team members, regarding all of these—as well as actual football skills—as a focus for continual improvement. Dom’s club football coach had made him player of the year precisely because of the way that Dom concentrated during the game and was consistently serious in considering strategy and talking to, encouraging, or leading his teammates, as well as in paying attention to the work rate of the whole team. In a similar fashion, Sara was encouraged by her family to take her hobbies seriously. When we first visited, she was making a whole series of Play-Doh sculptures, approaching this with a similar level of intentness that she did her academic work. While the family was obviously aware of the difference between earning a qualification in astronomy and making Play-Doh figures, it was noticeable that her family supported and respected all kinds of participation that provided opportunities to develop new interests—as exemplified by the array of cultural activities Sara enjoyed, including a visit to the Charles Dickens museum and National Trust properties.

For both Dom and Sara, access to technology was helpful: Dom liked to follow expert football commentary on Twitter; Sara would photograph and then upload images of her Play-Doh sculptures to Facebook. But it was neither relied on as sufficient in itself as a route to achievement nor especially prominent. Despite living in an affluent home—and with a father working in IT—Dom, his brothers, and his mother shared two computers between them as a deliberate strategy to encourage sharing, to regulate potentially antisocial behavior, and to mitigate against ob-
sessive solitary game playing. Dom’s bedroom was one of the few that had no screen, although the family did have an Xbox in a dedicated playroom for the boys. Sara had largely given up the struggle against her Facebook-mad little sister for the family laptop and would go online from her iPod Touch when she needed to look something up. Indeed, her bedroom was largely dominated by her Sylvanians (a cute range of animal toys with human characteristics), legitimating a space for childhood play along with her books and her new telescope.

Sara’s father described the process of seeking out enrichment opportunities: “For quite a number of years, I’ve tried to get them interested in various sports; and we’ve gone through a whole gamut of sports and, yes, from swimming to tennis. But a few . . . about four years ago, we stuck at climbing, and Sara’s become quite good at that.” It is noteworthy that more like Yusuf’s than Adam’s experiences, the climbing was part of an accredited scheme that provides qualifications measured in levels. Sara was persistent at this activity, although a little frustrated at how slowly she was progressing: “You have to move on to the next level and

Figure 8.3. Photographs of Sara’s Play-Doh creations uploaded to her Facebook profile.
stuff, and it’s . . . and I still haven’t moved on, but it’s just—it’s really long. They haven’t even got a level 5 at our climbing center. But I’m level four, at the moment, so it’s, like, I can’t give up now. So I’m going to just keep doing it, hopefully, get to level 5. I think . . .” By trying a range of activities, Sara had developed the ability to self-assess realistically, recognizing that she was not “sporty” or arty, for example, and coming to terms with her limitations in rock climbing after watching fellow climbers.

Such talk might give the impression that Sara was more average than is the case. However, she undertook the broadest range of activities in the class, working hard and obtaining A grades. It may be that to fit in with her peers she had learned not to shine too obviously, although it is also surely an achievement in itself that she had learned to recognize where and when to concentrate her efforts effectively. Two instances hint at the secret of her success. On one occasion, she had to research child mortality in Swaziland for a model United Nations competition: “I’m on the committee for child mortality rates, so I had do so much, like, research for it. And in the end, Dad just like—I’m just ringing up the consulate in—from the UK to Swaziland. So he just rang them up, and I was like, ‘You can’t just ring them up, can you?’ And then he was like, ‘Oh, here’s the government website, just . . .’” Not all fathers have the confidence to phone a consulate to help with their daughter’s homework, and so this example nicely illustrates Lareau’s claim that middle-class families teach their children to stand up for themselves, to demand the resources they need. Still, since any moderately experienced internet user could find this information easily, we found it interesting that high-achieving Sara did not, suggesting that she was more hardworking than used to taking initiative. For example, to be accepted on the after-school astronomy course, students had to promise to undertake what the school called “independent learning,” since the amount of formal teaching offered was limited. We asked Sara if this involved a different kind of study:

Not too much. It was relatively all right, but, like, because they gave you all the resources to find out anyway and a lot—like, we didn't actually cover that much in class. A lot of it we did have to study at home, but you didn't realize you were studying it, because what we were doing is we'd get our homework, and it would just be a set of questions, and then,
if you answer them, you don’t realize it, but every single one of them is, like, related to a topic that will come up on the test. And so it was quite nice how, like, you can study it yourself, and you can understand it at your own pace and stuff. I really, like, I really felt that was good.

We asked her about searching online for additional information or resources—for instance, whether she had visited the NASA site, a well-known source of astronomy knowledge geared toward students. But such exploration had not occurred to her, and she evinced no qualms about not checking any of these out. As she saw it, the facts required for the tests were conveniently available on a single recommended site, and there was no need to look further afield. Yet her account of studying astronomy in the evenings is one of positive engagement; she found school learning pleasurable and rewarding and thus welcomed its extension into the home.

Dom’s approach to learning was a little different: he tended to generate a kind of running commentary to accompany his activities, as if performing his own learning experience. We saw him to do this in tutor time, speaking aloud the class’s rate of awarded commendations as if he were a sports commentator; we might even see his way of following and commenting on the experts’ football discussion on Twitter in a similar light, and we saw him doing it during football practice, as our field note recorded:

Dom is very focused in the skills-based sessions. He is clearly competitive; at many points he made jokey remarks about beating other opponents but not excessively so. He is conscientious and does as he is asked and will rebuke others if they mess around. He is very involved in the action though not by any means the most aggressive or evidently talented show off. When [the coach] gave advice or instructions I noticed it was Dom who picked up on this first. . . . He does offer a little bit of a commentary in a humorous and engaging fashion—I mean he is always trying to involve others in the narrative. So: saying “well done,” “man on,” ooh’s and ahh’s, screams of pleasure etc. These are all ways of vocalising and narrating the experience for the group. In the game they played in the baseball arena kicking the ball as if they were making runs in a skills-based complicated activity; he immediately set up a commentary, a
dialogue with other boys—a jokey banter as a form of competition. They all do this but he is inventive, witty and consistent in this.

When we asked him about his player-of-the-year award, Dom explained, “I just realized that obviously I’m not the best in the team, but if I try hardest, I can make myself look like I’m the best in the team.” As with Sara, Dom found he could achieve beyond his actual expertise, because excelling was as much about performing as a type of learner as it was about displaying knowledge. In their different ways, we can interpret both Sara and Dom as having grasped what it takes to excel, having made a realistic assessment of their personal strengths and weaknesses, and having found a self-regulating strategy, perhaps even a personal pedagogy, that worked for them.13

Dom and Sara exemplified young people who had learned or were in the process of learning how to make the “choice biographies” introduced in chapter 1.14 Support for theoretical claims about the changing nature of identity in the modern age can be glimpsed in the daily efforts of these two youngsters as they went about developing the kinds of identity that were supported and rewarded by both their family and school and that, surely, would help them “succeed” in the future. The ways in which they had embraced these subtle and unstated aspects of being good learners stand in strong contrast to the attitudes of Yusuf and his father, who still operated with a top-down notion of the teacher-managed student, and of Shane, whom we saw to be puzzled, aware that no great burden of expectations was imposed by the school yet unaware of the self-regulating model that could take its place. As the year progressed, we saw Adam managing to integrate forms of learning that were marginalized with those deemed central. Also significant was the way in which Giselle’s family, and some of the other “bohemian” families, had access to alternative discourses of learning, allowing them to sidestep the school’s vision of learning.15

Alternative Visions of Learning

Although far from high earning, Giselle’s parents were a highly educated, bilingual couple, each self-employed in creative enterprises.
Giselle drew, performed, played music, and had a sense of herself as an emerging artist, strongly supported by her parents. She told us how, on vacation with her mother, a trained artist, she and her brother used dedicated sketchbooks as part of the holiday ritual. Giselle’s mother had also run a small after-school club for art when Giselle was younger. These professional practices—using a sketchbook, critiquing art together, or talking about photography—were normalized within day-to-day family activities. This same structure of support framed Giselle’s technological pursuits: her creative use of Tumblr, a management role on her cousin’s Minecraft server, her production of witty videos uploaded to YouTube.

Although Giselle’s father did not play Minecraft, he had observed Giselle and her younger brother’s game play—usually prominently conducted in the living room—and had developed a view of how it incorporated a range of learning processes. Unprompted, he spoke to us about how the play developed technological fluency and social skills to participate in a virtual social world. Giselle and he talked about some of the game’s design issues, such as developing customized skins for building textures. Unlike Adam’s mother, Giselle’s father had a vocabulary and set of concepts about learning that derived from his work as a self-employed creative within the digitally connected economy. This outlook and values framed his and Giselle’s mother’s beliefs about learning, leading them to treat Giselle’s participation with a certain equality and seriousness, recognizing that it involved a degree of responsibility on her part. Meanwhile, Giselle learned to conceive of her game play and her use of Tumblr as an extension and development of her other embedded artistic practices.

Here, then, was support for a vision of learning that integrated Giselle’s different skills and interests, drawing on wider discourses about aesthetics, taste, and expertise. This contrasted with the siloed approach of the school to art or music or information communication technology (ICT), instead allowing for an approach to learning that was reflexive, pleasurable, and interest driven and that made no artificial divisions between “academic” and “play” or “just games.” The result was a degree of disconnection between home and school in which home was superior in providing creative and flexible opportunities to learn:
Interviewer: Do you feel that what [Giselle] does here in terms of creativity is recognized in the school, is welcomed by the school, is completely separate from school perhaps?

Giselle’s father: I don’t know what happens in the school really. I mean, I know she’s good at art, and they’ve acknowledged that. I know . . . when it comes to music, I think it always sounded like music is a bit chaotic generally at school and isn’t really the place to really . . . the music classes aren’t really the place to do much at all other than . . .

Interviewer: They have those rooms full of digital electronic keyboards.

Giselle’s father: I don’t know what happens in there though. It does seem—I don’t know, music classes—I ask about music, and she goes—sort of, it just seems to be a bit of a struggle getting through music, because there’s just too many people doing too many things. And it sounds like the music teachers have trouble controlling the kids. I imagine they realize that she’s quite a creative person, but she’s also good at maths and that sort of thing, it turns out. So I don’t know how the school view her, sort of, creativity.

In this exchange, Giselle’s father stops short of direct criticism of the school, although he is clearly confident of his own views: he knows Giselle is good at art, that she is creative, and that her extracurricular music lessons are superior to those provided at school. As we explore in chapter 9, the expectations established at home are less concerned with measurable achievement than with cultural expressivity. Supporting and deepening Giselle’s creative and cultural engagement, therefore, is not something her father expects of the school, but he is confident of providing it for her at home.

Contrasting Learning at Home and School

Comparing different families’ conceptions of learning gives us a wider insight into what has been called the “habitus” of the home. Learning, as we have analyzed it, is not so much or not only an inner, psychological process but is grounded in and constituted through a whole set of activities, experiences, and resources that vary across contexts. At
school, as we saw in chapter 6, priority was given to a single definition of learning as progress through a series of explicit and measureable levels, although in a few more relaxed moments—the school play rehearsals, some of the after-school activities—we saw signs of less instrumental, more intrinsically motivated conceptions of learning. But for the most part, the school operated with a conception of learning that paid little heed to learning located outside its boundary, unless that learning could be translated into its own terms—in other words, made visible at school and accorded commendations or other markers of value that the school could recognize.

Yet families, as we have shown, are strongly oriented toward learning, investing their resources and arranging their homes and timetables to support, complement, or provide alternatives to the learning they perceive to take place at school. Thus, the home introduces children—explicitly and implicitly—to other ways of valuing and making sense of learning, to which individuals respond in different ways. How much is this a matter of individual choice, or is it the workings of social class, resulting in the social reproduction of advantage and disadvantage?

As argued in chapter 1, traditional notions of social class were tied to a stratified and stable labor market (unskilled, blue collar, office workers, management) that is now in flux, although far from obliterated. So although social mobility has hardly increased over recent decades in Western societies, many observers argue that, on the one hand, middle-class lifestyles have become more uncertain, while working-class solidarity is all but lost as the trade-union movement has been undermined, and many people even among the poor now self-identify as middle class in their values and politics. Matters become even more complicated when we add in the effects of immigration and multicultural living, as we saw some of the most determined efforts to support children's education and attain social mobility among the minority ethnic families in the class.

It is in this context that researchers are rethinking social class less as a matter of labor-market positioning and more as a cultural ethos. For example, Lareau argues that middle-class families focus on enrichment and self-assertion as part of a strategy of “concerted cultivation,” leaving ever further behind the working classes whose ethos of “natural growth” offers their children more freedom over their lives.
but at a long-term cost in achievement.\textsuperscript{18} And as discussed in chapter 7, Lynn Schofield Clark contrasts the higher-income family’s “ethic of expressive empowerment” with the lower-income family’s “ethic of respectful connectedness.” Clearly some cultural differences are to be expected in family life, given strong sociological evidence for the persistence of social class differences across the generations. Yet just as in chapter 7 we could not neatly map our families onto Clark’s two ethics of family life, nor can we neatly map our families’ approaches to learning onto the two ethics of Lareau.

The cases of Yusuf and Adam are perhaps the most striking: Yusuf’s relatively poor and marginalized family was making striking efforts to ensure that Yusuf would achieve educationally, while Adam’s professional parents, having lived through a painful year of his school refusal, were doing their best to stand back and not push.\textsuperscript{19} Equally, we have contrasted Sara and Giselle, two “gifted and talented” girls (as labeled by the school) who sat together in the class but who turned out to live so differently at home. Both were middle class and both were provided with many learning opportunities, and yet Sara’s learning at home singly conformed to the school’s conception of learning, while Giselle additionally pursued an alternative model of learning at home.

Only in Shane’s case might we agree with Lareau’s concept of “natural growth,” his mother having set him up with a computer but having little idea how he might use it, instead leaving him free to play the games he wished or to bicycle around the neighborhood at will. Yet over and again during the fieldwork, we found ourselves discussing Shane in terms of how the school seemed to have labeled him as a “bad boy,” even though, in their different ways, both he and his mother—Shane with remarkable patience, his mother with some frustration—seemed to wait for better support from the school, an institution they respected precisely for its expertise regarding education.

Sebastian’s middle-class parents demonstrated a type of “concerted cultivation” when his mother rather ruefully listed the activities he had now given up: “we went through a lot of [musical] instruments,” he played rugby for a local team, he gained a brown belt in karate, the family used to go skiing, and so on. His mother worried that “he’s recently dropped virtually everything that he was doing, because he wants to be with his friends,” even though she had warned him he would need
extracurricular achievements for his CV. While accepting that teenagers are not always very malleable, we were more struck perhaps than his mother was that Sebastian had followed her lead in excelling at drama and singing, both of them participating in a successful local drama group.

Overall, there was little doubt that most of the parents, irrespective of their social class, were well aware of the intensifying competition for qualifications and employment that awaited their children. Equally, they were familiar with the supposed value of extracurricular activities—as witnessed by the alacrity with which they joined forces with Catherine on Progress Day to encourage their child to take on more, to achieve more. To check out what the young people did, in a short in-class survey, we asked them about their past, present, and future extracurricular activities. This revealed a broad mix of musical, performance, sporting, and cultural activities, as is typical of British young people. Some of the impetus for these activities could be seen to come from the school, which provided lunchtime and after-school activities on-site. More, however, came from the home, and here lies the potential for social inequality, as on average, the young people from middle-class backgrounds did three or more organized activities (by which we mean activities that require arrangement, payment, or infrastructure), while those from poorer backgrounds did nearer two.

Linking Home and School

So far, this chapter has examined the notion of learning from the perspective of the home, contrasting it with the school’s approach (in chapters 5 and 6). We have described the efforts that parents make, according to their own conception of learning and education, to prepare their child for school and for the wider world thereafter. Both here and in previous chapters, a sense of the disconnections between home and school persists, with each operating according to different logics. It seems that parents, teachers, and children do not always understand the efforts that each makes with respect to learning. Such misunderstandings risk undermining innovative policies to connect home and school, to engage parents with the life of the school, or to integrate diverse processes of informal and formal learning.
The school’s predominant focus on curricular learning, measured by a complicated system of levels and integrated with a stringent system of behavior management, was in itself simultaneously respected—as clear, fair, and effective—by parents and students and yet problematic. For parents, it was often opaque and confusing, difficult to contest, and frustratingly insensitive to what they saw as the individual needs and circumstances of their child. For the young people, it kept school life predictable, but they resisted its invitation to offer up their out-of-school lives to its all-encompassing forms of measurement, recognition, and management.

For teachers, too, the desire to retain authority over their own domain proved stronger than the desire to link up with their students’ home lives. Indeed, few, if any, expressed to us much respect for what occurred at home—as they saw it. For example, we asked an IT teacher if he thought that young people’s use of digital media at home could aid school learning, only to receive a scathing reply:23

They do very little in terms of anything remotely academic at home that could be related to our curriculum. So the things we do in our curriculum, they do almost zero of it at home. So within that scenario of what they do at home, nothing appears to me to be remotely academic or related to the IT curriculum—certainly nothing to do with robotics or game design or designing their own games or video editing, which we do, graphic design, elements of programming, HTML script, web design of their own. Some of them occasionally venture into designing web pages, but that’s about it.

The home, as we have periodically observed in this book, was not generally seen by the school as a place of valuable learning, partly because, as in this example, the school did not have access to any way of understanding learning beyond its own metrics.

In the early 21st century, many hopes are pinned on digital networked technologies, for these surely can connect what has previously been disconnected, creating constructive linkages and new flows to circumvent familiar barriers.24 Yet in some ways, this is a naïve view of technology as a neutral conduit and of information as uncontested, so that it can somehow be shuttled between homes and school and other places in a
simple and unproblematic fashion. This chapter has shown that learning itself is best thought of as a range of different practices, habits, values, and disciplines that lie at the heart of different class dispositions. On the whole, schools find it difficult to accommodate this kind of diversity, and so, as Basil Bernstein showed 25 years ago, they adopt a series of linguistic mechanisms to frame, classify, and categorize knowledge deliberately to maintain control and authority over “what counts as learning.” In some ways, the teacher just quoted is doing no more than rehearsing this process of marking out the boundaries of these knowledge realms. But if this is the case, how can we expect the new digital networked technologies to be able to operate in such a highly contested and jealously guarded series of domains?

Over the year, we saw how this confusion between means (network technology) and forms of knowledge (how learning is understood differently in different places) repeatedly clashed and confused teachers, families, and the young people too. Nowhere did we see this more clearly than in the various fragile or halfhearted attempts to construct deliberate, and often too-simple, one-way digital linkages between home and school. For example, our fieldwork coincided with a new initiative to use email to strengthen communication between home and school. This failed, the teacher in charge explained to us, because although the school worried that parents were “hard to reach,” the teachers were “very nervous” that establishing email connection would unleash a flood of queries and demands from parents. In other instances, it was the students who resisted the intrusion of learning into their free time at home (for instance, when teachers set up subject blogs that they imagined the students would access out of school).

To be sure, the school and the families were willing to cooperate on certain set-piece exchanges: weekly, via the paper planner that the students carried between school and home, transmitting notes, marks, or instructions as needed; annually, via Progress Day (the face-to-face parent-teacher consultation near the start of the year) and the end-of-year school report, itself heavily coded (see chapter 6); and on an ad hoc basis, when either teacher or parent had something directly to communicate to the other. But this did not mean either was open to further or more flexible forms of interchange. In the main, efforts to make connections were ineffective when conceptualized in ways that might extend
or transform learning but were more effective when they contributed to the efficiency of authorized and school-sanctioned communication.  

The main link between home and school is, of course, the young people themselves. Every day, they traverse the boundary between school and home, and yet, famously, they communicate little of the interests or concerns of either to the other. There is nothing new in this, but it encapsulates the challenge for those who wish to improve relations between teachers and parents and between formal and informal learning. As Catherine reflected ruefully, “On the whole, there’s too many assumptions or preconceptions about teachers but also about parents and what they will bring. I think we’re both guilty of it.”

Conclusions

The abstract idea of learning was conceptualized by families in the class in a variety of ways. Yet whether they sought to extend what they saw as the school’s vision into the home or to enact a complementary or alternative vision of learning, there remained a notable disconnection between home and school. “Home” is a rather vague and problematic place, as seen by the school. “School” is an equally vague and problematic place, as seen by parents. Yet although efforts are made on both sides to overcome this disconnection—with teachers and parents seeking ways to connect formal and informal places of young people’s learning—at the same time, it is actively reproduced, with school and home each keen to retain control over their own domain. We saw parents making a rather greater effort to second-guess how best to accommodate the expectations held of them by the school than the reverse. As a European survey of teachers’ use of ICT concluded, digital resources are rarely used “to communicate with parents or to adjust the balance of students’ work in new ways.” Or, as Lyndsay Grant concluded even more critically from her research, “the requirement on parents to deliver the school’s agenda in the home comprehensively conceals any contribution that children’s home practices and discourse make to their learning.”

The key symbol of learning in virtually every home we visited was that of the screen: computer, tablet, or mobile. We have already observed that asking parents if we could visit their home to talk about digital media and learning was successful precisely because parents
were keen to discuss how they were variously appropriating new technology. Indeed, we were led to conclude that the signifi cance of technology was not merely the entry point to thinking about learning, but in many cases, it had come to stand for learning itself, thereby encapsulating parental dilemmas about their responsibilities in relation to their child’s learning. To be sure, families have long sought to provide a quiet place, perhaps a shelf of books and a convenient table for their child’s homework. But the far greater demand of investing in a computer; rearranging the home to accommodate it; making decisions about printers, speakers, scanners, and other peripherals; getting their heads around first dial-up and then fixed broadband and then Wi-Fi at home—all of this has engendered a degree of refl exivity as to its purpose. Does playing computer games involve learning? Is access to a computer or internet-enabled device helpful? How many extracurricular activities is enough?30

Yet in families’ development of strategies for supporting their children’s learning, they are very unequally resourced. Differences in cultural capital, as we have shown, result in significant variation in the ways that families understand what learning is, in their attitudes to authority, the pleasures of discovery, the autonomy and independence of the learner, and the wider social values at stake. We hesitate, on the basis of one class, to draw categorical conclusions regarding the likely future outcomes for the young people on the basis of their very different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. But we have observed a general tendency toward the social reproduction of advantage or disadvantage, while also noting the contrary cases among other complexities. And this general tendency makes us cautious in the face of the undoubtedly exciting calls to reimagine education in ways that rely on families to support and extend learning, for these risk exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities. In chapter 9, we explore the uneven distribution of cultural capital in more detail as we look into music making outside the school. We will see not just how some families deploy traditional cultural capital but how bohemian and community-facing families draw on alternative kinds of cultural capital in supporting their children’s learning.