Chapters 7 and 8 have explored how families organize and structure the lives of their children, with an emphasis on the parents’ as much as the young people’s perspectives. In this chapter, we look in more depth at how some of the young people themselves established their own “learner identities” through the ways they developed expertise in out-of-school activities. We have chosen the particular domain of music learning as our case study, because opportunities to learn and play music span formal, informal, and out-of-school settings. Music can connect experiences, engagement, and expertise across the various places of young people’s lives. Examining informal music making allows us to see how ways of learning developed in school may or may not be carried across into cultural activities outside school, demonstrating both connections and disconnections in discipline and habit. Learning music can be child led (or “interest driven”) or adult led (part of “concerted cultivation”) or both. It may be taught or self-taught, although, being usually a more “optional” subject, how the child or young person learns to be a learner is surely central.

In short, music learning offers a means of bringing together many of the threads in the previous chapters. What kinds of possibilities for learning music did our class encounter? What was the range of pedagogies on offer to them, across different situations of music teaching, learning, and provision, and how did they respond? How do families build on youth-led interests to develop particular forms of cultural capital? In what ways does learning to be a learner in out-of-school contexts reveal the development of cultural capital as young people practice habits and ways of behaving that reach beyond narrowly defined academic achievement? And because learning music—in particular, learning to play an instrument—is to a great extent voluntary and privately
financed, what does it reveal about how inequalities in social class and wealth are mobilized?³

At Progress Day, described in chapter 2, Catherine was keen to ask the parents about whether their child was learning an instrument, whether through the instrument lessons offered by the school or privately. Such discussions were not about music in general—itself a field of considerable importance that engaged virtually all of the young people with varying degrees of intensity. Indeed, they listened to music frequently, most of them every day. However, many of their preferences found little resonance either at school or in out-of-school music lessons.⁴ The more street-wise boys preferred “Grime” (London-centric rap). Several of the girls listened to “Top 40” (mainstream popular hits). Abby, Dilruba, and Salma liked Top 40 but focused on black artists, especially women such as Rhianna and Beyoncé. Sebastian and Dom liked mainstream “Indie Pop,” Sergei liked “Dubstep,” and Joel liked “Retro Rock.”⁵ But Catherine’s questions were about how the students might demonstrate the playing of an instrument as an accomplishment, recognizing that out-of-school lessons were conventionally focused on classical music. If they were playing an instrument, Catherine invariably asked what grade they were at, referring to the examination system controlled by the Royal Academy of Music or similar bodies, where students progress through graded examinations that are often taken as markers of achievement.⁶

While all members of the class had group music lessons at school, just nine told us that they were currently learning to play or perform music outside the school. Several more said that they had had lessons when younger but no longer pursued music. This was, in itself, a far from equitably distributed privilege, as shown in table 9.1. Although the table’s classification by relative wealth may be too simple, it shows stark differences regarding which young people had access to the possibility of music lessons and who was excluded.

The picture is clear. The opportunity to learn music is heavily influenced by social class, unsurprising insofar as all the young people currently learning music were learning it out of school, where lessons are relatively expensive; no one in the class was taking up the school’s offer of lessons at a subsidized cost. There were more girls than boys taking these lessons, suggesting that playing an instrument
may still be regarded as a gendered accomplishment. It is interesting that the two boys from poorer homes currently learning music were both from minority ethnic groups, which, in one case, revealed the importance of Turkish cultural practices. Several who said they would like to learn music in the future were notably from poorer homes, including Abby, Dilruba, Joel, Nick, and Sergei, suggesting that the barrier for poorer children is less lack of interest than the resources to sustain music learning.

As we got to know the young people and started visiting them in their homes, we found out more about the place and meaning of playing music in their lives. This chapter develops the stories of some of the nine who are currently learning music. Three were following grade examinations, and we begin with Adriana and Megan, two middle-class girls reluctantly learning the piano and violin, respectively, because their parents wished it. We contrast their cases with the case of Max, a middle-class boy learning the piano in a traditional and highly structured way. Then we turn to three young people whose music learning was not framed by the national system of grades and was instead primarily self-motivated: Giselle, Sedat, and Fesse.7

In different ways, our discussion of these three young people elaborates and complicates the nature of cultural capital by revealing how different kinds of pedagogy—or relations between ways of teaching and

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<th>Has never learned music</th>
<th>Used to learn music</th>
<th>Is currently learning music</th>
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<td>Wealthier homes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dom</td>
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<td>Adriana</td>
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<td>Toby</td>
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<td>(plus several of those who were currently learning, who had previously tried a different instrument)</td>
<td>Max</td>
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<td>Poorer homes</td>
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the knowledge being learned—contribute to what cultural capital might mean. In chapter 8, we outlined how forms of cultural capital in the form of resources, attitudes, and understanding of learning were bound up with social class. Here we expand on that discussion by outlining three types of cultural capital that we call traditional, bohemian, and nonconvertible. Traditional cultural capital is the typical goal of efforts toward “concerted cultivation” often pursued by the middle classes and is here illustrated by Adriana, Megan, and Max. By contrast, Giselle, although also from a middle-class home, exemplifies “bohemian” cultural capital, where an alternative approach to learning is deliberately derived from artistic practices.

As discussed in chapter 8, the learning practices evident in the poorer homes were also far from homogeneous. In relation to music, we were particularly interested in what we might call “nonconvertible” subcultural capital, rooted in minority ethnic cultural practices. We examine how Sedat’s playing of the saz, although it seems to include mainstream learning practices in its discipline and habits, is so rooted in cultural events not recognized by the school that the value of his learning does not “convert” to achievements that are recognized beyond his community. The chapter ends with Fesse’s story of determined “self-teaching,” a wholly interest-driven endeavor that, partly because it demands few resources and gains no credentials, also is not publicly visible and so makes little claim to convert into value that can be recognized outside his home.

Parental Ambitions and Reluctant Children

Adriana had completed Grade 1 piano and was now working toward Grade 2. She was uncomfortable with the idea of us watching her play the piano, so we did not accompany her to her lesson. At home, she told us that practicing the piano was a source of tension between her and her mother: “I used to have so many [arguments]. . . . I’d scream at her. I had to go to anger management and all this stuff. But I don’t have . . . and now I don’t have arguments with my mum at all, only for piano.”

We did not get to see Megan playing her violin either, although she was about to take her Grade 2 exam the month after we interviewed her. She framed her violin playing as a matter of filial duty, with music being traded against language learning in the family calculus of achievement:
I don’t really care. I just do it to keep my mum happy really, because, like, I do classics as well. So I do violin, classics. And I was going to stop doing violin a while ago, but my mum was like, “If you want to change Spanish to RS [religious studies],” then I have to keep it up. So it doesn’t, like, bother me having to do violin. It’s just like . . . and to be honest, I actually do quite like—when I think of violin, I don’t like the sound, but then, when I go, I don’t mind it. Like, I’ll enjoy it. It’s just because it, like, it ruins my evening because it’s at the most awkward time and it’s just . . .

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the girls’ parents saw matters differently. In Megan’s case, they were articulate about the skills, technique, and knowledge involved in playing an instrument. Megan’s parents not only knew much about the technique and learning processes involved in the teaching and learning of instrument playing but saw in some way an essence of their child’s unique abilities realized through these disciplines. Her father explained,

She’s natural at it, you know. She’s very good at sight reading, but for her, it’s something that she has to do, and it’s not something that . . . She doesn’t come home and say, “Great, I want to play some violin.” It’s “You will do some practice now,” and she’ll do the minimum. And you listen to her, and you think, now with the bare minimum she, you know, she can play, you know, nice enough to make you think, “Oh, that’s such sad music;” “Oh, that . . .,” and it’s pleasant to listen to.

Clearly he was perfectly aware that Megan did not see her practice as he did; rather, he hints at a parental philosophy in which the parent holds that he or she has the better grasp on the child’s long-term interests. Adriana’s mother, who may have shared some of these desires, was more worn down by the power struggle that this process entailed:

We’ve been quite persistent about that [piano lessons]. But have to kind of drag her to do the activity, because again with the sports, she doesn’t—she says she doesn’t like sports, which you have to respect to some extent. But I say, “You have to do some kind of physical activity.” So for—in the past few years, she did a bit of ballet and dance and other activities, but again, if she doesn’t go with a friend, she doesn’t want to go. So that’s one
of her difficulties, doing things on her own. And her plan this year is to
do tennis lessons with a friend. So now that the weather is getting nicer,
maybe she will start that.

Adriana’s mother was herself an expert in dance, so it is unlikely that
her expectations of Adriana were solely about CV-worthy achieve-
ments. But the value of music learning in and for itself easily gets lost
in parent-child struggles of the kind we see here. As Adriana’s mother
implies, beyond the value of engaging with music lies her belief that the
very process of music learning involves the development of character
(involving planning, doing things on one’s own, being self-motivated).
As with Megan’s father, the challenge is to respect the child’s expressed
wishes in the present, while believing as a parent that long-term benefits
may accrue with persistence. And, indeed, Megan herself had taken
on this language of self-determination in relation to music learning:
“Before you’ve done your first grade, it takes two years maybe, because
you’re just starting to know how to play the violin. But then if you want
to start an exam, it will take about a year to plan for it.” Listening to
these girls talk about music lessons at school reveals how little—as they
see it—learning music at school supports its learning at home (or vice
versa):

**Adriana:** Music, I don’t do anything. We just talk.
**Megan:** Music is actually [overtalking].
**Interviewer:** Music—I saw everyone was in the same room with the
keyboard, and no one was really doing anything. . . .
**Megan:** It’s fun in the practice room, because you do whatever you want.
**Gideon:** Everyone goes on their phones.
**Megan:** The teacher will come in for, like, five minutes of the lesson;
the rest of the lesson we do [overtalking].

We observed a fair few music lessons at school in which the tasks
set—especially for those who had instrumental lessons—were rather
simple. As we saw in chapter 6, the discourse focused more on matters
of levels and behavior than on the analysis or performance of music
itself. Moreover, we witnessed very few lessons in which the students’
extracurricular knowledge of music—whether their broad interest in
music listening for leisure or their specific expertise gained through out-of-school lessons—was specifically recognized by the teacher or drawn into the flow of the lesson. This is not to say that the teachers did not know who was studying music, but they depicted out-of-school learning as a curiously random and uneven form of knowledge, one that the students themselves were unclear about:

There are quite a few kids whose parents are in bands and stuff, and they’ve done some song writing. So they’ve probably got software at home that they’ve had a play around on with. I don’t think they realize . . . when we ask them in lessons, “What experience have you had of music technology?” and then some of them go, “Actually, I do know how to do this, because I’ve had a bit of a go at home.” There is the odd one or two who sometimes come out the woodwork and seem to be quite easy at picking up a different model or a different program.

Possibly, too, home learning is difficult to build on in lessons because those lessons are varied and constructed around national curriculum levels and tasks that do not fit with the grade system used to evaluate learning out of school.¹¹

Obedient Children

Max played the keyboard and piano. He was happy to allow us to attend a lesson at home one evening in his well-decorated flat with lots of family and wedding photographs. The teacher, Adrian, arrived late and seemed uninterested in having an observer as long as it was not an official inspection. He rushed in, did the lesson, got paid, spent two minutes talking with us at the end, and rushed off. Before the lesson, Max had explained that he had begun playing the piano in Year 6. He had taken it up because he liked the idea of being able to be a virtuoso. However, he explained his motives in instrumental terms, saying that it would look good on a future CV. He was working toward Grade 4 and had an ambition to get to Grade 8. We recorded in a field note,

He seems to practise prior to the lessons, so not every day—this is partly to do with him not liking the keyboard at his mother’s house. Whilst he
isn’t incredibly keen, he is dutiful and well organised in preparing for the lessons. He was a bit vague about discussing his musical taste. I think he liked a group called Octopus. He said his musical taste was not the same as his friends and was quite happy to be different. The grade system allows you to choose from a repertoire but he does not listen to classical music.

The lesson itself was intense, focused and technical. There was very little praise or negotiation about what Max was doing. Adrian has now taught him for 3 or 4 years so they are both used to this. Max went and got the money (I think £30) for Adrian. Like Dominic knowing how much the football costs (and unlike Nick) the affluent middle-class children are confident and informed about financial transactions.

They worked through the Grade book. They changed activity 3 or 4 times, working on sections of bits of music in order to get the technique correct. At one stage they did a sight-reading exercise. Whilst Adrian hummed a bit and obviously enjoys the music none of this came across from Max. Unlike Giselle [see later in this chapter], the emphasis is on complete technical accuracy rather than the experience of the whole piece or song. It is clearly anatomised, broken down into openings, middle parts and so on, all of which are treated repetitively to get correct. They worked a lot at the music itself, marking the stages, talking about notes, sorting out finger positions and at times talking about overall phrasing (preserve legato). Adrian wrote on the text a lot. It is about getting things right. Max rarely asked questions. Most of his talk in the session was apologizing, saying sorry or confirming “I get it,” to demonstrate to Adrian that he knew what he was supposed to do and it was just a question of making his fingers do the work. There was a lot of self-correction, which Adrian supported tacitly. (Afterwards Max did admit that he thought my presence may have made him slightly more anxious about performing.) Altogether I was struck by the shared focus and understanding mediated through mastery of the symbolic language of music.

Praise was reduced to comments like “You’re sounding confident here” and the occasional “good.” As I commented to Max afterwards, in some ways this was a harder and more critical examination then he would experience at school. I think he agreed with me here. Adrian is very direct and instructional, “fingers, fingers, 2nd.” Adrian makes all the decisions. “That’s all we’re going to do this week,” “Let’s do this piece
now.” He also makes the judgments about quality, about when it's good enough to move on. I didn't hear him involving Max in this process of judgment making and although he asked him several times whether it sounded right, to an extent Adrian is the authority and it wasn't clear how Max learns to know when it is right or good enough.

At the end it was “Right we are done,” “More practice.” Target setting and homework. If anything, I thought this was more school like than school itself—certainly more disciplined and challenging.

Two features of this episode are particularly noteworthy. First, there is the relationship between learning to play an instrument and the young person's own musical tastes. Here, there seemed to be a complete separation between high and low cultures, with Max's own music consumption having no bearing on the lesson. However, unlike Giselle (see later in this chapter), Max did not question this value system, and it did not seem to impact on his motivation to become a proficient pianist. Indeed, in contrast to the other young people discussed in this chapter, this capacity to separate himself from his tastes suggests an understanding of how cultural values work more broadly. In other words, it seems that Max has learned to operate with a notion of disinterest rather than just to be led by his own personal tastes.12

Second, there is the lesson's pedagogy.13 Unlike Adriana or Megan, Max did not question the formal, transactional, and heavily top-down approach taken. This was not a school environment, and yet Max was clearly accustomed to being obedient and obliging. He was quite happy to show mastery of the symbolic notation and was comfortable exploring these concepts. However, as in lessons at school, he was not encouraged to take much responsibility for the direction of his learning. His tastes and motivation were not considered relevant to the work at hand, nor was he invited to self-assess his progress or to suggest any of the strategies or content of the lessons. Despite the personalized, one-to-one nature of the relationship with his piano teacher, the feel of the occasion was of an impersonal adult-child relationship. However, Max seemed to find it clear, focused, and purposive, possibly because the teaching was precisely tailored to his developing expertise—something that he rarely experienced at school—and possibly because it provided very clear scaffolding for his steady progression in a way that suited him. Indeed, such
a disciplined experience out of school may even have contributed to his frustrations at school, as we showed in his concerns with his science teacher in chapter 5.

Structured Alternatives

We have already discussed Giselle and her family’s “alternative” or “bohemian” pedagogy in chapter 8. It will be no surprise, then, to learn that this was also evident in relation to her music learning, where the system of grades had been tried and rejected. Instead, Giselle and her teacher, Rachel, had developed a pedagogy that situated Giselle’s tastes at the heart of their jointly constructed curriculum. Here is our field note from her lesson:

In the car on the way over to [a leafy suburb on the outskirts of London] where the music lesson takes place we talked about a number of things. Giselle’s mother told me the story of how she found Rachel the music teacher and about her struggles to set up a business and also how she worked as a part-time art teacher working with a few kids in an after-school setting recruited through friendship groups.

Giselle told me she didn’t want to work for grades. She didn’t like that system and couldn’t see the point of it, but she was very motivated to develop musical skills. This was part of her overall scheme to become some kind of performer in the future so her interest in music was to an extent dictated by future sense of self as much for its expressive pleasures. The lessons seem to cost about £30 for the session. The family isn’t that well off so clearly this was a serious investment. Giselle has a big input into choosing which music she works with. She likes folk, country and a bit of Indie.

We already see a rather different orientation toward the act of learning and playing music than we saw with Max. The fact that Giselle was quite interested in and capable of engaging in discussions (both with us and with Rachel and her mother) about the theoretical challenge of constructing progression in informal learning situations says much about the reflexive nature of her family discourse. The directly personal way that Rachel welcomed and interacted with both Giselle and her mother...
was also very different from Adrian’s transactions with Max. Then there was the contrast between Giselle’s deliberately developing an artistic sensibility compared with Max’s interest in what would be recognized by and impress others. While we can see this emerging from the family habitus, Giselle herself knew she needed to develop a set of practices to turn her dreams into reality. Rachel had constructed a series of progressions with Giselle to give them something to work toward. The field note continued,

The lesson was split into four distinct activities. First Giselle plays the piano and Rachel accompanies her on the guitar. Then Giselle takes over the guitar while Rachel instructs on how to do some fingering. Giselle then sings at the piano and Rachel accompanies her on guitar. Finally Rachel sets up GarageBand on a Mac in the room and tries to teach Giselle how to lay down tracks. Giselle hasn’t done this before but she gets the hang of it. She first lays down a piano track. Then she sings while listening to the piano being played and tries to lay down vocals. They listen and debrief and agree to continue this work next time they meet. I think they are using an Adele track to work on. It’s a powerful song either way and Giselle doesn’t seem inhibited, giving it strong vocalisation and emotion.

This process was both more tailored to Giselle as an individual and more varied in its roles and activities than we saw with Max. However, the discipline of repetition and accuracy was perhaps similar for both. The pedagogical relationship was also distinctive in giving Giselle the responsibility for her own learning:

There are a number of features to the way that Rachel interacts with Giselle. She has a persistent questioning tone and when she issues requests she always frames it as a question rather than as a direct instruction. “Can you please . . .,” “How about . . .” those sorts of directions. Giselle is quite self-correcting and often reprises sequences in order to get them accurate of her own accord. At one point Rachel gets Giselle to write the chords for the guitar onto the piano script in order to develop Giselle’s notation abilities. At another point she says she’s not going to be that prescriptive; in other words, Rachel is not going to force accuracy
at the expense of getting it. This gives Giselle a real sense of engaging in a joint project rather than just having to get something correct and which she is not in control. Virtually all the playing is, to an extent, a collaborative activity, even when Giselle is being recorded, Rachel is then acting as the studio engineer, or when Giselle plays the guitar, and even when Giselle is singing, Rachel accompanies her. All through the session Giselle is very confident about her own abilities, every now and again she does say “I can’t do this” but most of the time she actually says, “Yes I can do this,” “I will do this.”

Again, in comparison to Max’s lesson, there was a greater sense of equality between teacher and pupil. This emphasized the idea of making music together rather than the teacher taking a judgmental role. Rachel worked hard to set challenges in a supportive fashion through the way she questioned rather than instructed. Although they were not working within the framework of a recognized and accredited curriculum like Max, this did not mean that there was less sense of rigor or progression. Notably, we had not seen this kind of pedagogic relationship in school at all. Indeed, Giselle said of music lessons at school, “They don’t allow you to do anything interesting; they seem silly and a waste of time.” Possibly her disavowing school music as “pointless” helped to valorize the kind of experience we had just witnessed, but it is also one of the ways in which cultural capital is given shape and form. On the way home, we found out that Giselle knew about the reputation of schools across North London and had a sense of the kinds of career pathways that people might follow. This discussion showed how she was beginning to adopt a deliberately bohemian artistic identity, a position that requires critiquing mainstream schooling. For this, she drew on her family’s cultural knowledge and her out-of-school experiences to look beyond life as a school pupil and to envision a possible creative future for herself.

Nonconvertible (Sub)cultural Capital

In contrast to Giselle and Max, Sedat found school difficult, as we saw in chapter 5, and he tended to play the class clown. Few fieldwork moments were more striking than that in which we discovered Sedat to have considerable expertise in playing the saz, especially since this achievement
clearly earned him respect within the highly organized context of a cultural institution.

Sedat’s family is Turkish and comes from a rural background. He came to the UK when he was six years old and frequently visited “home,” as he referred to it—indeed, he considers himself Turkish rather than British. He appeared to have the best English in the household. The family are from the Alevi minority (a branch of Sufi from the Anatolian region) but not ethnically Kurdish, unlike many Alevi who have migrated to the UK. On our first home visit, he told us about playing the saz. On that occasion, he played for us in front of the family to demonstrate his prowess, and his family proudly told us about the musicians on his mother’s side whose tradition he was continuing. Saz playing has a cultural importance for the Alevi minority, accompanying songs performed at key ceremonial events such as weddings and circumcisions, as well as signifying political resistance against Turkish hegemony. Musicians are often political leaders and possess considerable cultural authority. In other words, this kind of music has a different meaning from that of learning classical music in Western culture and certainly significance beyond that conceived by the subject “music” at school.

Sedat had started playing the saz when he was very young, as is traditional, and continued learning when the family came to the UK. He attended an Alevi cultural center in a disadvantaged neighborhood where he went twice a week for two-hour lessons. Our observation of his lesson revealed significant cultural capital, although, in comparison to Giselle’s or Max’s, it seemed likely to offer little potential for his educational trajectory, hence our characterization of it as nonconvertible. In addition to the lessons, Sedat practiced for at least an hour a day, suggesting a self-discipline that contrasted markedly with his behavior in school, where he seemed unfocused and often received bad marks for behavior. We managed to negotiate taking him to one of his lessons at the cultural center, a journey that left behind the green, middle-class location of the school for territory that hinted at a different cultural and community significance for what playing the saz might mean for Sedat:

This is a depressing journey. Georgian gives way to very poor run-down public housing. There is significant police presence and gangs of youths on the streets. Sedat observes this with great interest. We enter a light
industrial area. There are many people around—I see number of traveler families and small children in vans around junkyards. It is a different world. The cultural centre is in a converted warehouse. There was a gaggle of children and young people hanging around outside—some of whom had been primed to meet me, it seemed to me, and who rushed over to shake my hand and introduce themselves. Everybody is generous, polite and friendly.

The differences in social context also extended to the relationship between the teacher and his pupils:

Sedat’s class, they tell me, is the most advanced. The teacher smiles and clearly is happy for me to be there. Nobody speaks much English; indeed the whole session is really conducted in Turkish. Everybody translates for my benefit when necessary. There are seven boys and three girls including Sedat. There is an atmosphere of considerable discipline, order and respect, especially for the teacher. Relationships appear warm and generous but clearly hierarchical. We talk about this in the car on the way home and Sedat tells me that the teacher never gets cross with him and clearly respects him; he contrasts this with his schoolteachers.

The educational transactions that unfolded contrasted with the sophisticated student-centeredness of Giselle’s experience and even the transactional directness of Max’s.

The room is small; kids are arranged in pairs in rows with small tables in front. Many, but not all of the kids have folders with music and during some of the songs they do look at these but I am also struck by how much of this behaviour is about memory and repetition. The first 20 minutes are spent sitting almost in silence. There is very little backchat and very little talk between the kids. A girl brings each child’s saz up to the teacher and he tunes the instruments in turn. The age range must be from 12–17.

For most of the session the teacher would tell them what song they were going to play, with some requesting of favourites. The teacher would play the tempo they were to play the song at and give a few instructions and then the whole group launched into these orchestral pieces. I say orchestral, because some of the sazes are bass and some tenor and therefore
there was an element of harmony. For most of the songs most of the students sang as well. In some cases I noticed a very devout mode of singing with eyes closed and an intense ecstatic focus. This is clearly a learnt performance style.

This is a very different mode of self-expression compared to some of the music lessons I have seen. The class is invested in their cultural heritage; at break time many of them spoke about being proud of their heritage, using such language explicitly. The teacher plays along with the class and gives a little feedback at the end of each song. There seems very little individual attention. The kids tell me that because this is an advanced class they don’t get that kind of tuition. There is thus a sense of professional competence at work here.

This lesson was in many ways highly conventional in educational terms, as the pedagogy emphasized rote learning, repetition, and memory. The teacher’s address was to the group, emphasizing collective practice and trying to reach a certain kind of shared standard rather than to develop individual ability or recognize individual performance, as in the lessons for Max and Giselle. In contrast to any of the other lessons we observed, the absolute discipline instilled by the teacher derived from an older, different tradition of authority and respect.17

In the break we go to the cafe and Sedat is insistent that he buys me a cup of tea. I chat with the teacher who has played in Paris and seems to have an international reputation. A number of the other boys join us. One of them talks about right- and left-wing politics, about music being oppressed in the 70s, about protest songs and about how some musicians are leaders of revolution and independence. The boy talks about being racially discriminated against in Turkey. The music and the maintenance of the cultural identity clearly play a key role within this struggle. He tells me about all the other Alevi cultural centres in London. They show me pictures of musicians on the wall, and tell me stories of atrocities and discrimination. They tell me that as well as learning the music they also discuss the text and the meaning of the songs in the classes.

The whole episode was as equally remarkable for introducing us to a Sedat—serious, disciplined—whom we did not see at school. There
are a number of reasons why the Turkish community and in particular boys underachieve in the current English educational system, of which difficulties with language are key. His identity as a learner in this context was embedded in both his family narrative, with its particular musical heritage, and a wider cultural narrative and set of cultural and social activities that were able to include and respect him and his expertise. We might even suggest that, rather than seeing his saz learning as “extra-curricular,” it was rather as if the school was itself somehow outside or additional to the educational trajectory developed by this community. The inability to convert such learning back into the school environment, given the school’s preference for classical music, standardized measures of progress, and different kind of pedagogic relationships, locked these experiences as a form of cultural capital away from mainstream pathways within the English educational system.

All By Himself

Just as Sedat’s playing showed us a completely different side to his character that we could not have imagined from observing him at school, so, too, with Fessehaye, known as “Fesse.” On our first visit to Fesse’s home, he told us that his main activity at home was playing the guitar and that he was teaching himself. Being self-taught is not in itself unusual—within studies of informal music making, there is quite a long history of young people teaching themselves to become quite competent musicians—but in subsequent visits, we became intrigued by the principles and practices underpinning this autodidacticism. At school, Fesse was recognized for his abilities in art, but he had a reputation for being disorganized and, again like Sedat, had a tendency to play the clown that sometimes got him into trouble. Although we had observed him concentrating well in most lessons, we could not have anticipated his self-discipline in music learning at home. We made an extended visit after school one day:

Fesse was quite happy to see me. He assured me, supported by his sister, that coming home, sitting in the living room and playing the guitar was a common everyday experience and that he really tried to play guitar every day. We all agreed that me being there was a bit odd but that it wasn’t
significantly altering a normal everyday experience. His sister told me that he often got so wrapped up in playing his music and that he would forget to come to eat—a family sacrilege.

He went and got his electric guitar although he doesn't have an amplifier for this. There was a Krar (Ethiopian guitar) behind the settee. Fesse demonstrated this a little bit and when his father did pop in I was treated to a quick tune by dad. The dad told us how his father had been a musician. This is why the father can play the Krar. In my first visit, his father's musicality had been, they said, the source of Fesse's guitar playing. It may be that his father encouraged him when he was younger.

As for Sedat, there was a family narrative about inherited musicality and how this ability is passed down through the generations. And as with Giselle's artiness, it seems that children's learner identities can be greatly influenced by prevailing family beliefs. Over the next hour or so, we observed Fesse's approach to learning, discussing this with him on and off as he practiced:

For about an hour maybe longer, I sat in the living room. The TV was silenced though running all the time and Fesse played the guitar. The first thing that struck me was his incredible discipline and concentration. Not only does he get wrapped up in the music, but also he is sufficiently self-motivated to practice on a regular basis. Indeed much of his leisure activities show this desire for mastery. He cannot read music. He has a vague memory of some private lessons when much younger, and it may be that his father will be arranging some lessons for him in the future. His whole approach is playing by ear. He is completely fascinated by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. He basically tries to play their repertoire. He practices each song. He repeats phrases and sections until he gets the song right. He will often skip repetitive sections in order to focus on the more ambitious solos. He does like some other music but his taste is distinctive and unusual. He talked about wanting to be a musician and perhaps choosing music GCSE. The unusualness of his tastes, referenced by name-dropping bands, shows a considerable independence of spirit.

He was very interested in learning how to record on the computer but has had no experience. However, digital technologies are very important in his musicianship. He downloads music, one of his older broth-
ers showed him how to do this online and these are obviously unpaid for—unlike Max or Dominic. He puts the music on his phone. At several points in the conversation he used music from the phone to make this point. He does not use music as background mood but listens to it actively. He clearly knows all the words to the songs that he played me and these are important—we talked about this—but he refused to sing along for me. He does use YouTube tutorials and he talked about learning where to put his fingers.19

He has a strategy of how to deal with frustrations when he cannot get it correct and a way of pretending to play to an audience in order to be explicit to himself about what he’s doing. For the most part he is left alone playing on the sofa. At one stage I did ask him to bring down the acoustic guitar. He finds this more difficult as the neck and frets are more physically demanding. He was happy on the un-amplified electric. He clearly hears the music in his head. At this stage he does have a notion of progression, of improving himself and some sense of the repertoire he would like to be able to play. He did play me a few riffs—his own composition—but was by no means overly ambitious about wanting to be a songwriter. At the moment playing other people’s music accurately is what he wants to do.

As with Giselle, Fesse’s interest was driven by his taste, which came across as a form of deep cultural attention. This was part of his distinctive individual confidence, a sense of taking himself seriously—imagined as a future musician—which enabled him to transform this pastime into a serious educational project. The strategies he had developed, pretending to perform to an audience, repeating, using tutorials, and so forth, may have been drawn from school-based experiences. But he demonstrated a mature ownership of these processes that was not—or perhaps could not be—exercised at school, where the teacher generally retained authority over learning in the classroom.

Conclusions

In different ways and for different reasons, Max, Giselle, Sedat, and Fesse exemplified an energy, drive, and enthusiasm as they began to exert independence in relation to their music making and music learning.
The relation between the teaching style on offer and the development of their learner identity was strong for all four, with Max and Giselle fully aware that they were building an identity and expertise that would be useful to them in the future. For Sedat, participation in his culture of origin was crucial as a source of meaning and belonging, while Fesse was more intent on pursuing an individual vision of who he wanted to be, albeit one that, as for Sedat and Giselle, also drew on family traditions and values. The efforts of all four revealed how pursuing out-of-school interests can have a positive influence on young people’s sense of themselves as successful and independent learners.

While the school and the young people’s families professed willingness to support their ambitions, it was often difficult to steer a line between practical encouragement and realistic aspiration—and in Megan and Adriana’s cases, it seemed that matters were not going well. Although Giselle, Sedat, and Fesse were learning music successfully, in a manner stimulated by their musical interests, this was little recognized by the school because they were not pursuing the standard exam grades. Meanwhile, Max, who was doing well within the traditional grading system and seemed to be thriving in a personalized one-to-one learning context, was often distanced from or critical of school. Thus, for him, too, there was little constructive connection between in-school and out-of-school learning, although, as he was well aware, his music grades were valued by the school.

At the end of Year 9, the students chose further courses of study for the national public examination system. Interestingly, none of the children discussed in this chapter chose music GCSE, although Sedat had chosen music BTEC (the more practical, vocational option). Of course, following music in the academic setting of the school is only one possible avenue for further development, and it is likely that these musicians will pursue their interests into the future. Yet at this point in their lives, it was difficult to see such interests and expertise being recognized by or transferred into school learning; the experiences remained rooted in the particular social and cultural context in which their practice was developed. The stories in this chapter also reveal a disconnect regarding pedagogy. As we have sought to describe, the four whose music lessons we observed encountered distinctive and diverse pedagogic practices that could have—and perhaps did—facilitate their learning in
school. But such experiences remained largely unknown to the school and so could not easily be recognized or developed there. Furthermore, there were hints that positive out-of-school learning experiences led the young people to be more critical of school pedagogy, adding to the distance they felt from the school’s approach to learning not only in music but more generally.

This chapter has concentrated on music as a domain in which diverse pedagogies, differential cultural capital and resources, and youth-led interests and identities all intersect. It would also have been instructive to contrast the array of learning experiences gained by each individual. For instance, our account of Giselle’s music learning in this chapter bears considerable similarities to our account of her artistic and gaming activities in chapter 8; the “bohemian” form of cultural capital fostered in her home clearly shaped her learning activities—and her identity and ambitions—across the board. A similar point can be made about Sedat, who, on another occasion, we observed going to his boxing class. This, too, was a club populated by young Turkish men, and it was also highly structured and directed in its style of teaching. The boys were made to repeat and rehearse the boxing sequences until perfect, and as in the saz lesson, the feel was caring but impersonal and disciplined, with individual interpretation.

In these and other cases, we could see how out-of-school pedagogies supported young learners to take responsibility for their learning, engaging them in forms of repetition and practice that were not oppressive and in which the learner understood exactly what he or she needed to do to progress. In different ways, these learning practices contrasted with the school’s vision of learning as a matter of conformity to a prescribed and abstract set of expectations and regulations, as described in chapter 6. This understanding of pedagogy only became clear from our observations out of school and the ways in which we could follow learners across these different social contexts.

It just so happened that our six case studies in this chapter included two middle-class girls who were learning music as a matter of duty, “concerted cultivation” as Annette Lareau would call it, this learning being designed to get them “ahead” but with little pleasure or real achievement. Similarly, it turned out that the class included two boys from poorer, minority ethnic homes who loved music, were supported
by their families’ enthusiasm and skill, and were also highly intrinsically motivated, along with a boy and a girl from relatively wealthy, arty homes who nicely illustrated the traditional exam-based and alternative or bohemian approaches to music learning, respectively. Overall, then, our six cases illustrated different learning contexts as they relate to cultural and economic capital, possibly revealing generalizable trends.

What, then, can we conclude about the relation between learning and cultural capital? In Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, he contrasted the traditional or bourgeois and the avant-garde positions, both found among the middle classes but not the “proletariat” and revealed through taste in classical music. Updating Bourdieu’s account, Tony Bennett et al. argued, first, that classical music is no longer the domain through which cultural contestation occurs, although it still symbolizes elite status among those who can convincingly display their knowledge of it, and second, that cultural capital is now symbolized by “omnivorous” tastes across all types of music, along with some enthusiastic “knowingness” about particular genres or subgenres, all in contrast to what they call the more “restricted” tastes of the working class.26

But these distinctions fit poorly with the young people’s interest in music, as we have discussed in this chapter. To be sure, wealthier families are more likely and able to invest in classical music lessons as a means of distinguishing themselves and their children from the majority, now and in the competitive future that may lie ahead. But that does not explain why this strategy was working better for Max than for Adriana or Megan; and to understand this, we can only turn to the kinds of individual factors that introduce variation into all typologies. Then, we would hesitate to call Giselle’s family “avant-garde” in that it did not seem at the cutting edge of a movement.27 What matters more than the label, however, is that this form of cultural capital resists the pressures toward concerted cultivation or competitive individualism that oppressed Max as well as Adriana and Megan. Finally, it seems imperative to make some distinction among the cultural positioning of children from poorer homes too—calling their tastes “restricted” may apply to some but surely undervalues the commitment, expertise, and knowledge of both Sedat and Fesse—hence our identification of their musical expertise here in terms of nonconvertible (sub)cultural capital.28
These various concepts of cultural capital help to nuance the distinctions evident in the class, both with regard to young people's music learning and, looking back to chapter 8, in how parents try to equip the home so as to support school learning. In chapter 10, we examine how the young people's experiences of school, home life, friendship, and their associated pleasures, successes, and failures enabled them to reflect on their emerging sense of themselves as learners as they began to make choices for the future and to look back over the year we spent with them.