Life Trajectories, Social Mobility, and Cultural Capital

We spent over a year with the class, and this allowed us to reflect on the importance of different timescales in the young people’s lives. Building a learner identity in terms of leveling took place over several years of constant yet mundane repetition in the classroom (chapter 6). Gaining a musical or artistic identity, as we explored in chapter 9, could take rather longer. The roles that children take on within family narratives not only develop over their entire childhood but may also have longer roots back into earlier generations (see chapters 7, 8, and 9). Learning to get on with strangers in a civic or public sense may last a lifetime (chapter 5). Playing with the performance of different identities online, by contrast, is often momentary and intense (chapter 4), yet this, too, might have longer-lasting significance for the “project of the self.” In short, growing up, “being socialized,” learning to learn does not occur in a uniform way or on a single timescale.

How, then, do young people themselves tell their stories? Are certain moments or perspectives important to how they construct and reflect on their personal narratives? How does their sense of self influence how they see the future? In the introduction, we observed that these 13-year-olds no longer viewed themselves as children, aware that they were already making decisions that would be significant for their life chances. For instance, in the year we spent with them, they had to choose their options for the formal examinations they would sit at the end of Year 11, two years later, having followed the same course of study together up to this point. The “options” process, as the school called it, offered students a menu of subjects from which they had to choose how and where to specialize (e.g., performing arts, science, or design). Such decisions could also restrict their future trajectories (for instance, if they chose to do a single science course rather than all three of biology, chemistry, and physics or if they did or did not choose to study languages).
This process represented yet another timescale as the students had to envisage their academic careers over the next few years, anticipating how this might set the foundations for further study. Outlining this in year-group assembly, the deputy headteacher challenged the young people to think hard about the decisions they faced: “Where do you think you’re going to be in three years’ time? That seems a really terrible question to be asking people who are coming up to be 13, 14. It’s quite a hard thing to think about, where you want to be in that many years’ time. But if you don’t get your choice right at GCSE, that may well affect what you then have a choice to do later on.” This language brought into stark relief a key narrative about young people: their future.

In chapter 1, we commented that young people are often denied an ontological status in the here-and-now, instead being referred to as the people that they will become. School discourse is absolutely drenched in this talk. Competence and expertise is measured in terms of the opportunities they open up in the future rather than what they facilitate in the present, and there is a consistent pressure from teachers and families as they look forward to the next stage of qualifications: so GCSEs (taken at age 16) lead to A-levels (taken at age 18) and thence to university (for some) and then to employment (it is hoped). Even though this route is clearly not going to be followed by the whole school population, the whole edifice of attainment and achievement is built around the idea of progressing in an orderly fashion into an imagined future. Of course, the future is just that: an imaginary construct. But as the school conceived it, at least in its official discourse, progress is possible for all children so long as they can shake off the limiting visions held out for them by others. In the options assembly, the year head explained, “Today is not about who you’re sitting next to or who your friends are. Today is not really about what your mum and dad are saying at home or what advice they’re giving or what they’re saying you should do. Today is really about you, sitting there, thinking about your own choices, thinking about your own interests, thinking about what you want to do in your life. This is about you.” The point being driven home is that the students are responsible for forging their own individual path, and advice from friends and parents risks swaying them from acting in their own interests.

This chapter explores how the different young people of the class imagined their futures, how they reflected on the way they had grown
up, and what the process of imagining tells us about the building blocks of their aspirations. This focus enables us to discuss the class in two key ways. First, we address the mechanisms by which young people learn to become the kinds of reflexive individuals who imagine and enact their “project of the self,” as discussed in chapter 1. Reflexivity implies a sense of oneself that is separate from experience and is important to the way people learn to be individuals in contemporary society. Second, in the process of examining the emergence of reflexivity, we also gained some insight into how the process of reflexive identity building is more difficult for some young people, possibly because of their socioeconomic position or life circumstances.

In this book, we have seen how the young people acted so as to meet, more or less, the expectations held of them at both home and school. For many of them, this is experienced as desirable and unproblematic, although we have also noted Lydia’s and Abby’s gradual silencing and isolation along with Aiden’s more disruptive exclusion. Equally we have highlighted what scholars call “intersectionality,” in which issues of ethnicity, social class, and gender all intersect with each other in ways that make it difficult to draw neat conclusions about particular groups. We have also seen—especially with the case of the clique (chapter 3)—how these dimensions of difference do not always explain the friendship or other social configurations that the young people enter into. Nor do they necessarily dictate young people’s expression of identity (chapter 4). This is partly because processes of individualization shape young people’s actions and partly because explicit talk of social class or ethnic difference is publicly difficult and seen as potentially racist or prejudiced or as undermining the vision of civil society.

In the young people’s—and our—reflections on the relation between past, present, and future, many of the themes explored in this book come together in the effort to understand growing up in late modernity. Most fundamentally, there are strong pressures on young people to internalize and adopt expectations that, in practice, result in social reproduction. Those from more wealthy homes were already by the age of 14 asserting different versions of the future than were those from poorer ones; and ideas about choice and agency that hold out the promise that young people can affect the course of their lives already apply more to some than to others.
The language used to point to these processes of change over time tends to be spatial: we talk of routes, trajectories, vectors, and pathways. A major purpose of education, it is widely held, is to promote “social mobility,” despite Basil Bernstein’s 40-year-old warning that “education cannot compensate for society.” In class-stratified societies such as the UK, one key metaphor is of moving “up” the social scale, allowing future generations to trump their parents’ standards of living. Another is that of “leveling the playing field,” a social-justice-oriented vision of using education to give all children a fair chance. Yet, as we saw in chapter 1, both of these goals are becoming more difficult, more implausible than ever.

Uncertain Futures

The young people were constantly being required to imagine their futures; it is one of the burdens of youth. Their school progress reports speculated about future grades, classroom talk focused often on subject choices or careers, and there was a constant buzz about the lives they were going to lead once they had left school. Parents, too, were increasingly concerned about such matters. But how did the young people themselves conceptualize their futures? Some could not imagine a future at all, finding it difficult to talk to us about next year, let alone five or ten years hence:

**Interviewer:** Okay. What kind of future do you think . . . what do you think you want to do?

**Gideon:** I don’t know what I want to do at the moment. I want to get on with lots [unclear]. Definitely.

It is difficult to capture the hesitancy and silences in these kinds of exchanges. We could see that young people are used to such questions, and so many had developed pat answers. But we also heard plenty of nonanswers and stumbling replies, and these are inevitably hard to transcribe coherently. As we saw in chapter 7, Gideon’s recent efforts had been focused on overcoming difficulties at school as well as on growing his social network. So the fact that he did not know the answers to these questions led him into a self-knowing state of anxiety:
Gideon: I want to do good.
Interviewer: Yes.
Gideon: But I’m confused about what I want to do for GCSEs. . . .
Interviewer: Just one thing, have you got any sense of what you want to do?
Gideon: No.
Interviewer: But are you very worried about this?
Gideon: Yes.

Not knowing what you want to do at all is existentially troubling, especially if you are constantly expected to present yourself as a person with a clear vision of your future. Some young people clung to earlier family narratives, even though they were no longer convincing. In a family of keen tennis players, Jamie had been seen as promising, albeit not as successful as his elder brother, and the family had come to recognize that Jamie had reached his limits. Yet when pushed, Jamie gave us the answer he was used to giving:

Interviewer: So can you see ahead past GCSE, can you see to A-level, what you’re going to be studying?
Jamie: No. Not that far.
Interviewer: Are you going to be a scientist, or . . . are you going to work in the world of sports or . . . ?
Jamie: I’ll try and get a scholarship in tennis, because that’s what my brother [unclear] do. Yes, so I’ll just try and do that.

At this time, neither Gideon nor Jamie was doing especially well at school, and not having a clear pathway to a socially accepted future seemed unsettling for the family:

Interviewer: Do you imagine he will go to university?
Jamie’s mother: We’d like him to, but I don’t know. Again, if he’s in that mind of, you know . . . he might find once he’s done his GCSE subjects, you know. He’s thinking of doing Business Studies, ICT, and Media Studies I think. Maybe within those subjects he will find something that he will say, “Right, I like that, and I want to do something.”
Interviewer: Do you think he hasn’t really found his mojo, in that kind of sense?

Jamie’s mother: No, I don’t think so. I mean, he says he likes English, and he likes some of the science things. Maths he’s okay with, but I know that I need to, sort of, help him, push him a bit for that. So it’s just finding . . . and obviously computers he enjoys because he’s on it all the time kind of thing. But to find something for him to do in life, and it’s going to be difficult, I think.

There is a sense of waiting for a spark to ignite, of hoping that Jamie will “find something” that motivates him. There is also a sense of his being closely watched so that if and when “something” is found, his parents could swing into action. However, while Jamie’s mother hoped he would go to university, she seemed to regard this as Jamie’s decision, not hers. In other words, in the modern democratic family, her role is delicate: she can help, even push a little, but the outcome must be Jamie’s own choice. This is something of a burden for Jamie as well as for his mother, and not surprisingly, perhaps, as we saw earlier, he expressed himself as willing to fit in with the family preference for a tennis career.

Gideon’s mother was also anxious about the lack of a special passion or ability. While Jamie’s mother tried not to compare Jamie to his older tennis-playing brother, Gideon’s mother found the comparison with his successful older sister particularly worrying.

Interviewer: Yes. And do you think he’ll go to university?

Gideon’s mother: I don’t know. I used to think maybe he wouldn’t, but I don’t know. Now I think I don’t know, you know, whether he will or he won’t.

Interviewer: Okay.

Gideon’s mother: He’s . . . I think he’s quite a hard one to read, and the fact that he’s a late developer. When my daughter was this age, I knew that she would.

Interviewer: She was . . . okay.

Gideon’s mother: And I knew, again, because she was very focused, even at a young age, on what she wanted to do. With Gideon, not so much so, but I think it’s just because he’s developed late, and things will sort of dawn on him perhaps, you know, later on.
As we saw in chapter 4, Gideon presented a highly social, fun-loving face to his peers, only revealing his problems at home, where, it seems, he was seen as “a late developer.” Again, there is a sense of being suspended in this moment in time without a future pathway, of having to wait for “things” to “dawn on him.” These middle-class parents with high-achieving first children expressed the waiting as an anxious time.

Realistic Futures

By contrast, Shane, whose single mother had the benefit of little education or income, was more realistic about his situation. On the one hand, he had the insight to realize that it was still too early to decide his future path:

Interviewer: Yes. Are you looking forward to the options stuff next year, the new subjects, or don’t you care really?
Shane: Not really because, like, it’s a big thing, if you know what I mean. It’s a big step forward from just going and doing normal lessons.
Interviewer: So not really in a sense that you do care?
Shane: Obviously I care, like, obviously I want to try them out, but it’s a big step forward.
Interviewer: And have you got any thought what you want to do beyond GCSEs?
Shane: Not really, like, I haven’t really thought about that yet.
Interviewer: Have you got any ambitions . . . about jobs or anything like that you want to do in life?
Shane: Not, I haven’t really thought, but when I was younger, I wanted to be a footballer. But it’s not as easy as people think it is.

At first, Shane seemed to say he did not care what would come next, but what he meant was that he was not trying to control what could not be controlled: he knew big changes were coming, he declared himself ready to try out different options, but he would not try to anticipate the outcome. Unlike Jamie’s or Gideon’s anxiety, Shane did not seem to feel inadequate for not having a mapped-out pathway, even though growing out of the childhood fantasy of becoming a football player left him in
limbo for the present. A few months later, at the start of Year 10, we saw a keener sense of economic realism about what might come next than in the unformed aspirations of many of his classmates: “I’m basically guaranteed a job with my uncle, but if not, I’d rather be a carpenter or like something designing stuff, making wood. My uncle’s work is, like, it’s his own company. Basically, you know, gas on the roads, like doing the things. But my cousin used to do; he said it’s quite enjoyable because it’s all family, so you get along. But if not, I’d rather be a carpenter.” Here we have an ambition, to be a carpenter (a craft occupation), and a fallback plan, to work with his uncle as a more unskilled laborer. While the former was more motivating for Shane, the latter offered a comfortable alternative, and both plans fitted the expectations of his family and school.

Lydia similarly had worked out her answer to the question of what she will do in the future, thus seeing off further adult inquiry or anxiety:

Lydia: I want to work harder at school, so I get good GCSEs.
Interviewer: What will you be able to do with the GCSEs? Do you know what you want to do when you . . .
Lydia: Child care.
Interviewer: Okay, so you like small children?
Lydia: Yes.

Although Lydia was struggling at both home and school, she had found a role in looking after her best friend Kimberly’s little sisters. Shane’s and Lydia’s practical and realistic understanding of what the future might hold contrasted with the often-inflated language of possibility and aspiration that occupied many families as well as the school. Shane’s vision of joining the male working class and Lydia’s intention to take up a traditional female role contrast with the seemingly gender-neutral, individualistic, university-focused aspirations of the school and the middle-class families.

Planning a Career

Some of the young people from middle-class homes had also developed ideas about their future, but these ideas focused more on the
stepping-stones required to get them to their goal than the goal itself. As they had found, faced with the question of “Who do you want to be when you grow up?” they had found it counted as a sufficient answer to say, “I want to get to university, and then I’ll see what happens next;” taking economic imperatives for granted. Sara, who we have described as hardworking and academically successful, explained her plans to us at the start of Year 10:

_Sara_: Yes. I think if I had to . . . if I would say now, like, if I had to pick my A-levels right now, I would probably say biology, physics, chemistry, maths, and Spanish or something, because I love science and so I just . . .

_Interviewer_: And do you have ambitions, serious . . .

_Sara_: Yes, seriously I want to be, like, a scientist or something when I grow up. I don’t know what kind of scientist because it, like, fluctuates, but sometimes I’m, like . . . in a biology lesson I’m, like, “Oh, I love biology so much,” and then you go to physics and you’re, like, “Wait, I love this.”

For a girl who has only just begun her GCSE course, she was already clear about the next stage (A-levels) and knew that this clarity would buy her time, allowing her to be vaguer about her longer-term direction, provided that she conveyed enthusiasm and determination. Her strongly expressed love of science may also be designed to rebut skeptical responses from others aware of how few girls choose science. This may also be why she had kitted out her bedroom to match this view of herself:

_Sara_: I really want to do something with science, but I don’t know what. Like, if you look in my room, I have a lot of science things. I’ve got, like . . .

_Interviewer_: Point out the science things in your room.

_Sara_: I’ve got an elements calendar.

_Interviewer_: You have, yes.

_Sara_: Yes, and I’ve got the visual elements.

And most important, she had her new telescope, dominating the relatively small room.13
In Sara’s mapping out of the steps and qualifications needed for each stage in her projected future, she was fully aware of the social status she aspired to. While Jamie and Gideon suffered from comparisons with successful older siblings, Sara was herself the successful older sibling, and over the course of the year, we heard several disparaging comments made about her little sister. As she told us in this interview, “[I want] a job that I want to do, because like, I don’t want to end up like working in McDonalds. God forbid. . . . [My sister] is like, ‘Yes, I want to do that,’ because she wants French fries.” By such confident talk about loving science and being different from her Facebook-obsessed sister, Sara worked to repudiate any stereotypical expectations of being girly and frivolous.

Moreover, in Sara’s already planning the steps of her career, she showed herself very different from Jamie or Gideon in her determination and from Shane and Lydia in her ambition. Unlike them, Sara understood that working on her learner identity was crucial to her hoped-for future. For Sara, this was a wholehearted commitment and one that rewarded her parents’ considerable investment in her. A comparison with Sebastian’s plans for his future raises a doubt over whether we can call Sara’s approach the result of “concerted cultivation,” however. At school, Sebastian was diffident, even though he performed well. In his out-of-school drama and singing group, he showed passion aplenty, along with a confident swagger and the admiration of an enthusiastic bunch of friends. He knew, too, of the value of this activity for his future plan:

**Interviewer:** But you’re telling me that you don’t actually do it, because you think you’re going to be an actor, or you’re very good at it . . . that’s not what this is about.

**Sebastian:** Because it’s fun, doing . . . I think if I put on a CV, “Oh, I’ve . . . I did drama, and I’ve done shows at . . .” Like, I could say I’ve sang at the Royal Festival Hall. It would look quite good on a CV, you can show that you can do something.

**Interviewer:** But you’re not doing it because it’s something just for the CV. You’re doing it [overtalking].

**Sebastian:** I’m doing it for the fun. It’s a lot of fun.

**Interviewer:** Yes, yes. Okay.

**Sebastian:** It’s very enjoyable.
Sebastian kept the two rationales separate: drama was fun, and it would look good on a CV. While the pleasure he took in drama was motivating in the here-and-now, he also knew that present pleasures can be calculated with an eye on the future.

Fulfilling Lives

For some of the young people, their present interests and pleasures offered a way of imagining their future that combined recognition of what motivates them as a person (the spark that Jamie’s and Gideon’s mothers were hoping for) with knowledge of the stepping-stones needed to realize their vision (as we saw with Sara and Sebastian just now). This was more typical of those from artistic—or what in chapter 9 we called “bohemian” backgrounds—and, therefore, of more middle-class youngsters.

Megan, for whom social life and personal interests were a priority now, had mapped out the next few steps—A-levels (Sixth Form), university—but had not thought beyond that: “I think, like, all my group have decided that we’re going to VFS. Obviously maybe one or two of us won’t, but I think, like, the majority of us will carry on going to VFS. I’m going to do . . . well, I’m either going to do history or English, I haven’t decided yet, and then drama. And I think I’m going to go to Liverpool, so then I’m right near my family and stuff, and, like, my cousins went there and stuff.” Here Megan explained the considerable uncertainties before her by establishing some continuities: keeping the same friends and staying at the same school as she enters the next phase, selecting a university town where relatives live, anticipating subject specialisms that she already enjoys. As for where this might lead her, Megan was torn, already aware that her dream of becoming an actor could prove unrealistic, but unlike Shane’s hope of becoming a football player, she was also not willing to put these dreams aside. Instead, she offered a rationale for why acting could be a plausible career for her, plus a more prosaic alternative in case it fails.

Megan: That’s why I would do, like, history or English with it [acting].

So then I have something to, like, fall back on.

Interviewer: Yes, but you’re going to give it a try, then? You’re going to try and be an actor?
Megan: Yes, like, I love acting.
Interviewer: Are your parents going to support you in that?
Megan: Yes, like, my mum's, like, happy that I'm doing drama. But, like, since I've been little, I've always been, like—you know, you do the school plays, and, like, primary school, I was always, like, the lead character because I think it's just because I'm not afraid to, like, talk, and I think I can act.

By contrast, while Fesse harbored similarly artistic ambitions, he was less articulate in their defense:

Interviewer: What kind of future do you imagine for yourself?
Fesse: Either a designer or a musician.
Interviewer: Okay. So what kind of life do you think that means?
Fesse: Like, just doing my, like, doing what I enjoy.

For these young people, then, lifestyle preferences in the present provide a guide to plausible futures built on desire more than concrete expectations about career or even employment.

However, social class makes a difference, not only in formulating ambitions but also in convincing others of their feasibility. Max, who we have seen under some pressure in earlier chapters, had not reached the point of knowing what he wanted to do either, being more focused on escaping school to a world of his own choosing than on elaborating on any particular future. Thus, he told us, “[I will] probably go and take like a year off or something, get some money and then go to university, if that's . . . I think I might go, if I still want to go in, like, five years.” But while the future remains uncertain, as indeed it must for a 14-year-old, he has learned a convincing answer to the question “What will you do?”—one that is likely to satisfy middle-class questioners.

Transitions
When we revisited members of the class at home at the end of our project, we invited them to reexamine the ego networks they had drawn for us six or so months earlier. Few were as explicit as Megan that life
was not going to change: “I think my life’s going to be like this until the end of secondary school. Like, I’ve never been in a completely different friendship group. Since Year 7, I’ve had, like, basically the same friends of—like, the boys I hang out with have been the same since Year 7, and Mandy and Mila have been my friends since Year 7. So I don’t really think it’s going to change that much.” In general, the young people made few changes: the important people then were still important, and there were few additions or omissions. But there were exceptions. Giselle had stopped playing Minecraft and had gained a boyfriend. Lydia had fallen out with Kimberly, her main source of support. Sedat’s family had been rehoused to a much poorer estate, and they had had to leave their vegetables and chickens behind. Nevertheless, our overall impression was of stability and continuity despite the constant talk of growing up as being all about change.

While few of the young people saw Year 9, the year we were with them, as possessing any great existential significance, the institutionally determined transition from primary to secondary school loomed especially large in their personal narratives. Other pivotal moments revealed the gender work important to teenagers. Sebastian, for example, recalled a ski trip organized by the school in Year 8. As a slightly self-conscious and sensitive young man, Sebastian never quite felt part of the class or indeed the school, perhaps because he lived on the edge of its catchment area. However, he had been skiing for many years with his family and was an accomplished skier. The school trip gave him the chance to assert his physical prowess, allowing him to put his relations with the other boys on a different footing: “I just shared a room with them. The original room I was in, because I sat on the top bunk, and I think something sort of snapped, so I don’t want to sleep there. So I moved into the other room that was, like, full of Dom and Albie and Anton [two other boys in the year group].”

For Nick and Adam, being inducted into different kinds of gaming circles proved the key to a new social life. Getting an Xbox marked a more grown-up status for Adam, allowing him to communicate with friends and to evade the anxious scrutiny of his parents (see chapter 7). Nick talked about his early entry into console game playing watching his father (from whom he was now separated):
When I used to live with my dad, in his flat, I always used to watch him play, like, you know, Dragonball Z. Yes, and then my cousin came over, and I remember, I used to get . . . I didn’t like losing. Like, I still remember one time when he kept on firing fireballs, so I kept getting knocked down. And I was getting really angry, and that just encouraged me to get more gaming experience and, like, try to beat him one day.

Nick’s narrative was that his personal qualities of persistence in and commitment to game playing derived from this early experience, and thus, like Adam, entry into game play stood as a marker of adult masculinity.

The most repeated trope about teenage rites of passage was gaining a profile on Facebook (see chapter 4). Joining Facebook for this cohort was the central means of managing the difficult transition at 11 years old from a small, local primary school to a much larger secondary school, full of older teenagers. With Dilruba and Salma, we discussed how this transition marked a shift to a more social self, increasingly turned outward toward the world.

**Interviewer:** When did you join Facebook?
**Dilruba:** I think when I was in . . . wait, what day was it? I think when I was in Year 7.
**Interviewer:** So was part of like coming to secondary school part of doing Facebook kind of growing up like . . . ?
**Dilruba:** Yes, because everyone else had it.
**Interviewer:** Okay, what about you?
**Salma:** Yes, I joined Facebook in the start of Year 7.
**Interviewer:** Do you think you joined because everyone else was on it, and you kind of felt like you’d be left out?
**Dilruba:** Yes . . . no, not . . .
**Salma:** You started it later. She done it like . . .
**Dilruba:** I started it later than you. Wait, I was like . . . I started when I was like end of Year 7.

This talk of girls “starting” their teenage social life seems rather gendered, hinging on the moment when they joined the social scene.17
The boys also told stories of getting on Facebook, but they more often narrated their personal trajectory to a more grown-up self through an account of a fight or confrontation of some kind. Sedat, Shane, Gideon, and Yusuf all told us stories about getting into trouble and having fights. In each case, these were serious incidents, resulting in temporary exclusion from the school, reinforcing the idea of a masculine rite of passage.

We saw in chapter 4 how Gideon described overcoming his anger and disruptive behavior (although for the school, his anger was not yet firmly in the past). Gideon’s mother also saw his struggles in gendered terms: “You know, he’s a young boy trying to find himself, his way in the world, and perhaps, you know, going around with people who were not really his sort of people and perhaps behaving in a way that he thinks people expect that he should behave. And I don’t know, maybe as he’s getting older, he’s becoming more comfortable in who he is, you know.” Shane, too, had learned to tell the story of his difficulties, putting them firmly in the past, although, again, the school found it harder to put his reputation in the past:

I used to get like angry, like, really quickly, and, like, some teachers were just, like, start shouting in my face, and they didn’t understand that makes me more angry. Then they just go, like, “Take five minutes outside and, like, just calm down.” But, like, also with Ms. S. was one of my favorite teachers. Do you know Ms. S.? . . . Like, she’s the only one—like, them four teachers were the only ones that understood that if, like, you shout in my face, like, they knew I’d retaliate. So they would just tell me to calm down outside.

Shane’s speech, with its hesitant “likes,” hints at his determined struggle to express himself clearly. He is reflexive here about methods of self-regulation in the social situation of the school (although on other occasions, both he and his mother tended to blame individual teachers rather than attributing any fault to himself).

Both Gideon and Shane had reflected on and sought to put right their troubled reputations, recognizing that this was part of the task of realizing a different future. Both boys narrated a sense of growing up
and working through a specific kind of institutional difficulty as young men marking out a transition for themselves as well as one that has been articulated by the school and their families. But this task was not a purely private struggle. Although it was rare to hear the young people talk about each other’s reputations, they gave sufficient hints for us to see how watching and comparing themselves with others was significant in their own self-development. For example, Nick commented on how Dom had been a very different kind of person at the football club in previous years and how he had changed his persona to someone far more active, leading the team. Sara expressed surprise that Adriana behaved as if she was more stupid than she was, again possibly positioning herself in contrast to displays of frivolous femininity and not knowing, as we did, that Adriana was reveling in what she saw as her last year of being irresponsible before knuckling down to the task of fulfilling her parents’ (and her) expectations. The clique (Max, Alice, Jenna), among others, talked about Lydia’s reputation as a girl with problems in the past as well as someone who was still difficult to get on with.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have concentrated on how individuals draw on different discourses to narrate stories about themselves. These stories articulate the individual’s sense of themselves and their actual or possible trajectories, variously framed by the norms of gender, family, school, and the wider society. With greater or lesser degrees of reflexivity, optimism, and anxiety, the class was beginning to look backward in order to grasp their present and to meet the practical task of developing a socially acceptable response to the ever-present question “What are you going to be?” For, as we argued in chapter 1, having a credible story to tell both about and for oneself is vital to the larger task of identity construction (itself a never-ending task, although particularly intense in adolescence).

While there is widespread recognition that the social, economic, and cultural trends through the 20th century have wrought significant changes in the conditions under which children grow up—longer
education, less secure employment, increased social stratification, the consequences of globalization and commercialization—there is less agreement on what this means. Whether such changes are really generating a new life stage (“emerging adulthood”) or new life tasks (“the choice biography,” “the project of the self”) and whether these in turn are evidence of a grand historical shift (individualization) or a new historical epoch, late modernity (or the risk society or network society), remains hotly contested. In this chapter, we have tried to listen to how the young people talked about themselves with these concepts and claims in mind, but we return to these bigger questions in the conclusion to this book.

Although we have contrasted Gideon and Jamie, Shane and Lydia, Sebastian and Sara, Megan and Fesse, we could have selected others in the class. With the exception of Lydia, the young people were willing to speculate about themselves with us. They were all to some degree self-reflexive, taking the opportunity of our interviews to conduct their own identity work and to check out our responses. Is it possible to explain the ways we have grouped them according to their gender or social class? Jamie and Sara, for example, come from equally affluent and well-educated families, yet they could not have been more different in their confidence about the future. Fesse’s strong desire to do things he likes—an expression of personal self-fulfillment—might not have been expected from knowledge of his social background. Shane’s self-assessment was, perhaps, more predictable from his home circumstances, but it would not do him justice to call this simple social reproduction; and we have tried to capture the thoughtful determination with which he and, in different ways, Abby (see chapter 7) have sought a path through their difficulties. Megan’s self-aware effort to negotiate a plausible artistic future (as we also saw with Giselle in chapter 9) drew on her family background, where her willingness to embrace uncertainty derived from her speculative interest in prioritizing creative fulfillment over economic comfort.

We saw in chapter 5 how the school’s vision of civility seeks to efface social, ethnic, and gender difference, in the interests of fairness. But it is hardly surprising that, for example, young people seek to construct gendered identities for themselves and thus frequently came up against
the supposedly gender-neutral values of the school, which they met with exaggerated forms of gendered resistance such as fighting and rudeness (mainly by the boys) or flouting school uniform rules (mainly by the girls). Why did they focus on these particular aspects of masculinity or femininity in this context, and how will these forms of identity serve them as they grow into adults? We could read the gendered images and expectations of society as offering the much-needed (if not ideal) resources for constructing identities. Similar arguments could be made about social class or ethnicity, although society is keener to disavow classed imaginaries as resources for the self, and it is ambivalent about the significance of ethnicity and cultural difference. In a society that tries to efface difference and celebrate the individual, it is hard for young people to recognize who they are or imagine who they could be: the project of the self seems potentially content- and context-free.

However, we should not overstate the case for generational or historical changes in late modernity, not least because we cannot know what the future really does hold for our 28 young people. Interestingly, there are a small number of scholars who have formed long-term relationships with young people in their research, following them over years, even decades. What can these studies tell us about the trajectories of their participants as they have grown into adults? How do participants’ senses of their own futures stand against long-term analyses of social change?

Most of these studies end up telling a story about large-scale social change and are almost epic in scale. Lois Weis’s study, for example, of young women coming of age around the end of the 20th century tells a story about the declining employment prospects in postindustrial economies for the male working class and its mixed effects on women’s family roles and their economic independence. In Jay MacLeod’s decade-long study of “aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighbourhood” in the US, social class disadvantage is thoroughly perpetuated, but this occurs differently among his “white trash” group and his group of poor black boys. To summarize briefly, the former group was deeply pessimistic and so barely tried to “succeed,” resorting to anger and racism, while the latter did try to gain academic results but failed, internalizing this as their fault; yet they stayed hopeful
even years later.23 Given the rhetoric of the American dream, MacLeod captures his findings as showing “social immobility in the land of opportunity.” For this, he is highly critical of the school for devaluing the boys as deficient and for failing in turn to recognize their cultural capital, especially compared with its positive valuation of the middle-class white kids. Annette Lareau reaches similar conclusions in her ten-year follow-up, although her explanation lies more with the differential role of the family than the school: “Although all parents wanted their children to succeed, the working-class and poor families experienced more heartbreak. The middle-class parents’ interventions, although often insignificant as individual acts, yielded cumulative advantages.”24

But unlike Willis’s boys, who learned to labor, or MacLeod’s boys, who never expected to “make it,” our class was hopeful. This may also explain why we saw relatively little or only minor forms of resistance. Have things changed in recent years, or is our class naïve, yet to “wise up” (they were, it should be said, a little younger than those in these more pessimistic studies)? Arguably this chapter has identified some of those seemingly insignificant, if microlevel, processes that will, over time, increasingly distinguish the life chances of young people from wealthier and poorer homes: the parental ambitions and resources, the school’s perception of a child’s potential, learning to map the concrete steps required to attain a long-term goal, learning to present one’s aspirations in ways that will convince others, becoming reflexive about the tasks ahead, and aligning one’s personal narrative with an imagined future.

From this point of view, an attention to learning is important because it emphasizes those moments of agency and control when individuals can exert their own power (or not) over the influences that envelope them. Rachel Thomson and her colleagues pay attention to what they call “critical moments,”25 drawing on perspectives from narrative theory to focus on these significant yet time-bounded, even momentary, experiences, as we have done in this chapter (and as the young people themselves were keen to do). Yet they argue that, still, structural determinants prevail since “critical moments” are interpreted in ways that are heavily structured by lifeworld contexts. This would suggest that the
reflexivity that we have highlighted in this chapter does not so much offer the young people an intrinsically advantageous vantage point on their own experience in the ways that forms of self-knowing have been privileged in the past but, rather, is simply the discourse that contemporary society expects them to be able to use.

Also complicating conclusions about social reproduction is the fact that, in a multicultural, late modern society, social class differences are themselves no longer clear-cut (as discussed in chapter 1).26 In chapters 8 and 9 especially, we have divided the middle-class families into those who rely on more traditional economic and cultural resources and those who adopt a more alternative or bohemian approach. The poorer children—whom we cannot even label as “working class” in the taken-for-granted sense of this term—may lack traditional forms of economic and cultural capital, but, we have found, some benefit from nonconvertible but still-significant forms of (sub)cultural capital or from determined parental input; and the individual consequences cannot be easily predicted. With all these intersecting influences at home as well as in the wider society, no wonder that the young people—and we as researchers—give some credence to more individual visions of the self and of the future, being reluctant to conclude that social inequalities will inevitably reproduce themselves in familiar ways.

We worked with the class only over the period of one year. We were not able to see how the young people’s lives unfolded after our time with them, so our conjectures about their trajectories must remain immanent. We have seen how the young people were subject to a range of expectations and aspirations that at times verged on the pressured and oppressive. We have seen how they were preoccupied with the “work” of positioning themselves within desired, prescribed, or problematic trajectories so that they could make sense of present experiences in relation to narratives of the past and prospects for the future. Whether or not life circumstances have been different at different times or in different cultures, for those who are growing up in the 21st-century Western city, it could hardly be otherwise: the modern self must tell stories about who we are and why and how we imagine the future. But the stories that young people tell betray their origins.
Most often, we saw young people learning an identity that fitted the future that others had planned for them. Whether they will be fully prepared for this inheritance, and whether the possibilities that are laid out for them are real or imagined, is something we will have to return to in 20 years’ time.