Conclusion

Conservative, Competitive, or Connected

In this book, we have portrayed the lifeworld of a class of 13-year-olds throughout a year of their learning, family, social, and online lives. Now we bring together the threads of our arguments. In chapter 1, we asked, What is distinctive about the texture of young people’s lives today? What is it like growing up in a hyperconnected yet anxiously competitive world? How are young people navigating the at times conflicting demands from school, family, peers, and community, and how have these institutions and relationships themselves changed under contemporary pressures?

Our ambition was to reconcile young people’s everyday experiences with the many hopes and fears about youth in the digital age. We open this conclusion with an account of one of the extracurricular opportunities offered by the school to the whole year group. For us, the World Challenge epitomized the tensions that we have found to connect and disconnect the social worlds of young people at home, school, and elsewhere. Particularly, it reveals how the promise of harnessing connection is largely sacrificed to a mix of conservative and competitive pressures that maintain the status quo.

The World Challenge

The World Challenge, offered at the beginning of Year 9, promised a two-week trip to Malaysia to introduce students to the rainforest and to the conditions experienced by people living in developing countries. It was a commercial enterprise, packaging together the necessary travel arrangements and local services for schools and families. There is nothing new about school trips, but such exotic trips are not always on offer to everyone regardless of circumstance. Outsourcing educational activities to a global company is also new, as is the World Challenge’s efforts
to link individual and collaborative activities across school, home, and community, locally and globally, through digital networks.

The invitation to 250 members of the year group arrived early in the school year, promising that “students who participate on a World Challenge will embark on an amazing journey of self-discovery. The life skills they learn will not only aid personal growth, but help secure university places and impress future employers.” A tough competition followed close behind, there being only 16 places available. Students were invited to write a proposal about how they would each raise £2,000 toward the cost of the trip, no mean feat for a 13- or 14-year-old and far more than poorer families could contemplate for a holiday. We saw around a third of the class preparing their entry forms, working hard to find the words to represent themselves as young people with the right kind of interests, ambitions, and all-round life skills. The teacher in charge, Julie, then checked applicants’ school records for attendance, discussed their character with colleagues, and aimed to select “self-starters” or those with “a passion” for the effort—criteria that emphasized individualized competitiveness. She found this hard, describing the selection process as “horrific.” We, too, watched as some members of the class succeeded while others had to deal with the disappointment of rejection.

Gideon’s case was interesting, as Julie had had to argue him in as a reward for leaving behind his troubled past (chapter 7), as his school record was insufficient. Indeed, despite the school’s professed values of fairness and equality, the World Challenge turned out to be a rather privileged experience: the four who were selected from our class—Max, Giselle, Gideon, and Sara—were all from middle-class families. This was not intended, but the process contained its own logic. Julie had had to persuade the skeptical headteacher that the project was feasible, making her highly risk averse in selecting students and managing the project—hence her scrutiny of the school records for each student. But these, as we have seen in earlier chapters, are influenced by different social backgrounds. And the plan to raise such a lot of money was itself risky: we asked Julie what would happen if the students could not manage it, only to learn that it was assumed that the affluent families would make up any shortfall.

This one instance encapsulates what we have seen over and again in this book. The discourse of opportunity is presented as fair and inclu-
sive, and teachers, parents, and young people all subscribe to it. The process of taking up such opportunity is one of individual competition, seemingly a matter of personal interest and expertise. But the contextual factors that shape both the school’s offer and the students’ uptake result in social reproduction: the already-advantaged gain more than the relatively disadvantaged.

So far we could have been describing a process from any time in recent decades: school led, local, privileged. But the rhetoric surrounding the World Challenge was that of the digital age. The young people had to connect to each other to coordinate shared activities and monitor progress. And the school could connect to the wider international project, with schools in many countries engaged in parallel efforts. Yet what we witnessed remained a highly local effort. The young people met face-to-face after school to review their progress and to discuss the next tasks. They organized fund-raising events at school (a parent quiz night, a cake sale, an Easter egg hunt) and in their neighborhood (babysitting, washing cars, packing bags in an upscale supermarket).

As we have seen throughout this book, although “the digital” was always present, it made less difference in practice than the rhetoric promised. Digital connectivity can link home and school, youth and adults, local and global spheres. But as we have documented, both teachers and young people have a lot invested in keeping their spheres of interest and identity separate, under their autonomous control, and away from the scrutiny of the other. This was illustrated by the catalogue of minor failures that resulted from Julie’s attempts to organize the fund-raising activities via digital platforms. These were seemingly practical: when Julie tried to demonstrate the World Challenge website to the young people, on one occasion the school’s internet went down, and on another she had forgotten her password; and when she posted meeting minutes on the school’s intranet, it turned out that the students did not know how to access it. Such minor yet persistent struggles over the World Challenge reminded us of a host of other digital struggles we witnessed during the year—for instance, the teachers’ difficulties in establishing subject blogs to engage their students at home (chapter 8).

But this was not a school that could not manage technology; the school’s information management system worked with considerable efficiency (chapter 6). So why, then, did it seem to fail to recalibrate other
or new kinds of home-school relationship? In part, both teachers and students exercised personal autonomy and control. For example, we asked Julie and the students if it would be helpful to set up a Facebook group to coordinate World Challenge activities. Julie thought this a good idea but worried that it would give the students access to her profile, her personal life. Unbeknownst to her, however, the young people had already set up a Facebook group—they did not want to give a teacher access to their profiles either. As we have learned in this book, young people are heavily invested in not connecting the spheres of their lives.

Disconnection was also favored over connection to preserve the school’s authority. For Julie, email provided an efficient means of arranging meetings, issuing instructions, and setting deadlines; she posted information on the school website and sent text messages to the students and newsletters to their parents. Her preference—along with that of the school more generally—was for unidirectional, one-to-many communication. Receiving many responses from students or parents or being drawn into multiway negotiations not only would be time-consuming but would risk the school’s authority.

The World Challenge’s invitation to participate in a global effort was particularly unsuccessful. The global vision on offer proved obscure and unclear to the young people. To sustain interest and get things done, they preferred to meet each other face-to-face. None of them took up the invitation to “meet other Challengers” or to participate in the World Challenge website (via Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) or to engage with “people living in developing countries.” Only at the very end did the project become publicly visible as a record of the school’s achievement, with photos of a successful trip uploaded to Facebook and celebrated in the school newsletter.

Although digital networks now reach across long distances, it was the visibility and intensity of local links that counted for these young people, as we saw in chapters 3 and 4—attesting to the persistence, perhaps “re-mediation,” of face-to-face communication, valued for intimacy and discretion.

To be clear, it is not that the digital made little difference to the young people’s lives. We saw effective use of technologies at school to track individual attainment and deliver one-to-many content in the classroom.
We argued in chapter 6 that this facilitated an unprecedented normalization of quantification, standardization, and surveillance of the self-as-learner. We also saw the effective use of technologies at home, especially those that enabled the radical personalization of media consumption among family members who, nonetheless, put considerable effort into the communal as well as the individualized dimension of “living separately together.” In the peer group, we saw how digital communication enabled more subtlety in communication choices and identity work. Our point is that we saw remarkably little use of technologies to connect people or activities across these places, especially in ways that opened up new opportunities to learn or participate.

The promise of a more connected society remains; but it seems just that, a promise. And it is not necessarily a promise that young people themselves wish to see realized. Indeed, digital technologies were as much valued for how they could disconnect (keeping teachers and students in separate spheres, for instance) as for their potential to connect given that home-school communication was still more likely to be face-to-face or by telephone or letter. Distant links in the young people’s ego and online networks were relatively rare, and when they did exist, they generally stemmed from extended family or the places where the young people had lived previously (see chapter 4).

The main exception was young people’s considerable use of technologies—via gaming and social networking sites—to sustain sociability when they were separated from each other for reasons of cost or safety (notably, parental anxiety about their children’s freedom of movement in the neighborhood). This in itself tells us something: where adult boundaries are imposed unwillingly on young people, they welcome the potential of digital networks to reconnect them. But where adults themselves initiate connections, young people seem more likely to evade than subscribe to them whether they are digital or not.

Finally, the World Challenge illustrated a threat to the school’s vision of itself as a civil and fair society. Not only did it privilege a small group of already-privileged young people, but it also represented the developing world as an exotic “other,” an object of study rather than part of “our” world. Possibly to mitigate this threat, the selected group worked hard to foster trusting relations with each other. Gideon told us, “You’re kind of making friends with people, like, I probably wouldn’t have made
friends with before because you’re all kind of connected and working together.” However, not only was the group more socially homogeneous than the class in general, but the global “other” was absent—displaced from the group camaraderie. Similarly absent from explicit discussion were the students who had not been selected or who had not applied because they were not interested or had judged that they would not be included.

Yet, as with the civility constructed within the school, this sense of “working together” proved useful for the duration of the World Challenge, even if it did not extend much further. This too seemed to us symptomatic of the civil space constructed within the class: it was important for day-to-day sociality and, justified with reference to the longer term, for socializing the young people into getting along with very different others. But as the whole-class network discussed in chapter 3 showed, such civility did not extend very far. This is not to say that incivility broke out regularly but rather that social class put the young people on rather different tracks, and these were more often sustained than challenged by the school and among peers.

The World Challenge typified tensions between opportunity and exclusion, connection and disconnection, democratic and competitive values. How it played out was also symptomatic of late modern life: in the eyes of the school and the selected families, this was a successful activity, but we also saw it as fostering an individualized and competitive sense of achievement, mediated through the disciplinary processes of the school and privately financed by middle-class parents. Possibly some parents, teachers, or the young people themselves might agree with this analysis. But in practice, it was tacitly accepted as a reasonable compromise that talk of unfairness, thwarted ambition, or overidealistic aspiration should be set aside so that the young people involved could complete the tasks well and have a good time.

Living with Social Change in Late Modernity

We saw in chapter 10 that young people commonly evade incessant adult questioning about the future (“What do you want to be when you grow up?”), anticipating only more demands in the present. While schools, heavily focused on the business of sorting and stratifying,
prioritize a philosophy of “becoming,” parents try to combine wanting the best for their children’s well-being in the present with a concern to prepare them for an uncertain future. Yet in the face of adult efforts toward competitive and instrumental imperatives,7 the class seemed generally sensible, thoughtful, and not overly anxious (unlike some of their parents). They lived in smaller and more private worlds than the rhetoric of the network society might imagine, prioritizing face-to-face communication and valuing time with their families. They were broadly respectful toward the school, hopeful of their learning, and accepting of their likely paths ahead.

How, then, can we relate these young people’s experiences to the efforts of sociologists, psychologists, educationalists, technologists, and others, outlined in chapter 1, to analyze the social changes, perhaps even historic transformation, through which we are living? We have tried to sustain a double focus, integrating a close-up exploration of everyday experiences while also setting our account of these young people in the wider context of sociohistorical shifts. We noted in chapter 1 that neither the claims for accelerated change in late modernity nor for characterizing our times in terms of individualization (including the individualization of risk and the destabilization of traditional stratifications based on social class) are sufficiently proven through empirical study.8 Insufficient evidence certainly characterizes the grander claims about young people’s present and future circulating in public and policy discourses, whether optimistic or pessimistic.

Late modern theorists say remarkably little about young people’s experiences, childhood activities, or the institutions that address children themselves.9 This blind spot extends also to questions of family, learning, and socialization. Theorists’ enticing yet rather abstract discussion of how children’s relations with parents are altered in today’s “democratic” (rather than the “Victorian”) family asserts, improbably in the light of our findings in chapters 7 and 8, that family life is now freer than ever before from the dictates of gender, generation, or social position, with the “pure relationship” satisfying for its authenticity and freedom from social constraint.10 Hence, we have worked to make visible young people’s own voices and experiences. After all, the project of the self is one in which young and old are all equally absorbed. The effects of the risk society are likely to burden today’s youth more than older
generations, well into the future. And children and young people also experience—and have views about—the democratic family, the hopes invested by society in its children, and the individualized burden of risk. Much rests on how they adjust to society’s pressures and on their capacity to respond positively.

In interpreting the subtle ways in which people live with and respond to social change, we must remember that change occurs over a longer timescale than can be observed in a single year of research. Any putative cause of change—even the recent adoption of digital technologies—has long roots, and there is often little good evidence available for reliable longitudinal comparisons (after all, what was family or school life really like “before”?). Then, any change is multiply caused, with changes in schooling or family demographics or labor-market opportunities not always linear in nature, and all occurring on different timescales. Last, change is often less than transformative because pressures toward change generate their own counterpressures as individuals and institutions try to hold onto established practices and preferences. These conservative counterpressures are most apparent in the effort that the school and families put into maintaining separate spheres of influence or resisting moves to connect learning across sites, for instance. They are also apparent in relation to social reproduction, with the parent generation trying all the harder in the face of change to secure for its children the values and resources that it holds most dear.

Competitive or Conservative?

We hazarded in the introduction that faced with a measure of social change, people might adopt competitive or conservative practices in response—either to try to succeed within or to slow down the effects of individualization and the risk society.

From the foregoing chapters, it has become clear that young people do not generally share the phenomenological experience of the breathless “rat race” of individualist competition claimed by the theorists of late modernity.11 When asked, the class members generally struggled to imagine their various futures and tended to draw on what they already knew from home to anticipate lives much like those of their parents’ (chapter 10). But they were only 13 or 14 years old, and as we saw in
chapter 1, surveys show that young teenagers are generally fairly optimistic about the present, although around 15 or 16, the transition to adulthood begins to loom larger. Significantly, surveys also show that, for the first time in some decades, today’s teenagers doubt that they can improve on the life situation achieved by their parents, hinting at a new fatalism.\textsuperscript{12} This too we saw some evidence of.

By contrast, chapters 7 and 8 reveal rather more anxiety and uncertainty among the parents, often triggered by questions about the use of digital media at home and its implications for family values and possible futures. Interestingly, many of the families were themselves undergoing transformations with regard to social class, ethnicity, migration, and family composition, on a timescale varying from months to generations. This in itself complicated the norms and expectations within family life, resulting in a fair degree of flexibility toward children but also anxiety about whether the parents have made good decisions.\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps for this reason and perhaps because of wider anxieties about the future, parents’ views of the school were significantly risk averse, appreciating rather than criticizing its efforts to protect its pedagogic and disciplinary autonomy by reinforcing its boundaries rather than meeting change by experimenting with alternative pedagogies or reaching out to embrace and integrate with home or community life.

The school, meanwhile, prioritized a regime of individual measurement and competitiveness while maintaining a rigorously civil internal culture (as argued in chapters 5 and 6). This regime of individual competition, welcomed by risk-averse parents yet surely disappointing to progressive educators, was sustained by erecting barriers to the possibility of collaborating or connecting across different places and forms of knowledge. This civil culture could be read as conservative in claiming fairness (within the school walls) while masking hidden processes of social reproduction (extending from home into the school). But we also read it as a progressive contemporary response to the challenges of multicultural or cosmopolitan city life.\textsuperscript{14}

Young people’s own experiences are, in various subtle ways, marked by adults’ embrace of either competitive or conservative responses to the pressures of late modernity. Indeed, their actions are contributory, since relations at home and school are coconstructed through everyday practices and mutual understandings. For instance, despite the public
hyperbole about the opportunities of youth and education, the young people had broadly accepted the conservative “deal” on offer from the school (“if you accede to our discipline and measurement, we will get you sufficient grades to succeed in what comes next”).

Taking this idea a step further, we saw young people’s ready internalization of standards and metrics, into their everyday talk, interactions, and sense of self. Education has long been measured, but the shift we see today is an internalization of these values on a different scale. In chapter 6, we captured this as a shift from measuring the curriculum in terms of levels to one of measuring the students as being “leveled” (as in the discourses rife within the school: “I’m a level 5b” or “Have you been leveled yet?”).\[^{15}\] We conjecture that by internalizing such metrics, young people (and their parents and teachers) gained a sense of control over the expectations and pressures that surrounded them, even though doing so simultaneously excluded attention to young people’s intrinsic motivations to learn or the possibility of exploring alternative conceptions of knowledge and ways of knowing.\[^{16}\]

However, the young people had set a significant condition to their acceptance of the school’s regime: that it should not extend beyond its boundary into “their” places—interstitial, domestic, or online spaces of living and learning. Conveniently, this condition suited the school for related reasons, as we saw earlier in relation to World Challenge and in chapters 4 and 5.\[^{17}\] Thus, we observed the care with which the young people sought to contain (rather than resist or reject) the ever-encroaching adult demands to accede to rigorous regimes of measurement, narrow conceptions of the knowledge worth learning, and civil relations with their highly diverse classmates in public (in the classroom, on Facebook).

The young people tried to protect their personal autonomy by seeking out unsupervised places or times in their day (the walk home from school, their bedroom, certain online sites). Their friendships were conducted face-to-face when possible, as this—still—optimizes flexibility, authenticity, and reciprocity. Insofar as friendships were also conducted online, doing so already represented a response to adult control over their physical freedom of movement; so most emphatically did not wish to engage with adults in their online spaces.
While friendships tended to be more socially homogeneous than the school population at large, we also saw several friendships built around popular media interests (sports, gaming, fandoms), and some of these, also as a matter of choice, bridged divides of gender, social class, and ethnicity.\textsuperscript{18} We saw the pursuit of forms of learning, too, that evaded the scrutiny of or valorization by the school, with several young people refusing the chance to “shine” or obtain “commendations” for out-of-school activities in school precisely to keep their spheres of interest and activity distinct. We cannot say with confidence that among this group of 13-year-olds, such signs of independence hold out great promise for future pathways that are neither competitive nor conservative. Nor can we say that they do not.

Reconfiguring Home, School, and Peer Culture

The relation between social change and social reproduction has been a theme throughout this book. While the middle-class families were fairly easy to identify, the class contained few, if any, young people from working-class or blue-collar homes (as traditionally defined), although many of them struggled economically. As we saw in chapters 8 and 9, when we look more closely at these families, they cannot simply be identified in terms of traditional conceptions of social class; for this is late modernity, and economic and cultural resources are no longer so tightly linked and the one no longer neatly predicts the other.

Nor did social class neatly predict responses to the demands of late modernity. For instance, some of the middle-class families were content to endorse the authority of the school, while others sought more “bohemian” alternatives, although they tended to sidestep rather than directly contest the quantified standardization of learning at school. Some migrant families were also pursuing different paths to that of the school, concerned to value and sustain their home cultures. These alternative or subcultural pathways were rather quietly trodden, with rich subcultural knowledge gained outside the school sometimes making little impact on the bounded life of the school or, at this stage, despite the potential benefits to the learner, without converting into capital that could be recognized more widely. Moreover, since all concerned acceded to
the standardized, supposedly fair, and generally civil discourse of the school, refusing the language of social class or even of inequality, it seemed difficult to articulate any critique of the unequal outcomes that sociologists continue to document.\textsuperscript{19}

In contrast to earlier ethnographies of school life, we could not identify either “hidden curricula” or the processes of “learning to labor” that implicitly validate middle-class children while working-class children are allocated to the factory floor or seek tactics of resistance.\textsuperscript{20} This is not because the school was as fair as it claimed but, rather, because the discourse of individual competition and success was made explicit rather than tacit. Differences in opportunity or achievement were not seen as either controversial or unfair—quite the contrary. Thus, it seems that a sense of collective classed identity is giving way to an uncertain and ambivalent recognition of status differentials, understood as a matter of individual talent or luck, good or bad. The long-term outcome—that social advantage or disadvantage persists—is little changed from 20 years ago,\textsuperscript{21} but the means by which it comes about and the implications for identity and social relations are reconfigured.

Relatively, we have traced ways in which family lives are being reconfigured: as the transition from child to adult is extended,\textsuperscript{22} as the value of the resources that families can provide their children are increasingly uncertain, and as the home becomes saturated with media of many kinds, to the point that highly flexible, increasingly personal digital media use encapsulates what it means to feel “at home.”\textsuperscript{23} The continued importance of family, along with young people’s respect for their parents and comfort in the security of home, is perhaps only surprising to those who believe the popular hyperbole about an alienated and superficial digital generation.

But the meanings of family and home are, nonetheless, subtly different from what they used to be. Managing the balance between time together and time apart is high on most families’ agendas, with tensions about commonality and privacy accentuated by the habitual use of shared and personalized media. As we put it in chapter 7, rather than family members “living alone together,” isolated under the same roof, we found them more often “living together separately.” By this, we mean that, in the modern “democratic family,”\textsuperscript{24} the interests and desires of each family member are respected as a matter of individual rights but that even when everyone
is in a separate space or using a different technology, they still feel connected to each other. Furthermore, most of the families put a lot of effort into finding ways to come together. The media, especially television, although sometimes computer games, often underpin shared times “as a family,” and each family had stories to tell about how this was managed.

One reason the young people’s desire to spend time alone at home was accepted by their parents was on account of their reduced freedom of movement outside the home. Most members of the class stayed within a narrow radius of home when they were outside and often stayed at home once they had returned from school. It is no wonder that they liked to delay the return home, dawdling and chatting or dropping into the local shops. For 13- to 14-year-olds today, going online once they are at home to hang out with friends on Facebook or Xbox or the like seems to have taken the place of long phone calls or hanging out on street corners, activities typical of their parents’ own youth. As a result, the home—and especially the bedroom—has intense individual meanings for the young people that are ever less determined by parents, becoming increasingly a place in which friendship, gossip, and flirtation can occur, albeit online more than offline.

At the same time, and in various ways, the values, logics, and practices of school have progressed further into the home, with parents widening their responsibilities for their children’s present and future success by ensuring that particular places, times of the day, and technologies are used not only for homework but also for varieties of informal learning, enrichment, and school-related activities. As young people’s developing interests are increasingly conceived as a matter of choice for them to pursue according to personal preference rather than mandated by economic or cultural position, the task of sustaining their interests often falls to them personally even as the importance of these interests grows in the minds of parents and teachers. The young people in the class, even by their early teens, could already recite a list of activities (musical, artistic, sporting, etc.) that they had tried and dropped. Since each activity had represented an investment on the part of family or school, this apparent failure was regarded with growing frustration and, in some cases, anxiety by their teachers and parents.

Yet we also saw only unevenly sustained support from those same parents and teachers to encourage young people’s intrinsic interests, to
find ways to recognize small achievements in meaningful ways, or to overcome the many obstacles that might seem minor or temporary to adults but often proved significant for the young people (a missed class, a friend leaving the group, a teacher they did not like, loss of time for relaxation). Such interests are not simply the hobbies of old but, rather, are increasingly framed as the source of personal drive and self-direction required to compete in the tough race for success that lies ahead. Some of the middle-class parents, realizing this, took it upon themselves to support interest development: this was more successful when done as part of family activities, for intrinsic motives, and less successful when it was reduced to a similar system of reward or punishment that the school also operated. Engagement in creative digital media activities—creating minivideos to upload to YouTube or experimenting with a digital camera or music—seemed particularly short-lived, even if it was enjoyed in the moment. This points to the need for social and institutional support for informal learning activities, which was often most readily available among families whose lives were already embedded in a rich cultural world, ranging from Giselle’s art to Sedat’s music. It was seemingly least recognized by the more individualized families—wealthy or poor—who lacked such a local culture and who tacitly accepted the notion that success is a matter of individual striving and character. In sum, the choice biography is problematic, inasmuch as it imposes a responsibility for managing it well (thereby generating anxiety for the young, their teachers, and their parents).

Throughout this book, we have asked how young people construct and enact their identity (or aspects of identity) in a high-pressure, digital age. We mapped a range of social spaces within which identities and relationships are imagined in different ways. In the super-diverse society of 21st-century London, civility online and offline proved unexpectedly important—unexpected because most academic discussion of civility concerns adults and, when applied to young people, is seen as oppressively disciplinary. Yet our class was keen to endorse civility as an ethical outlook—tolerance, fairness, inclusivity—albeit seeing these as values primarily relevant to public places. In private, young people tried to keep their desires and friendships more under the radar of adults, some experimenting with aspects of their identity, selecting friends like them, and trying to deal with daily difficulties and upsets. Their online
lives largely mirrored rather than opposed both public and private senses of self, underpinning, extending slightly, and intensifying the experience of their more public and also their more private networks.²⁵ At the same time, we saw ways in which face-to-face communication—for long the only form of communication available—is prized for intimate talk. In other words, since online interactions may or may not be private—and, arguably, uncertainty over privacy online will surely increase—face-to-face interaction becomes increasingly valued.

Connections and Disconnections

Throughout this book, we have drawn attention to connections and disconnections: the social relationships among members of the class (chapter 3) and how these are underpinned by digital networks (chapter 4); how these relationships contrast with the relatively closed world of the school (chapter 5); and the usually small worlds of individual families (chapter 7). We have identified some of the structures and norms that make each place particular and that facilitate or close off connections with other places, people, or activities (chapters 6, 8, and 9). While the metaphor of the network—local and global, social and digital—has proved helpful in this book in revealing the connections and disconnections among young people and their spaces and activities, our analysis has also pinpointed some limitations of this metaphor, especially its tendency to emphasize ever-extending links and connections.²⁶ Indeed, we have found the idea of places or spheres of activity more persuasive as way of capturing the texture of everyday life than that of the immaterial network.

In the class, connections between people and places were most sought out among peers (locally or online) and most avoided between home and school. With regard to activities and interests, we saw ways in which art, music, and sports could link home, peers, and community in various ways, but this was not always acknowledged or valued. Parents’ efforts to bridge the home-school divide by organizing learning at home were unrecognized by or even problematic for the school,²⁷ while teachers’ efforts to bridge that same divide using digital technologies were fragile and short-lived. We have drawn attention to the disciplined practices of the school to support civility, showing also how young people
and their families supported this emphasis on inclusivity, transparency, and fairness, and we saw such civility replicated by the young people themselves on Facebook. But few civil bonds extended beyond the school gates, with traditional social (with a few idiosyncratic) groupings shaping the construction of smaller social worlds at home and in the neighborhood.

Yet there were small signs that digital technologies altered the young people’s possible connections with the wider social world, even if other forms of connection at school or in the family did not. Dom’s forays into Twitter or Megan’s burgeoning use of Tumblr may have ended up maintaining their immediate social world rather than forging new kinds of links with others, but for these young people, the scope of the network had changed. Similarly, Giselle’s embryonic role as a moderator on the family’s Minecraft server had introduced her to the management of risk with random outsiders and learning to interact with people she did not know, giving advice and direction and thus inducting her into a new way of relating. Shane told us that on open game play during Call of Duty, he disliked what he called “racist Americans,” whose commentaries he actively opposed, reinforcing his pride in belonging to a racially diverse family (with black cousins) and actively encouraging him to take antiracist stances. Here access to wider networks changed—for a time at least—the social horizon.

But overall, we saw more effort invested in controlling access to the networks the young people were in rather than extending their reach. We have interpreted this as a reasonable desire to limit their networks more in line with other “conservative” responses to pressures for change, introducing this label with a small c in the sense of conserving the status quo rather than resisting change. Indeed, we have recognized the identity commitments that the young people—and also their parents and teachers—invest in particular places, relationships, and activities. They defend these commitments because they matter to them.

Policy makers or others who seek to cross established boundaries and multiply connections will need careful negotiation to consider the likely costs as well as the benefits of doing so. There are additional difficulties in harnessing digital networks as part of this effort to connect. These technologies offer unprecedented possibilities to connect people, places, and ideas, and so teachers, parents, and young people alike are
now highly attuned to questions of privacy and trust. Indeed, the principles and practices involved in regulating or restricting the scope of digital networks has become a public preoccupation, protecting particular spheres of influence and interest even at the cost of experimentation, collaboration, and cooperation.

The class members were still very young, and few wider opportunities have yet come their way; so this insularity is hardly surprising or, arguably, problematic. But in trying to puzzle not only how connected the class was but also what difference any such connections might make, we struggled to relate our emerging understanding to the burgeoning body of theory and practice that insists on the benefit of bringing wider opportunities into the lives of teenagers. In this work, the value of the network is almost always perceived as a good thing, mainly because of the belief that more connections will benefit youth and also society at large (see chapter 3). Making connections, it is held, harnesses young people’s often-untapped creativity, advances social justice by combating disadvantage and exclusion, and contributes constructively to changing conditions of knowledge and expression, cultural and economic production, and transnational understanding. In some ways, the motivational, creative, and collaborative potential of digital technologies has come to stand for this deeper and wider thesis of the “benevolent network” and thus enhances learning outcomes even if the pedagogic and political visions driving such efforts are not always clear or agreed. In these visions, changing education has come to stand for a way of changing society at large, irrespective of the kind of analysis that has permeated this book.

Harnessing Connection

Given a public rhetoric that suggests unlimited potential for connectivity, we have described some of its practical and desired limits. Yet the public and policy enthusiasm over varieties of (digital and global) connection is framed as an alternative to both competitive and conservative responses to late modernity. Specifically, against competitive individualism, calls for more connections—as in connected learning, connected communities, a better-connected world—assert the values of inclusion, collaboration, empathy, and civic engagement. Against
conservatism, calls for connection invite creative thinking about ways of living that could leave behind established forms of exclusion or exploitation and meet future challenges with fresh thinking. Here dreams of a digital future connect with older traditions of progressive interventions for social change. During our year with the class, thinking about these possibilities often led us from observing what the young people were actually doing to imagining opportunities that they might be missing. And so in this final section, we think through some ways that connections might be “harnessed” for social change for ordinary young people like those in the class, by applying the logic of late modernity we have used in the preceding chapters to assess what kinds of change (if any) might be possible (or desirable).

For many schools and parents (and, doubtless, governments and employers), the question is not only whether harnessing connection could bring improvements but whether pursuing it is worth the risk of getting it wrong. What was striking about the parents’ and young people’s endorsement of the school’s approach to measuring learning via standardized levels (as minutely tracked on the school information management system) was not that anyone thought it an especially stimulating approach to learning—for they did not—but that they were not willing to risk its predictable delivery of adequate results by contemplating alternative approaches. As pressures on education and uncertainties over employment grow, the more conservative (rather than flexible or experimental) we predict parents will become. For schools, too, the benefits of alternative approaches would need to be firmly established to wrest them away from a tried-and-tested approach to schooling, one that manages external pressures, fends off rather than embraces the messiness of home, and locks down rather than opens up uses of technology by students.

The risky opportunities of “the digital” seem especially to breed conformity as much or more than experimentation. The convergence on a single proprietary platform, Facebook, is one such instance. Fears about new contacts and reluctance to explore new pathways to participation are another. But most important is the lack of motive, of purpose, or of a reason to do things differently. Young people could use the internet to get to know almost anyone, but they stick to their own kind. They could explore esoteric forms of knowledge, but they stick to the top-ten
Google hits, and their favorite sites include Amazon and eBay. They could create and remix their own content and become “produsers,” but they actually consume stuff made by others. As we have argued, this is partly a concern about the individualized burden of risk and lack of a safety net and partly a lack of knowledge about the alternatives.

And as for the alternatives, the exceptional cases are much celebrated. Henry Jenkins writes about Flourish, a girl who published her first online novel at age 14, thereafter mentoring many other hopeful writers twice her age. Mizuko Ito and colleagues highlight the case of 17-year-old Clarissa, an aspiring screenwriter whose friends introduced her to a role-playing site online where equally enthusiastic peers pooled their creative and critical resources to the point that Clarissa could use her newfound expertise to get into college. Mark Warschauer and Tina Matuchniak describe how 14-year-old Max produced humorous videos and posted them on YouTube, gaining so much fan mail that his video aired on mainstream television. But the point is that these are, precisely, exceptions. Should we wish that these opportunities existed for everyone? What effort should society put into making this a reality? Members of the class had encountered little of this, with a few exceptions: Megan, Giselle, and Sergei had uploaded home-produced videos to YouTube, and Joel and Alice experimented with their digital cameras, for instance. But even these activities were rarely sustained or developed, and most of the young people did not seem to feel the lack of such opportunities.

But before simply seeing a lack of change as missed (or rejected) opportunities, we need to be wary that we do not fall into the trap of blaming individuals for their own failings. Many scholars have critiqued alternative or nontraditional approaches to learning as implicitly middle class. Connecting learning across school and home might seem beneficial for everyone, but given the different resources that families can call on, in practice it opens the door to socioeconomic inequalities. Further, shifting the burden of responsibility for children’s learning from school to (also) home compounds already-heightened parental anxieties over children’s increasingly uncertain educational and employment prospects.

Also troubling is the claim that promoting and designing flexible opportunities to harness the power of networked technologies to support
self-motivated paths to living and learning is an enterprise that aligns closely to the needs of an insecure, exploitative, and precarious labor market where risks are borne individually, not collectively.\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, against the call for connection, critical voices fear that connectionist talk seems to overplay individual agency and commercially driven populist visions of the ideal society. Connectionism underplays the importance of the state’s vested interests in retaining the power to frame and judge people’s everyday activities while appearing to devolve governance processes to ordinary people, as well as disguising commercial efforts to coopt public discourses in companies’ extension of proprietary and profitable networks.\textsuperscript{38} Certainly there are plenty of initiatives that use the discourse of connection to market edutainment products to parents and digital creation or coding resources to schools, just as there are many that seek to profit from the more conservative desires to manage “the digital age” safely by minimizing risk.\textsuperscript{39}

Such concerns might lead us to consider framing connection in negative rather than positive terms. Yet watching young people and the adults around them take everyday actions designed to disconnect rather than (or as well as) to connect instead provoked us to rethink disconnection in positive rather than negative terms.\textsuperscript{40} These everyday actions, along with the simple fact of a persistent and practical lack of connectivity across places and activities, led us to look more deeply at the deliberate and inadvertent impediments to greater connections, digital or otherwise. People’s everyday actions, we learned, often affirm the positive value of separation— as facilitating spheres of autonomy or trusted spaces rather than as failing to take up the promise of connection.

But even this is insufficient reason to reject the promise of better-connected alternatives. At their best, they offer a humanist vision for living and learning that could challenge the injustices of contemporary society. And from this perspective, digital affordances\textsuperscript{41} may yet facilitate communication that is creative, civic, collaborative, and experimental, potentially linking spaces, respecting voices, building self-efficacy, supporting interests, acknowledging expertise, and scaffolding learning. Will these positive visions combat the risk-averse responses of both individuals and institutions? If the potential of connection is to outweigh the appeal of disconnection in the future, we must directly address the risk-averse fears and self-protective practices that stand in the way of re-
thinking society in the digital age. But for our class—and the many other classes of ordinary young people—initiatives that address structural and widespread reorganization remain rarely available or sustained, and with respect to outcomes, they are, at present, ambiguous at best.

But is it digital connections that are really needed, or are these a (currently fashionable) means to achieve a more familiar but hugely important end, namely, to support connections among people and places more generally? It perplexed us that neither the school nor the families could imagine what goes on outside their immediate gaze, leaving young people to move from home to school and back each day without the adults responsible for their opportunities really seeing how their lives do or could better fit together. We have uncovered a series of reasons why the situation is as it is, but we remain unsatisfied. So we still wonder whether there are ways—digital or otherwise—that teachers could (or should) know more about their students’ lives, for the benefit of all young people. Must such knowledge inevitably become incorporated into top-down, standardized conceptions of traditional learning, neatly measured according to the logics of digital systems?42 Could not small changes make a big improvement over time? What if Sedat’s musicianship and discipline could be credited; if Fesse’s independent concentration could be acknowledged and developed; if Giselle’s wide-ranging knowledge and accomplishments could be built on; if Mark’s sense of social isolation could be more directly addressed; if Yusuf’s extraordinarily committed out-of-school life could be brought together by all the adults concerned for him; if Alice and Jenna and Max’s friendship around literary appreciation could be developed; if ways could be found to value and trust in Shane’s mature, reflective, and honest appraisal of his own capabilities? If the school had recognized the young people’s out-of-school lives without seeking to manage or measure them or limit their value, parents, too, might have found ways to focus their own role without either simply approving or sidestepping or misunderstanding the life the school constructed for their children. And then perhaps young people might have more reason to welcome than to resist such efforts.

But what can schools or teachers do about the determining influences of social class? How can greater agency be granted to young people? How could changing ways of conceptualizing learning alter such seemingly
overdetermining social structures? These questions have haunted almost every study of childhood and youth, and in varying degrees of explicitness, they underpin most countries’ education and family policies. While investigating young people’s lives in the round might seem only to deepen our knowledge of these challenges, we also believe that it reveals some chinks in the processes of social reproduction, at least for some young people in some circumstances. By paying attention to the ways that young people develop and enact their identities within particularly enabling or constraining contexts, our project has revealed not so much cruel fate as society’s lack of imagination and resources about creating alternatives. We recognize the considerable and entrenched inequalities that stratified the lives of the class. But these were not wholly determining of young people’s realities and prospects.

Thus, we remain optimistic about a progressive project that seeks creative ways to engage people—as individuals and institutions—in imagining alternatives that can expand their vision of future opportunities and of the possible pathways by which such opportunities might be reached. But our year with the class has also taught us that such a project can only work if it engages with people’s identity commitments to how things have been until now and with their often-justified fears about a risky or threatening future.