

**The Cutting Edge of Fun: Making Work Play at the New American School**

by

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# Abstract

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This dissertation presents an ethnographic account of the launch of “The Downtown School for Design, Media, and Technology,” one of the most prominent American school reform projects in recent years. Drawing on popular accounts about children and young people’s pervasive affinity for digital media, and especially video games, the Downtown School’s progressive founders hoped to create a new model of schooling for the twenty-first century. By attempting to make the entire curriculum “game-like,” and by braiding digital media through pedagogic practices, the Downtown School’s founders hoped to make a model of schooling that was more “student-centered,” equitable, creative, engaging, fun, and technologically sophisticated than canonical models. In this dissertation I draw on my ethnographic documentation of the Downtown School’s first class – a group of 75 sixth graders coming of age in New York City – to show that despite the best intentions of its founders, the Downtown School’s techno-centric model mostly overlooked, rather than overcame, schooling’s contributions to the making and remaking of privilege. I argue that the school’s enthusiasm for digital media and games led educators to underestimate the power that students, the state, and privileged families would exert on the school to thwart the founders’ aims, as well as to play down the school’s embeddedness in a system that legitimated biased social selection. As a result, the school paradoxically helped remake many of the inequities its planners had hoped to ameliorate.

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I feel similar appreciation for the Downtown School's teachers. The school's teachers were far more generous and open than they needed to be, and the work is much better for it. Not only did teachers let me into their classrooms and put up with my annoying avoidance of taking on a "normal" (e.g. helpful) adult role, but they frequently made time to chat between periods and after school, and generally treated me in a warm and friendly manner. I feel lingering, and likely irreconcilable, guilt that I left the field whereas they continued their work "on the ground," putting in long hours in an attempt to improve other people's lives. While I may disagree with educators about the some of consequences of schooling, I have no doubt about the honorable intentions and dedication of the teachers in my study.

This study also benefitted enormously from the generosity of the parents and guardians that agreed to participate. Many invited me into their homes, several fed me, and few continue to invite me over. All made several hours for an interview and many were candid to the point that they were willing to share both the glories and the less saintly sides of being a parent and a human being. I have yet to have children of my own but if and when I do I will keep these families fondly in mind as I navigate these dilemmas for myself.

I also want to offer a heartfelt thanks to the students. While it's a cliché to say so, they really are the best part of doing this sort of fieldwork. Being a sixth grader is often a confusing, awkward, and painful experience, even for the so-called "popular" kids. Students learn to judge and be judged, they learn that just about everything they say or do means more than they thought, seemingly solid friendships suddenly evaporate, bodies no longer look or feel the way they used to, everyone is changing and it's not at all clear if and how you should change as well. At the same time, sixth grade can be exhilarating. There are new people, new places, new outfits, new music, new routines, new things to try out. Despite all the "drama," there is a fragile and subtle solidarity of commiseration amongst the students. Teachers are meaner and stricter than they used to be. Classes are more serious and boring. There is less downtime, less fun, less play. Against these new afflictions, bonds develop. Students share jokes at the teachers' expense, they spread "stupid" sayings that get repeated until everyone is "annoyed," sideshows become epic dramas. I feel very luck that many students allowed me into this awkward and bewildering world, that they were

willing to share their excitements and agonies, their pride and their embarrassments.

Beyond the field, I have been supported by such a wide and generous collection of people that I cannot do justice to all of their contributions. Paul Duguid deserves special praise since he has done more than any other person to help me develop as a scholar. If it were not for Paul, I would not be where I am and there is a good chance I would not have made it through graduate school. Paul is one of those rare scholars who puts far more effort into advising than the profession demands or rewards. When I talk with graduate students at Berkeley and elsewhere it's clear that Paul's advising is as uncommon as it is exceptional. He is also phenomenally well-read, analytically sharp, warm natured, and reliably funny. I feel deeply grateful for his contributions and I hope I can live up to his example when I advise graduate students myself.

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The Digital Youth Project was one of the most influential experiences of my career thus far as I continue to be shaped by my involvement between 2005 and 2008. The project's leader, Mimi Ito, has been a quiet but unwavering supporter of my work since I met her in 2005. Mimi funded me on several ongoing projects, including during my dissertation research and analysis. I could not have conducted the research reported on in this dissertation without Mimi's support. Several other members of the Digital Youth Project have also provided invaluable encouragement, council, and friendship over the years. Through their playful teasing, C.J. Pascoe, Becky Herr Stephenson, and Heather Horst were the first professional practitioners to treat me like a legitimate member of a scholarly community of practice. They helped me first imagine that I could one day become a "real" academic. They encouraged my ethnographic insights while also pushing me to consider new perspectives. They taught me many "tricks of the trade." Heather, in particular, went out of her way to mentor me even though she received little official credit for doing so. Having worked on several projects with Heather I can attest to the uniqueness of her generosity and mentorship, and I feel very lucky that I have been her colleague and friend. In New York City, Diana Rhoten and

Richard Arum generously provided insightful feedback and a place to work for three years. It would have been much more difficult to do research and write my dissertation from New York City without their help and I thank them for it.

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### Introduction: Playful Grooming for the New Millennium

“I must make an admission,” Ivan began. “I never could understand how it’s possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren’t so nigh... It’s still possible to love one’s neighbors abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close.”

*The Brothers Karamazov* (1990 [1880], 236-7)

On a brisk day in the fall of 2009, a production crew for a nationally televised public affairs series aimed their camera at an 11-year-old boy who was sitting alone at a desk with a large laptop computer on it in an otherwise long and empty hallway. The boy was demonstrating a software program that allowed him to design video games. The television crew was filming footage for a story on the Downtown School for Design, Media, and Technology (henceforth the Downtown School), a well-funded and highly touted public middle school that had opened in lower Manhattan two months earlier.<sup>1</sup> The school publicized itself as tailored to fit the unique sensibilities of a new generation of children. According to their accounts, rapid changes in information and communication technologies had transformed the world and children. The problem was, schools had not kept up. Appropriating “digital media,” and especially games, could help educators make up the difference. What’s more, these educational reforms would be “progressive” and student-centered, unlike the top-down, authoritative, and bureaucratic school reforms that were popular at the time. The Downtown School would meet students where they lived their lives, they would be, “a school for digital kids,” as their tagline read, and the entire curriculum would be “game-like.” Students would spend their schooldays traversing designed game-like worlds, “taking on” the identities of scientists, geographers, and other worldly practitioners as they moved between classrooms. Digital media, and especially equipment for media production, would be woven throughout. By appropriating the latest digital media tools as well as principles from well-designed games, educators could bring education, students’ out-of-

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<sup>1</sup> All institutional and personal names are pseudonyms. That said, given the school’s uniqueness, I don’t anticipate being able to preserve its anonymity from readers who seek to identify it. I have made extensive efforts to preserve the anonymity of individuals, as discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

school lives, and the broader social world into a harmonious relation, an amalgamation that would be distinctively hip, high-tech, and even fun.

Back in the hallway, the camerawomen lifted her face from the viewfinder and moved her tripod closer to the boy at the computer. Her producer asked what she was doing and she pointed towards a doorway in the middle of the hallway. Through a window in the door we could see another television production crew, this one from a local ABC affiliate, that had entered the background of her shot. For the next several hours the two television crews danced around each other as they gathered footage for their stories. At one point, the door to a classroom opened and one of the school's educators and two student volunteers entered the room with a tour of prospective families in tow. As the camera crew maneuvered to capture footage, and as one of the student tour guides showed off the school's most cutting edge technology – a “semi-immersive embodied learning environment” – one of the prospective students quietly let out an elongated, “Cooool.”

While this day was especially frenetic, it was not anomalous. Local, national, and even international journalists routinely visited the school, often producing stories that emphasized similar themes. Here is how the narrator of a nationally televised PBS news program opened a story featuring the school:

In the twentieth century we taught our kids what to learn. We lined their desks up in rows and put the teacher at the front of the classroom. But in today's world many educators are questioning the status quo by meeting young people where they are. They're using twenty-first century tools to prepare kids for a twenty-first century world.

Similarly, a reporter from the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* wrote:

What if teachers gave up the vestiges of their educational past, threw away the worksheets, burned the canon and reconfigured the foundation upon which a century of learning has been built? What if we... reimagined the typical American classroom so that, at least in theory, it came to resemble a typical American living room or a child's bedroom or even a child's pocket circa 2010 – if, in other words, the slipstream of broadband and always-on technology that fuels our world became the source and organizing principle of our children's learning? [The Downtown School has] spent a lot of time thinking about whether there is a way to make learning feel simultaneously more relevant to students and more connected to the world beyond school. And the answer, as [they] see it, lies in games.

## **1.1 America and the Social World in the New Millennium**

As Hanah Arendt (1961) observed in the middle of the twentieth century, perennial public debates about education and educational crises suggest that much more is at stake than parochial questions about educational administration and pedagogy:

It is tempting indeed to regard [the crisis in education] as a local phenomenon, unconnected with the larger issues of the century, to be blamed on certain peculiarities of life in the United States which are not likely to find a counterpart in other parts of the world. Yet, if this were true, the crisis in our school system would

not have become a political issue and the educational authorities would not have been unable to deal with it in time. Certainly more is going on here than the puzzling question of why Johnny can't read. (174)

At the historical moment when the Downtown School was being designed, the fragility of American hegemony was especially evident. While evidence of increasing economic inequality and a weakening position on the global stage had been mounting since the 1970s – transformations that were partially obscured by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and a series of financial market bubbles – the extent of America's challenges became especially evident after the turn of the millennium. Design for the school began in 2006, with 9/11 fresh in the public's memory, two intractable wars in the Middle East, economic inequality at levels not seen since the 1920s, China, India, and other developing nations on the ascent, and rates of relative economic mobility falling behind those of many other wealthy countries (cf. Corak 2006; Jäntti et al. 2006; Piketty and Saez 2003, 2006; Economic Mobility Project 2011a; Hall 2011). The year before the Downtown School opened, American financial markets collapsed and globalized capitalism nearly imploded. None of this squared with the long-held sense that America was a shining example of social order for a new age. As Arendt observed, the American public has long characterized America as a qualitatively different model of society from societies of the past and other societies around the globe, a social order dedicated to individual freedom and equitable opportunities rather than oppression and rigid social hierarchies, a society where "everyone who worked hard and played by the rules" would be allowed to go as far as their innate capacities and personal will could take them. In short, the globalizing social world of the new millennium was hard to square with a national ideology that had long figured America as an exemplary "*Novus Ordo Seclorum*," a meritocratic society that offered each of its citizens an equitable crack at self-fulfillment, the central promise of the American Dream. As Arendt and many others have observed (e.g. Cuban 1990; Tyack and Cuban 1995; Hochschild and Scovronick 2003), Americans have long treated public schools as one of the main institutions that should turn this vision into reality, and when the gap between vision and reality becomes especially wide, public schooling often catches much of the outrage, hence the perennial crises in education and the perpetual educational reforms that promise to finally fix schooling so as to fix the society.

Over roughly the same period that it became increasingly evident that economic opportunities were shrinking and that America's international influence was waning, astounding things were happening in the high-tech sector. Google rapidly grew from a graduate student research project into one of the most valuable companies in the world. Sales for video games exploded and threatened to surpass Hollywood. Craigslist undercut the revenue model of newspapers and newsrooms around the country were consolidating or folding. Facebook emerged from a Harvard dorm room to become an international social network with hundreds of millions of registered users. Apple surpassed ExxonMobil to become the most valued company in the world. While many Americans were out of work, and while many more had not seen significant wage increases in decades, high-tech entrepreneurs were granted a messiah-like status. As President Obama noted on the occasion of the death of Apple CEO and co-founder Steve Jobs:

Steve was among the greatest of American innovators... By building one of the planet's most successful companies from his garage, he exemplified the spirit of American ingenuity. By making computers personal and putting the internet in our pockets, he made the information revolution not only accessible, but intuitive and

fun... [H]e transformed our lives, redefined entire industries, and achieved one of the rarest feats in human history: he changed the way each of us sees the world.<sup>2</sup>

Under the gloomy shadow of national decline, digital media cast a hopeful light, one that, perhaps, could resuscitate faith in the American Dream, faith in schooling, faith in America's approach to capitalism, in short, faith that America's liberal heritage could make a, "New Order of the World."

## 1.2 Grooming Children for the New Millennium

Anxieties and hopes about the future tend to coalesce and gain concentrated focus in debates over normative notions of "childhood," and particularly struggles over how adults should educate, rear, and groom children for future membership in adult society. The sites for these struggles tend to be the places where futures are made, notably schools and families but also, increasingly, a diverse collection of adult-managed programs for children and young people.

At the time this study was conducted, many public commentators routinely defined contemporary children and young people primarily in terms of a technological identity, figuring them as collective members of the "digital generation." According to these accounts, today's children were "digital natives" (Prensky 2001), "the net generation" (Tapscott 1998), "the YouTube and MySpace generation," all of whom were "born digital" (Palfrey and Glasser 2008). For decades social commentators have defined new generations in terms of the technologies that were new at the moment, but the association of "digital media" with children and young people has been especially pervasive. These techno-centric accounts privilege children and young people's relationships with "digital media" as amongst the relationships that matter most.

Such perspectives tend to attribute much of the widespread changes to the social world discussed above to technological change (for a paradigmatic, and oft-cited, example see Friedman [2005]). Further, technological change is often seen as an exogenous force, produced outside of society and then acting on society in ways that demand adaptations by persons, institutions, and governments. Escobar (1994) succinctly named these assumptions about technologically driven social change the "arrow of progress metaphor." The arrow starts with scientific knowledge being discovered by way of research in a setting that is seen as neutral, apolitical, and outside of society. The arrow ends in social progress, usually figured as economic development and general notions of human betterment. Along the way, scientific discovery moves through technological innovation, industry, and markets. As I discuss in chapter 4, information and communication technologies, in particular, are often thought to have made the world vastly more interconnected, allowing for the globalization of production, finance, trade, labor, and media.

The digital generation concept grafts the identity of contemporary children onto this model of technologically driven social change. As Buckingham (2000) observed, these generational stereotypes often produce polarized debates. Optimistic accounts gravitate towards the digital media's educational potential. According to these views, changes in media and technology have the potential to liberate and empower children; they can unleash children's intrinsic interests and creativity; the new media is active rather than passive, democratic rather than authoritarian, diverse

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<sup>2</sup> See "President Obama on the Passing of Steve Jobs: 'He changed the way each of us sees the world,'" accessed May 31, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/10/05/president-obama-passing-steve-jobs-he-changed-way-each-us-sees-world>

rather than homogenous.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, pessimistic accounts tend to associate digital media with entertainment and leisure. According to these views, digital media corrupts and threatens children; it exposes them to junk culture, adult content, manipulative commercial interests, and possibly even adult predators. If digital media isn't harmful, it's seen as a waste of time.<sup>4</sup> Both perspectives tend to overlook the diverse dilemmas, tensions, and anxieties that children and young people themselves feel about participating in various digital media practices, an oversight that leads to reductive generational stereotyping and exaggerated accounts of the roles digital media plays in their lives.<sup>5</sup>

These contemporary debates about children and technology intersect with much longer historical continuities and transformations in children's lived experiences. As Thorne (2009) argued, for much of the twentieth century most children in the global north lived their lives primarily in relation to two institutions: schooling and the family. Schools institutionalized age-segregation and family relations became more private (Qvortrup 1994; Buckingham 2000). Perhaps the most dramatic and lasting consequence of institutionalized age-segregation occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century when children were removed from the paid workforce and placed in schools. Laws against child labor accompanied compulsory schooling requirements, and school curricula defined and mediated the official knowledge about the world children should have access to at various ages (Qvortrup 1994; Buckingham 2000; Corsaro 2005; Thorne 2009). As a greater percentage of women gained access to the paid labor force, as children's access to unsupervised play spaces diminished, and as single parent families and divorce rates climbed, many children spent more and more of their daily routines in organized activities and child-care outside the home (Qvortrup 1994; Jenkins 1998; Buckingham 2000; Halpern 2003; Lareau 2003; Corsaro 2005).<sup>6</sup> I call these spaces of age-segregated situated activity "enclaves" for children and youth (see chapter 3). While enclaves for children and young people are typically treated as spaces set off from adult society, they also function to produce, and often reproduce, social divisions amongst children, notably racialized social class segregation but also gender divisions. In chapter 3 and chapter 7 I show that those who control access to various spatial enclaves play a significant role in the production of social divisions as well as the reproduction of many historical structures of privilege.

Alongside the removal of children from sites of economic production and the increased institutionalization of many children's lives, Americans have gradually changed their social

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3 For a more on these optimistic accounts see Buckingham (2000, 24-56).

4 A longer review of these pessimistic accounts can be found in Buckingham (2000, 21-40).

5 For more on children and young people's perspectives regarding various digital media practices see chapter 6 as well as Ito et al. (2010).

6 These shifts haven't occurred universally for all children, nor did they occur to all children in the global north at the same period in history. Working class and agricultural children still tend to be more involved in paid and unpaid labor. Additionally, there are important gender differences here as most forms of domestic labor were, and often still remain, outside the realm of paid labor and, hence, they were not subject to laws about child labor. In many families, girls continued to participate in domestic labor even after compulsory schooling became institutionalized. These gender practices intersect with class positioning in important ways, with girls of more working class families often helping out more in child-rearing responsibilities of kin and other domestic work. Additionally, some scholars have argued that children in the U.S. and U.K. have had their spatial mobility limited in recent decades as the increase in women's participation in the paid labor force has led to fewer mothers at home during the day, alongside fears of urban dangers, child kidnappings, and sexual predators (Thorne [2008b] citing Valentine [2004]).

valuation of children, what Zelizer (1985) characterized as a transformation from economically useful to economically useless but emotionally priceless. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, childhood came to be romanticized and institutionalized as a “sacralized space, outside of the market” (Thorne 2009, 5). Yet as Seiter (1993), Zelizer (1985, 2002), Cook (2004), and Wasko (2008) observed, children were never really “outside the market.” Rather, they have played an increasingly significant role in consumer culture since the late nineteenth century. Commodities for various age-grades and genders of children were initially targeted at parents, particularly mothers, but gradually children and young people have been targeted as legitimate, even “empowered,” individual consumers in their own right (Cook 2004).

As Corsaro (2005) noted, commodities, including media, play a particularly important role in the peer cultures that form by way of institutionalized age-segregation. In some cases, the commercially produced cultural forms that get taken up and reworked by peer cultures are valued by children because they create a sphere of knowledge and preference distinct from adults. Further, corporations and marketers of children’s consumer culture have played an increasingly significant role in defining normative age-categories and associated “needs” and “desires” amongst children and young people, but not without also granting children new powers to shape production (Cook 2004).

These interrelated trends have tended towards an increasing recognition of children as unique, individuated, creative persons with inherent interests, needs, desires, and even rights.<sup>7</sup> The view of the child as *individual* and *creative* is a theme I will return to throughout this dissertation. Such a view of children creates dilemmas for parents, educators, and other adults who are held socially responsible for rearing and grooming children, all the more so as children’s future participation in meaningful employment and positions of influence in adult society have become more competitive and uncertain.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the idealized social and cultural category of the child has increasingly figured children as individuated, even sacred, persons imbued with inalienable interests, needs, desires, and rights (Cook 2004). On the other hand, shrinking economic opportunities, a scarcity of quality public resources, and increasing competition within and amongst states have led the state, parents, and educators to ratchet up their efforts to groom children for successful participation in a changing adult world. This increased competition often leads families to deploy more and more resources to child-grooming projects, hence widening the gaps in approaches to child-rearing based on a family’s ability to pay.

In other words, many educators, parents, and policy makers feel they need to devote more resources and energy to shaping children for a competitive and uncertain future, yet they do so while juggling normative models that treat children as special, creative individuals. One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that many contemporary grooming practices, especially amongst more middle-class families and “progressive” educators, can be partially understood as an attempt to reconcile this tension. Further, the increasing role of consumer culture in children and

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7 Many scholars point to the 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child as evidence of this more general trend towards treating children as rights-bearing individuals.

8 In a 2011 poll by the Economic Mobility Project (2011b), an increasing proportion of American parents (59% up from 46% in 2009) believe their children will, “have a harder time moving up the income ladder than you did.” Not surprisingly, families that don’t feel they’ve been economically mobile in their own lives are more pessimistic about their children’s prospects. On average, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans are more optimistic than whites about their future circumstances.

young people's out-of-school lives has created dilemmas over which forms of consumer culture and play should, and should not, be permitted in various enclaves for children and youth, especially enclaves that play a role in legitimizing social selection. Here too, the consumer cultures and play practices of children from privileged families tend to be permitted and valued more than the consumer cultures and play practices of children from less-privileged families. I end by suggesting that an emerging class-structured cultural sensibility – what I refer to as “techno-cosmopolitanism” – may be gaining influence as an idealized approach for grooming children.

### 1.3 The School and the World

As Levinson and Holland (1996) observed, modern schools sit in the space between the local and the nation-state. Increasingly schools don't just mediate between the state and localities, but between, states, localities, and globalizing relations. At stake are efforts to groom children into differentiated positions in adult society – what I will frequently refer to as “social selection” or “social sorting.” Further, social selection should be, or seem to be, fair and legitimate. Given the widening inequality and increased competition discussed above, this is no easy task.

Schools are socially constructed as separate from the social world even as they purport to provide children with knowledge about that world. Throughout this dissertation I will refer to this tension as the school/world divide. According to conventional wisdom, schools are like nurseries that protect students from the profane realities of the adult social world as they prepare students to eventually enter it. Adult educators and instructional media act as the main mediators between the segregated space of the school and the social world by offering students access to knowledge about, and skills for, the “real world.” Importantly, school-based knowledge and skills are seen as widely transferable, culturally neutral, and context free (Lave 2011, 13–23). These assumptions justify the separation of schools and children from the rest of the world and legitimate schooling as a mechanism for meritocratic social selection. Proponents of the transferability of school-based knowledge routinely figure schooling as a social good that benefits all who gain access to it. From this perspective, schooling is an agent for democracy and long held ideals of equality. Those who treat schooling as culturally neutral, render social selection unproblematic. These conventional views suggest that those who use schooling to ascend to better jobs and positions of influence in adult society have done so on the basis of innate capacity and merit, not on the basis of the luck of their social location at birth. Thus, proponents of this conventional view routinely treat public schools as the key institution that will fulfill ideals of equality and the promise of the American Dream. While the meritocracy of school-based social selection has long been criticized (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Eckert 1989; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2003; Varenne and McDermott 1999; Willis 1977), the legitimacy of schooling as a mechanism of social selection continues to be reproduced in popular discourse and in various localities for each generation.

As I discuss in chapter 4, the Downtown School was designed within the tradition of “progressive” pedagogic school reform. This tradition has long criticized canonical approaches to schooling, but it has also had difficulty overcoming schooling's role in legitimating biased social selection. Since the late nineteenth century, progressive pedagogic reformers have attempted to balance numerous values that are often in tension with one another. On the one hand, the progressive tradition has a history of attempting to ameliorate historical structures of privilege, especially those rooted in

economic inequality, masculine white privilege, and various forms of cultural bias. In that tradition, the Downtown School's founders made concerted efforts to attract an economically and ethnically inclusive student body. The founders succeeded in that effort and the Downtown School's first class of students was much more economically and ethnically diverse than most Manhattan middle schools. About half the students came from professional families who lived in Manhattan, and about half the students came from far less-privileged families, many of whom lived outside of the official school district. On the other hand, progressive pedagogic reformers have long subscribed to romantic notions of the child as they attempt to address the school/world divide. They have done so by promoting "student-centered" pedagogic practices, which often involve various forms of "hands-on," "experiential," and "project-based" activities. Ideally these two goals do not have to be in tension so long as all students' interests can be supported equally. Yet in the context of a competitive, meritocratic model of schooling, educators have to support some students' interests more than others, and middle-class interests often win out. Since the larger schooling system is organized as a contest that guarantees the production of "losers" as well as "winners," progressive educators face the dilemma of attempting to fulfill "student-centered" commitments within a system the inevitability produces many "losers."

While progressive pedagogic practices are meant to better approximate the practices of practitioners in the "real world," progressive reformers tend to downplay their own institutional embeddedness and spatial segregation as they offer simulacra of real world practitioners. At the Downtown School, idealized notions of "games" and "digital media" were thought to bridge the practices that were organized in the school to the practices that students would one day participate in the "real world." The school's founders hoped their vision of schooling would allow them to escape many of the familiar challenges of canonical schooling, as they brought school-based grooming practices inline with ideals about children's self-realization, which, as noted earlier, stressed each child's inherent interests, creativity, needs, and even rights. To do so, they appropriated cultural forms that were assumed to belong to children's consumer culture and play practices – mostly games and digital media – and attempted to rework canonical schooling practices and models of adult practice so that they would more closely resemble these popular forms. This appropriation was thought to resolve several tensions in contemporary school-based grooming practices. For one, "game-like" schooling was figured as escaping adult authority and coercion, which was in tension with romantic notions self-expressing and self-realizing children. Because schooling was figured as a "game," and since games were seen as inherently fun, the compulsory nature of schooling and educators' power over children were initially overlooked and underestimated. As I describe in chapter 5, these oversights revealed themselves shortly after the school opened, and educators spent much of the remainder of the first year trying to assert their authority, often in ways that undermined the school's student-centered ideals.

Second, the appropriation of digital media and "game-like" learning allowed the school's planners to underestimate the degree to which the cultural practices of students' out-of-school lives did, or did not, correspond with the practices organized within the school. By drawing on stereotypes about the digital generation, the school's planners felt they were designing a version of schooling that would resonate with students' out-of-school lives. As they wrote in one of their planning documents:

[T]oday we live in the presence of a generation of kids who have known no time untouched by the promise and pitfalls of digital technology... The phrase that best

explains this change comes from Mikey, a student, who in talking about games said, “It’s what we do.” The “we” he was referring to are kids these days, the young people of his generation.

The limitations of these generational stereotypes are discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 6. In particular, I argue that by focusing on (some) digital media practices, the school overlooked much of what mattered most to many students in their out-of-school lives. Additionally, by treating games as more-or-less self-contained “worlds,” the planners figured their approach to schooling as cut off from the historically structured world even as it offered all students ubiquitous access to simulacra of that world, simulacra that erased differences in their out-of-school lives. This vision of school-based grooming allowed the school’s designers to imagine that students would fluidly move between game worlds as they passed between classes, “taking on” various identities as they did so. By emphasizing identities furnished by game worlds, the school’s founders did not account for the ways in which the identities that students negotiated with their peers at school were deeply rooted in their historically structured out-of-school experiences.

In addition to trying to square school-based grooming practices with romantic models of children, the school had to appease state-driven reform efforts. This was a tricky endeavor since educators often had to choose between state-agendas and students’ inherent “needs,” “creativity,” and “interests.” While progressive reformers and parents often saw each individual student as special and unique, they saw state-driven efforts as producing homogenization, making, “androids for the factory,” as one creative professional parent put it. As I describe in chapter 4, recent state-driven school reforms grew out of a long tradition in which Americans have asked public schools to fix various economic and social problems that are often beyond the means of schooling to solve, and yet which educational reformers routinely promise to take on. At the moment when the Downtown School’s founders designed and launched the school, state-anxieties over national competitiveness in the face of globalizing economic competition had driven many of the more systematic school reform projects over the previous decades – from the “school choice” movement to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) initiatives. For the most part, these state-driven reforms have marginalized the progressive pedagogic reform tradition. However, the rapid expansion of “small schools” in New York City – a development that was part of a larger attempt to promote “school choice” for families as well as competition between schools – also allowed new opportunities for reformers, including reforms in the progressive pedagogic tradition.<sup>9</sup>

By appropriating digital media and games, the Downtown School tried to graft aspects of the progressive pedagogic tradition onto these state-driven reform agendas, and especially STEM agendas. Yet state-driven reforms, and particularly the emphasis on high-stakes testing, also worked against many of the school’s progressive offerings. In particular, both privileged and less-privileged families that relied on test scores for mobility in the schooling system put strong pressure on school leaders to focus more on testing, and their calls gained traction after the school performed poorly on its state math exams at the end of its first year. Finally, the institutionalization of idealized market logic into New York City’s public school system helped obscure biases in the social selection mechanism by figuring social selection as a matter of individual consumer choice. By stressing the notion of “cultural fit,” these sorting practices were

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<sup>9</sup> While the Downtown School has received more public attention than most new schools, its approach is rather similar to many other schools that promote “experiential,” “project based,” or “expeditionary” learning.

widely considered legitimate even as they produced differences in opportunity that mostly rewarded those who were already privileged. Privileged families were significantly better equipped for navigating and manipulating the choice system, partly because of the class-structured geography of their residences, but also because of their greater supply of cultural and social capital, their flexible work schedules, and their greater exit and voice options within the choice system. I discuss these issues in more detail in chapters 3 and 7.

## 1.4 Parental Grooming through Enclaves

As Qvortrup (1994) observed, the increased institutionalization and commercialization of children's daily lives has not often been matched by an equivalent shift in cultural sensibilities. Qvortrup argues that western societies still associate many responsibilities for child rearing with motherhood even though non-kin adults increasingly do the work of grooming children. At my site, this disjuncture placed extra significance, and often tensions, on relations between educators and familial caregivers, mostly mothers but sometimes fathers, aunts, and grandparents. Widening social inequalities and heightened uncertainties about global economic changes amplified these tensions. Such tensions were especially acute between educators and professional families. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 3, most of the professional parents whose children attended the Downtown School worked in the culture industries, many quite successfully. These parents, which I refer to as "urban creative professionals," tended to have high levels of cultural capital but less economic capital than the New York City families who sent their children to private schools. Without access to institutions specifically tailored towards reproducing privilege, many of these families worked concertedly, and sometimes aggressively, to shape the Downtown School (for similar accounts see Lareau 2003; Lareau and Munoz 2012; Clark 2012). While professional families sometimes disagreed with each other, they typically coalesced around visions of the school that matched their own class-structured cultural sensibilities, what I later refer to as "techno-cosmopolitanism." While educators sometimes resisted these parents, many of the professional parents' efforts won out in part because creative professional families and educators shared a vision of a school that was focused on students' interests, creativity, and self-expression. They also agreed with educators that more "traditional" approaches to schooling, and especially the current trend towards highly regimented test-driven schooling, were problematic.

Occasionally, these parents' failed in their efforts to shape the school. As discussed in chapter 7, state-mandated testing and curricular standards created contentious disputes, with the creative professional families and educators attempting to downplay the role that testing should play in the school's grooming practices, and less-privileged families and professionals working in non-culture industries tending to push for greater emphasis on testing. Educators temporarily settled these disputes by promising that they would deliver satisfactory test scores even as they offered a student-centered pedagogy focused on creative production. It remains to be seen whether the school will be able to deliver on these promises but thus far it has struggled to deliver competitive test scores and, in response, it has gradually moved towards more canonical schooling practices.

Professional parents also confronted educators about the school's disciplinary practices. As noted in the last section, the school's vision of student-centered "game-like" learning underestimated the role adult authorities would have to play to coerce students' participation in compulsory schooling. Student resistance, especially amongst some of the less-privileged students, quickly revealed this

oversight. It also revealed the relative passivity of many of the students, an irony given that the school and many creative professional parents celebrated students' individuality and creativity. While educators initially attempted to avoid responding with authoritarian measures, privileged parents clamored loudly for strict enforcement of "zero-tolerance" policies against precocious students. As I discuss in chapter 7, these efforts by privileged parents were often racially inflected and centered on a vision of the school as a culturally purified "sanctuary of learning." Here again we see the attempt to construct the school as a culturally neutral setting set off from the world and yet purportedly about that world. Eventually, educators complied with the demands of privileged families and they significantly ratcheted up their discipline. These efforts had the effect of temporarily purging the enclave of the most discomfiting of the less-privileged students and restoring a sense of legitimate playful grooming.

There were several significant factors that allowed the privileged families to influence the school in ways that less-privileged families could not. For one, privileged families drew on their social networks as well as networked communications technologies to form a coalition of like-minded parents before the school year began, what I refer to as a "networked coalition" in chapter 3. Families in this coalition shared stories about what was going on in school, formed similar interpretations, and then approached the school as a collective voice, often through official channels such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). I discuss the formation of this coalition as well its influence on the school in chapters 3 and 7. Additionally, several of the creative professional parents had a fair degree of control over their work schedules. This temporal flexibility allowed them to put significant time into coordinating and managing the coalition. It also allowed them to stop by the school and gain more day-to-day access to educators and school leaders. Further, many of the professional families held graduate and even doctorate degrees and could display their cultural capital in interactions with educators. Outranking most educators in educational attainment, these parents often commanded respect and asserted their views with the weight of expert culture behind them. Finally, privileged families had much better options within the "school choice" system than less-privileged families. Since many of the less-privileged families lived outside the school district, exercising "choice" meant sending their children to schools in the less-privileged school districts where they lived. By contrast, most of the privileged families lived in Manhattan and could choose other quality schools if they left the Downtown School. Threatening to leave the school was one of the main ways that privileged families shaped the school as school leaders did not feel their ambitious reform project could afford a general exodus of privileged families in the school's first year.

In addition to shaping the school, privileged parents groomed their children by providing access to a diverse assortment of out-of-school enclaves for their children. These attempts to provide and coordinate extra-curricular activities had much in common with what Lareau (2003) referred to as "concerted cultivation." As I discuss in chapter 3, access to extra-curricular enclaves was significantly shaped by a family's ability to pay. Most privileged families enrolled their children in a diverse assortment of private classes, lessons, and tutoring sessions that were expensive and hence unavailable to those with less ability to pay. By contrast, most less-privileged children participated in after-school programs sponsored by public schools and community-based organizations, headed to the library to wait for parents, or went home. While some less-privileged parents and caregivers practiced the "natural growth" style of parenting observed by Lareau (2003), many less-privileged parents and guardians engaged in grooming practices that could also be classified as concerted cultivation. Yet despite its relatively broad appeal, there were important class-structured differences

in families' practices of concerted cultivation. A few less-privileged boys participated in time-consuming private leagues for football and basketball, but these were less expensive than most of the privileged students' private classes and lessons. Further, most less-privileged students participated in only one significant extra-curricular commitment at a given time, whereas many privileged students participated in an assortment of offerings. Further, the organized out-of-school activities of less-privileged students were often arranged as teams and squads, and the genres of activity were more ubiquitous in popular commercial culture. By contrast, the more privileged students generally participated in more niche activities where accomplishment was individuated. In turn, these differences in out-of-school participation likely contributed to different cultural sensibilities and identifications, with privileged students tending towards individuated cosmopolitan sensibilities and identifications, and with less-privileged students tending towards stronger identifications with their group activity.

Participation in after-school activities also produced gender divisions. This gendering of activity was true across social class divisions, although less-privileged girls tended to participate in more domestic work than their privileged peers. The Downtown School offered its own collection of after-school programs that partially overcame social class divisions as they contributed to the production of gender divisions. All of the Downtown School's after-school programs were initially focused on creative production involving digital media. These programs overwhelmingly attracted boys, suggesting that the digital media practices the school promoted entailed inherited gender biases. This gendering of the school's technical practices was also reflected in the school's ongoing difficulty attracting girls to the school. While most participants in the school's after-school programs were boys, participants came from various social class backgrounds, in part thanks to subsidies that made the programming affordable for less-privileged families. I discuss these dynamics in more detail in chapter 3. As I'll discuss in the next section, one additional consequence of the structuring of out-of-school activities was that it also influenced students' negotiations over clique membership and peer identity within the school; these too were central sites for gender construction.

In sum, while educators and privileged parents attempted to construct a spatial division between the school and the world, the borders were inherently porous with privileged parents in particular permeating the boundary. Further, privileged parents did not see their agendas as culturally biased but, rather, as normatively beneficial. And in cases where students and families resisted their efforts, educators and creative professional parents avoided reflecting on the biases entailed in their approach and instead suggested that dissidents were just a bad "fit" for the school. I discuss these dynamics more extensively in chapter 7. I now turn to how students negotiated identity and difference with peers inside the school.

## **1.5 Student Negotiations over Identity and Belonging**

Just as many privileged parents routinely permeated the school/world divide, students regularly punctured the school's borders in their day-to-day negotiations with classmates over identity and belonging. In the U.S. and other wealthy nations, schools remain the primary place where children and young people routinely assemble and establish social relations with near-age peers.

Ethnographers who have done research in schools have consistently emphasized that it is often through participation in school-centered peer cultures that children and young people come to

develop an intimate perspective on the salient social divisions of the larger adult society (e.g. Corsaro and Eder 1990; Eckert 1989, 1997). A common feature of these school-based peer cultures is that they tend to organize into differentiated groups, or cliques, that entrench social divisions, such as those rooted in social class (Eckert 1989; Willis 1977), gender (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995; Thorne 1993), race and ethnicity (Ferguson 2001; Lewis 2003; Perry 2002; Staiger 2006), and sexuality (Pascoe 2007). While individual friendship networks may span cliques, and while surface-level articulations (jocks, burnouts, geeks, emo kids, goths, etc.) vary historically and locally, the structural divisions between cliques often remain fairly consistent over time. That said, historical structural divisions do not in themselves make clique divisions; rather, divisions have to be rebuilt *in situ* through indeterminate processes that cannot be predicted beforehand and which hold out the possibility of social change.

Much of this rebuilding process consisted of students making bids for inclusion in peer groups as they navigated the adult-managed enclaves of school and extra-curricular programs. In the Downtown School's first year, there were four main cliques that were widely recognized as anchoring the social organization of the student body. These cliques offered students the main opportunities for participating in peer-centered group life in and around the school. While I focus on the normative cases so as to emphasize the structuring power of peer formations, peer cultures shouldn't be interpreted as fixed social or cultural categories with determining effects. As I discuss in chapter 6, many students avoided participation in these dominant cliques, some only participated occasionally, and a few moved between cliques with relative ease. All the same, most opportunities for broader peer recognition and acceptance depended on participating in these forms of group life, and even nonparticipation was a statement about one's relations to the dominant groups.

While these peer cultures were partially autonomous from adults, and while each peer culture was partially independent from the others, the cliques were constructed in their relations to one another as well as in their relations to the adults in the enclave. Typically, a few students in each clique exemplified the normative values associated with being a clique member. This was a contested position that insiders considered high-status and outsiders knew about. From this perspective, identity construction was inherently relational, or "dialogical" to use Holland et al.'s (1998) appropriation of Bakhtin. Students were identified and made their identities in part to display who they were and in part to display who they were not. Additionally, students attempted to fashion identities as they simultaneously had identities ascribed to them. Students could not fashion any identities they liked since their participation in the social practices of a peer culture depended on acceptance by, coordination with, and recognition by others who co-participated in the clique: it was up to the clique to decide what constituted legitimate participation. Yet at the same time, students did not have social identities merely impressed upon them. Students both played to and off the identities that others tried to ascribe to them, sometimes consenting to the ascriptions and sometimes parodying them, infusing them with irony, outright resisting them, or, as in Lévi-Strauss' (1966) "bricoleur," assembling new identities from the cultural forms available. All of this was accomplished through negotiations over participation in the collective practices of peer groups, many of which took place in adult-centered educator spaces.

I discuss peer identity and belonging extensively in chapter 6. What I want to highlight here is that the dominant peer cultures tended to remake two historical lines of social division: a racialized social class division and a gender division. A few students crossed these more structural social divisions, but each clique skewed significantly towards members from privileged/less-privileged

families, and masculinity/femininity, producing four dominant ways for participating in gendered peer life at school. Thus, while educators endlessly tried to construct the school as a culturally neutral sacralized space cut off from the world, students actively brought the divisions of the world into the school. One way that these historical structures of privilege were remade within the supposedly culturally neutral site of the school was through students' routine references to their out-of-school lives, including their involvement in various organized out-of-school activities, which, as noted previously, were structured by a family's ability to pay as well as by parents' and children's sense of gender normativity. A good portion of participating in clique life involved practices that referenced a heterogeneous assortment of out-of-school experiences, from tales of travel, to preferences for various food, media, and clothes, to their accomplishments and involvements in organized out-of-school programs, to their relations with family members, to accounts of their adventures, feats, and tribulations in realms of practice not directly managed by adults (e.g. commutes, hanging out online, and, for some, hanging out in the neighborhood or city with friends). Further, students brought distinct material cultures – fashion and food primarily – into the school, as well as distinct discursive practices and performative styles that had been shaped by their participation in practices organized outside of school.

While each clique had partially autonomous and heterogeneous cultural practices, educators and involved parents ascribed more narrow and essentialized identities to some of the cliques. In general, educators and privileged parents treated the masculine and feminine cliques that skewed towards privileged students as normative and unmarked. In contrast, educators and privileged parents came to identify the masculine and feminine cliques that skewed towards less-privileged membership as deviant and, in some cases, as cultural pollutants that needed to be purged from the enclave. These views were largely driven by involved privileged parents who found common ground with educators when they focused their concerns on the specter of the “bully,” a cultural figure that deeply worried educators and some parents from the day the school opened. As I discuss in chapter 7, privileged parents' concerns over bullying eventually reached such emotionally charged levels that educators turned away from many of their “student-centered” commitments and instituted strict discipline and rigid routines. This had the effect of driving many of the most discomfiting of the less-privileged students from the enclave, a cleansing that allowed educators and involved parents to temporarily restore their sense that the school was a culturally neutral and morally just “sanctuary of learning” devoted to promoting students' self-expression and self-realization, not coerced grooming and social selection.

## **1.6 Getting to be Techno-Cosmopolitan**

To describe and understand the Downtown School's model for twenty-first century education, as well as the genre of social grooming practiced by many of the privileged parents, I use the term “techno-cosmopolitanism.” Over the last decade or so, the concept of cosmopolitanism has become an increasingly popular and debated concept in the humanities and social sciences (cf. Appiah 2007; Beck 2012; Beck and Grande 2010; Beck and Sznaider 2006; Calhoun 2002, 2008, 2010; Gilroy 2010; Sen 2006). By “cosmopolitanism” I refer to a cultural sensibility that entails legitimating assumptions about a unified and homogeneous world and people's proper places within it. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is in the tradition of nationalist modernization projects and western modern social imaginaries (Taylor 2002), reworked to accommodate contemporary processes of globalization. Most scholars treat cosmopolitanism as an appropriate moral response

to these processes, a cultural sensibility for acting ethically in a globalizing world. Cosmopolitanism thus partially signifies an idealized *relation of belonging* to the whole world. Successful cosmopolitans are thought to have overcome allegiances to inherited cultural identifications and prejudices rooted in exclusive and essentialized commitments to nationality, ethnicity, gender, culture, locality, or religion. As Calhoun (2008) argues, many contemporary advocates of cosmopolitanism can partially be understood as responding to perceived limitations with multiculturalism and identity politics, which tended towards essentialized (and hence limiting) notions of culture and identity, as well as a fractured, conflictual world. By contrast, cosmopolitanism often reasserts the primacy of a common humanity and harmonious social relations but on a global scale, its prefix “cosmos” referring to an ordered and harmonious whole.

From a more ethnographic perspective, progressive educational reform projects and familial grooming practices can be read as cultural cases in which long-standing western assumptions about relations between the self and the world are reworked in the context of increasingly globalized markets, migrations, and media. These assumptions were expressed, debated, and reworked in struggles over normative notions of the child and child rearing in families and enclaves. In these struggles, deeply rooted moral tensions within the western tradition, particularly a tension between assumptions about the individuated self and assumptions about social belonging, came to the fore. Legitimate grooming practices arose from, and were transformed by, the working out of these generative tensions, a process that was never complete but which reached temporary settlements that allowed the underlying tensions to withdraw from awareness.

At the Downtown School, educators and many creative professional parents attempted to resolve these tensions by wishing cosmopolitan ideals onto technology. By turning to a techno-centric view of both contemporary children and globalization, the inherent tensions of both the cosmopolitan ethos and grooming sacralized children for a global economy seemed to dissolve. As I discuss in chapters 4 and 5, these perspectives rested on a mythic ideas about the power of technology and games. They also encouraged educators and parents to overlook and underestimate many of the factors and forces that were shaping social life.

When joined with laudable cosmopolitan ideals, techno-cosmopolitanism entailed moral assumptions about the dignity of the expressive self (see Taylor 1994) in harmonious relations with an increasingly interconnected world. In the tradition of sacralized views of the child, techno-cosmopolitanism placed special emphasis on the singularized quality of each child. Attempts to groom children for the global economy were seen as helping children discover and develop their inherent interests and capacities so that they could self-realize. Such an orientation placed extra significance on the creative expression of children, as manifest in the Downtown School's “student-centered” ethos and focus on creative production, as well as in parents’ procurement of individualized extra-curricular activities focused on children’s agency and creativity.

How this vision of the individuated child was supposed to be related to the globalizing world was more complex and contested. The school's founders and many of the professional parents often foregrounded relations of appreciation, respect, and tolerance. From this perspective, the world was a diverse *mélange* of cultural forms and practices that could be circulated, appreciated, appropriated, and “remixed” as part of the ongoing project of adults helping children self-realize. As discussed in chapters 4 and 5, digital media was often seen as a powerful new set of tools and infrastructures for these purposes, and games were seen as an idealized model of adult-organized activity for student development. Not only did globalizing mediascapes and consumer culture

introduce diverse cultural forms for appropriation in child-rearing projects, but these changes were seen as liberating children from bureaucratic rules and parochial identifications, both of which were seen as limiting. State-driven efforts towards standardized educational outcomes could be partially escaped by incorporating them into game-like structures that would offer children opportunities to be active and creative in ways not mandated by the state. Further, as already noted, cultural identifications rooted in historically produced structures of privilege were generally overlooked in favor of a fluid notion of identity, one where children could “take on” different identities as they moved between different game worlds.

The main shortcoming of this idealized vision of social grooming was that it tended to overlook the social conditions that produced techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities. Despite the Downtown School’s status as a state-institution, many educators and creative professional parents eschewed bureaucratic rules, which were seen as alienating and coercive. However, less-privileged parents tended to be more keenly aware of the degree to which their children’s life trajectories were shaped by bureaucratic arrangements, however alienating and seemingly arbitrary those arrangements might be. Moreover, proponents of a techno-cosmopolitan sensibility treated their own practices as having overcome the confining aspects of historically structured cultural attachments. By drawing on the notion of the “digital generation” and the idea that video games were an inherently popular medium, the school’s founders initially believed they were designing a new educational model that would be universally appealing to “kids these days.” Further, game-worlds, rather than students’ historically structured out-of-school life-worlds, would furnish children with a context in which they could actively and creatively fashion fluid identities. What was missing from this perspective was an awareness of the social conditions of its own possibility. As Calhoun (2008, 442) observed, “Cosmopolitanism may be a cultural orientation, but it is never the absence of culture. It is produced and reinforced by belonging to transitional networks and to a community of fellow-cosmopolitans.”

As I discuss throughout this dissertation, belonging to cosmopolitan networks and communities was structured by capital – economic, social, and cultural – as well as by institutions, historically produced racial divisions, and differing assumptions about gender normativity. Families, as well as some educators, that wielded power to shape the grooming practices of the Downtown School had often gone to similarly class-structured colleges and graduate schools, lived in neighborhoods segregated along social class and racial lines, worked in similar professional industries, sent their children to elementary schools and after-school programs whose access was mediated by economic capital, traveled frequently around the country and the world, and consumed similar food, media, technologies, fashion, and other commodities. While these professional families often came from different localities and even nationalities – indeed several professional parents were either born abroad or had moved between nations for their professions – they shared class-structured work-styles and lifestyles that transcended nationality, and this familiarity allowed them to mostly orient towards cultural differences within their class formation in terms of appreciation, respect, and tolerance.<sup>10</sup> Yet when these professional families encountered other families who didn’t necessarily

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10 This isn’t to suggest that there weren’t internal divisions and conflicts amongst the privileged families. Indeed, as I discuss in chapter 3, several white professional families expressed racially inflected anxieties about “Asian” styles of parenting and family-school relations. At several points in the year, fissures in the privileged class formation emerged, especially with respect to tensions over the relative priority of promoting self-expression or standardized outcomes of school achievement (see chapter 7). Yet despite these internal divisions, families from similarly privileged class positions often joined together in response to threats they associated with the presence of

share their class-structured work-styles and lifestyles a moral panic ensued (as discussed in chapter 7). Some of these “Other” families also belonged to transnational networks, but they did so from significantly different social class positions, and, as discussed in chapters 3 and 7, they had significantly less power to shape the institutions within which they were entangled. Further, many of these less-privileged families were sophisticated users of digital media, but their uses of digital media were not the ones that counted as appropriately “techno” at school or amongst privileged families. If anything, many of the less-privileged students’ uses of technology were seen as inappropriate.

In response to these encounters across social class lines, privileged parents pressured the school to elevate the virtue of “respect” above all others. In doing so, they granted educators nearly martial power over students, even though such practices seemed to go against their progressive commitments to student-centered agency and creativity. Less-privileged students who resisted the school’s offerings were strictly disciplined, zero-tolerance policies were introduced, and eventually many of the most discomfiting of the less-privileged students left the school. At the same time, educators and involved parents began policing the borders of the enclave, working to make sure that only families who “get what we’re about” would apply (chapter 7).

There were several reasons that educators and privileged parents did not see these exercises of adult power as contradicting moral commitments to tolerance and student-centered self-realization. For one, the import of market logic into the school system made processes of social selection seem to be a matter of individual choice or meritocracy, rather than institutionalized bias. Families “chose” to leave the Downtown School, and, as such, they were fulfilling their individual liberties the same as anyone else could in the “choice system.” Second, there was routine slippage between treating techno-cosmopolitanism as a fact about the social world and treating techno-cosmopolitanism as a normative view of how the social world should be. This slippage revealed itself most clearly in the disjuncture between discourse about the digital generation and grooming practices that attempted to make students more “digital,” in very particular ways. On the one hand, the school’s digital focus was seen as catering to the unique needs and sensibilities of an entire generation. On the other hand, students were seen as in need of special training for a world purportedly transformed by digital media. Pivoting between these two stances allowed educators and privileged parents to construct the sense that they were catering to students’ authentic needs as they worked to groom students for privileged positions in a global economy and public sphere. At the Downtown School, abstract notions of “games” and “digital media” were the main concepts on which such a pivot turned. By designing and managing compulsory game-play, educators and creative professional parents could participate in grooming practices that seemed to meet children on their own terms and in their own worlds. From this perspective, adults and children could harmoniously participate in projects of co-realization at the cutting edge of fun in an increasingly individuated and competitive world.

## **1.7 Organization of this Work**

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into seven chapters. In the following chapter I discuss my theoretical/empirical approach, which, drawing on Lave (2011) I refer to as “social

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less-privileged students within the enclave.

practice theory.” I note the advantages and limitations of this approach for studying how the social order is made and remade through situated activity. I also provide an overview of the case site, including the basic demographic categories of my study participants. I end with a discussion about the challenges and limitations of doing research across lines of social and cultural difference, as well as the opportunities and challenges of studying young people’s practices with digital media. In chapter 3, I discuss how students and families came to access to the Downtown School as well as different out-of-school “enclaves” of adult-managed programming for children and youth. In chapter 4, I provide a cursory sketch of the state-driven school-reform movements that have dominated school reform in recent decades, including the turn towards small school, school choice, and STEM initiatives. I argue that the Downtown School’s model of “game-like” schooling can be read as an attempt to revitalize the progressive pedagogic reform tradition within a reform context that had marginalized this tradition. In chapter 5, I look at what the Downtown School’s “game-like” model looked like in practice. I emphasize that the model downplayed the compulsory aspects of public schooling as well the role of adult-power in coercing participation. Further, I contrast the school’s model of organized fun with the ways students exercised their independence, creativity, and play at the interstices of adult-managed activities. I end that chapter by looking at when adult-driven practices and student-driven practices came into a more symbiotic relation, especially during end-of-the-trimester projects called “Level Up.” In chapter 6, I look at the main processes by which students negotiated identity and belonging in the school’s peer culture. As noted above, I focus primarily on the dominant normative cliques since these exerted the greatest structuring influence. In addition to peer negotiations, I look at how different student-driven cliques and practices were viewed by educators and involved parents, noting how they helped construct deviant, and often racially inflected, identities amongst some of the less-privileged students. In chapter 7, I examine family/school relations, noting how some parents were able to exert influence on the school. In the second half of the chapter I focus on the main conflicts that emerged between parents and educators during the first year, mostly over the appropriate role of testing and discipline. I show how privileged parents were able to exert significant influence on the school. In doing so they reworked the school so as to purge practices that failed to comply with their own class-shaped cultural sensibilities.

# Studying and Theorizing the Production of Privilege

I began this project with a general interest in how historical and emergent social privileges were being made and remade for children coming of age in the so-called “digital age.” I entered the field without a firm commitment about the roles played by social class, gendered identifications, racial relations, or other forms of identity and attachment rooted in local cultures, nationalities, or other imagined communities. I also did not want to assume that new technologies were playing an especially significant role, despite frequent claims to the contrary. Instead, I wanted to understand the processes by which forms of association, belonging, and social distinction were made and remade *in situ*, with and without digital media. In this chapter I locate my own research approach within an empirical/theoretical tradition that Lave (2011) and Holland and Lave (2001, 2009) referred to as “social practice theory.” Social practice theory is a strand of historical materialism that attempts to incorporate the contributions of approaches focused on the apparently objective social order and approaches focused on situated activity, as it rejects either approach on its own terms. I relate my social practice problematic to other prominent approaches in ongoing debates about how relations between education and digital media produce privilege, debates that are often assumed to provide guidance for promoting equality of opportunity. I first review objectivist approaches to these questions, before reviewing approaches inspired by phenomenology and other traditions that prioritize situated activity. I then contrast these perspectives with prominent theorizing and developments in social practice theory since the 1970s. I suggest that a social practice problematic encourages a reflexive ethnographic practice that attempts to account for phenomena that are complexly distributed in space and time, requiring “ethnography on an awkward scale” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). I then provide an account of how I conducted this study. I note how I chose a field site and how the boundaries of this site changed over time. I describe the different ways I produced documentation and reflect on the advantages and limitations of various approaches. I end with a discussion of the enduring dilemmas ethnographers face in studying and writing about the lives of “others.”

## 2.1 Objective Structures and Social Reproduction

According to Prout and James (1997) the dominant sociological frameworks for studying children during the second half of the twentieth century were informed by various forms of positivism, particularly structuralist–functionalist theories of socialization. From a structuralist–functionalist perspective, society was envisioned like an organism, with different organs of the society

performing different functions that contributed to the overall harmony and stability of the social order. Structural-functionalist perspectives required, according to Prout and James, a theory of how new generations learned to perform various roles in society, and schools were often treated as key institutions in these processes.

Social reproduction theorists depended on a similarly deterministic view of socialization, but they differed from much of mainstream sociology in that they drew critical attention to the injustices of the existing social order (Collins 2009). Largely growing out of a Marxist tradition, early social reproduction theorists mostly focused on how capitalist relations of production were reproduced across generations. As Willis (1981) observed, social reproduction theories tended to borrow from theories of patriarchy, looking at how families who occupied privileged positions within a (capitalist) social order reproduced privilege for their children. Schools were seen as key sites for sorting new generations into positions of privilege and domination in adult society. Early in the 1970s, Marxist critics such as Althusser (1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) brought critical attention to the role of schooling in processes of social reproduction. These scholars pointed out that, despite liberal claims that schooling was a mechanism for promoting equality and self-fulfillment, class relations tended to be reproduced across generations. Not only did schools sort children into different positions of privilege and domination in adult society, but the dominant ideology of schooling legitimated the persistence of inequalities by treating school-based social selection as meritocratic.<sup>1</sup>

Like the structural-functionalists and the social reproduction theorists, scholars who studied relations between media technologies and domination also routinely produced theories that left persons with little agency. These scholars drew attention to a decontextualized relationship between objective media technologies and beneficial or harmful social outcomes. In media studies, the “media effects” tradition attempted to locate causal relations between exposure to media and technology artifacts and various individual or social “outcomes.” Media effects scholars treated media technologies as self-contained entities that impacted attitudes and behaviors regardless of the context of their reception and use.<sup>2</sup> The dominant approach to theorizing the relationship between digital media and the production of social inequalities followed a similar line of theorizing. During the 1990s, this discourse centered on the metaphor of the “digital divide,” which was framed as a gap between those with and without access to various digital media and especially the internet. This discourse argued that those without access were disadvantaged and that providing access would ameliorate the reproduction of inequalities. Since the 2000s, numerous scholars have argued that the “digital divide” metaphor simplified and distorted the relationship between digital media and the re-production of social inequalities (e.g. DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001; DiMaggio et al. 2004; Hargittai 2002; Selwyn 2004; van Dijk 2005; Warschauer 2003). Collectively, these works criticized the digital divide metaphor for oversimplifying digital inequalities into two categories: the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Critics rightly attacked the metaphor for its technologically deterministic conceptualization of new technologies. Perhaps the most influential of these criticisms was DiMaggio et al.’s (2004) article that called for a new

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1 For a review of social reproduction theories in education see Collins (2009). Similar issues arose with respect to theorizing consumers’ relations to the mass-produced cultural forms, especially theorizing coming out of the Frankfurt School, which tended to see consumers as ideologically shaped and controlled by the mass-produced media texts they consumed.

2 For a review and critique of the media-effects tradition see Livingstone and Drotner (2008).

“digital inequality” research agenda. The article recommended that scholars look more closely at how and why those with access to the internet use it in different ways, some of which were thought to affect life-chances more than others. The authors emphasized this shift in conceptual focus in the article’s subtitle, “From unequal access to differentiated use.” Many researchers studying digital inequalities over the past decade have met this call (e.g. Hargittai & Walejko 2008; Jenkins et al. 2006; Livingstone and Helsper 2007), but they have done so while retaining the assumption that digital media are some of the key factors driving the re-production of inequalities in the current era.

While each of these traditions of theorizing has drawn important attention to what social inequalities look like, they suffer from various forms of determinism. By focusing on the reproduction of an existing social order, structural-functionalist and social reproduction theories have difficulty accounting for processes of social change, including changes in gender and race relations, the expansion and contraction of the middle-class, and, most recently, globalizing production, trade, finance, media, and immigration. Structural-functionalist and social reproduction theories also relied on a passive and under-theorized notion of learning or socialization. Either implicitly or explicitly, both approaches tend to entail a theory of learning as cultural transmission or cultural reproduction (Levinson and Holland 1996, 4-7). Theories of objective structure effectively denied agency to persons and closed off the possibility of resistance. From these perspectives, the only avenue for social change came from exogenous factors or from “experts” who intervened on behalf of the less-privileged. As such, less-privileged persons tend to be represented as “cultural dupes” (Hall 1981), acted on, or “interpellated,” by capital, schooling, media, or technology, but not active participants in the production of their learning, culture, lives, and the social order. Objectivist problematics also entail particular relations between theory production and empirical work, either theorizing without engaging in original empirical investigations or relying on surveys that cannot register the processes by which privileges are produced *in situ*.

## 2.2 Situated Activity

Theories of situated activity offer a potential remedy for limitations in these various forms of deterministic theorizing. In general, theories of situated activity draw on phenomenologically-inspired traditions that emphasize the primacy of direct experience of the world, what Bourdieu (1977, 3) referred to as, “all that is inscribed in the relationship of *familiarity* with the familiar environment.” Theories of situated activity – which include symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and strands of cultural studies – tend to reject the determinism and stasis inherent in structuralist/objectivist accounts of the social world, and emphasize persons’ interpretive capacities, creativity, and the improvisational quality of being-in-the-world. In doing so, they leave open the possibility of persons (other than social scientists and other “experts”) working to make social change.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike structural-functionalist approaches, theories of situated activity emphasize the significance of a semi-autonomous cultural level – symbolic and material – as well as the agency of all actors who participate in a social order. From a situated activity perspective, persons are not cultural

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of different genres of situated activity theorizing see Lave (1991, 66-67).

dupes, passively dominated by Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser 1971), the requirements of capitalist systems of production (Bowles and Gintis 1976), or the rules and laws of other variations of structuralist and functionalist theory (from Talcott Parsons, to cybernetics, to cognitive science). From a situated activity perspective, all persons actively interpret and make meaning out of the conditions of their day-to-day existence. The social world might appear objectively structured to researchers who look at social life from afar, but this structure has to be made and remade by persons acting *in situ*. All persons are embodied and all bodies are located distinctively in space. Further, persons are actively involved in ongoing projects of making their futures, not as autonomous individuals, but through networks of relations with objects and artifacts (including technological equipment and infrastructures), institutions, and other co-participants that play a role in producing situated activity. From this perspective, subjects, objects, and places co-produce each other through their involvements in ongoing situated activity.

In the context of schooling and associated theories of learning, situated activity scholars have expanded concerns about privilege beyond issues of class. Numerous ethnographers have drawn on situated activity problematics to document the ways that schooling is a key site in the production of gendered (Thorne 1993), racialized (Ferguson 2001; Lewis 2003; Perry 2002), sexualized (Pascoe 2007), and other “marked” and “unmarked” subjectivities and identities. This turn towards a semi-autonomous cultural level was a welcome improvement over structuralist Marxist accounts that treated cultural difference as epiphenomenal to class relations. They also put emphasis on the active role that children and young people play in the processes of their learning/socialization. Rather than seeing learning as cultural transmission, situated activity scholars emphasized the active and engaged character of learning, only some of which took place at school.<sup>4</sup>

Amongst researchers who study media technologies, situated activity theorists have been especially prevalent in science and technology studies and in the audience studies tradition of media studies.<sup>5</sup> In media studies and studies of consumer culture more broadly, situated activity theorists criticized positivist theories of relations between producers and consumers. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, researchers began arguing that “audiences” exercised agency in consumption practices even if they were positioned subordinately to producers and were constrained as to what meanings they could make with a media entity (for a review, see Buckingham [2008]). This work emphasized that audiences actively interpret, appropriate, and make meaning with the mass-produced cultural forms they consume, a process that is inherently social (e.g. Jenkins 1992).<sup>6</sup> Importantly, these commodified media or technology artifacts do not transfer fixed meanings or elicit common uses, and, consequently, the diffusion of media and technology artifacts cannot be assumed to produce

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4 There is a long history of theorizing about various “hands on” or “experiential” or “student centered” approaches to learning, from Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development,” to Dewey’s “learning by doing,” to Piaget-inspired “constructivism,” to Papert’s “constructionism.” These traditions are by no means the same but each tends to reject a model of learning as cultural transmission/reception.

5 See Suchman (2006) for an ethnomethodological account of situated activity with respect to human-machine relations. Suchman’s work draws heavily on the work of Harold Garfinkel. For a comparison, see Garfinkel (2002, Chapter 6). Actor-network theory (see Latour [2005] for a recent overview), which is especially popular in science and technology studies, is also in the ethnomethodological tradition.

6 Jenkins (1992) argues that loyal fans not only creatively construct meanings from texts but also transform public understandings of the text in their acts of “poaching” mass produced cultural forms for their own purposes. The power they have in shaping public discourse, though, is subject to much debate.

social outcomes in a law-like and predictable way.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, theories of situated activity offer a fuller account of the heterogeneous, and often contradictory, relations that shape practices, persons, relations of belonging, and the production of privilege. They emphasize that numerous forms of cultural difference are often in play, that identities are multiple, intersecting, and often in tension, and that social life is an ongoing process that only appears as if it were produced by a rule-governed order when it is viewed from a distance. Such a theoretical perspective has encouraged empirical approaches that emphasize direct observation of the micro-dynamics of social activity, whether through participant observation or even video recordings. While rightly critical of the limits of positivist problematics, theories of situated activity tend to overlook the social conditions that make different phenomenological perspectives possible. As Bourdieu (1977, 3) observed, phenomenological knowledge, “by definition, does not reflect on itself and excludes the question of the condition of its own possibility.” Persons may creatively shape themselves, cultural forms, their environments, and the social formations of which they are a part, but they do so with the material, cultural, and social forms that history has produced and distributed. What is needed, then, is a problematic that continues to foreground situated activity and agency while also accounting for the ways that all activities take place in and with the objective conditions (political economic, but also cultural and spatial) that history has produced. As noted earlier, one such problematic lies in what Lave (1996, 2011), Holland and Lave (2001; 2009), and Lave and Wenger (1991) have called “social practice theory.”

## 2.3 Social Practice Theory

Social practice theory offers one way to bring together theories of situated activity with theories about the production of the social order. As such, it offers a powerful way to study the relations between schooling, digital media, and processes that make and remake privileges without succumbing to deterministic theorizing. Social practice theory has its roots in Marxist theories of *praxis*, as reworked by social theorists who wanted to break with the economic determinism of much of twentieth century Marxism.<sup>8</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several prominent social theorists renewed scholarly interest in the notion of “practice” as a way of getting beyond the objectivist/subjectivist and structure/agency dualisms discussed above. Notable early theorists included Bourdieu (1977), Willis (1977), Giddens (1979), and Ortner (1984). While responding to different intellectual traditions, they shared a common interest in drawing on the advantages of objectivist and subjectivist problematics as they hoped to overcome the limitations of each.<sup>9</sup> One of the central assumptions of social practice theories is that in order to understand either subjects or social orders researchers should begin with relations between them, since both subjects and social

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7 For a summary of these studies, see Livingstone and Drotner (2008) and Buckingham (2008). For an exemplary empirical case focused on one of the most iconic globalized commodities, Coca-Cola, see Miller (1998).

8 Gramsci, a pivotal theorist in this regard, was given new life by Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, and other scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. For a review, see Lave et al. (1992).

9 Bourdieu was responding to battles between French structuralism and existential/phenomenological traditions, whereas Willis was responding to structural variations of Marxism without succumbing to individualistic rational-choice theories.

orders depend on each other for their existence. As Lave and Wenger (1991) put it, “a theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing” (50). According to this perspective, these seemingly disparate elements are synthetically given together in ongoing social practices.

As a synthetic middle to objectivist and subjectivist approaches, problematics of social practice start with the primacy of *participation* in collective activities that are situated in a historically produced social world. As Lave (2011, 152) put it, “Praxis encompasses... people making their lives together in various historically forged institutional arrangements, not exactly as they choose.” On the one hand, practice problematics don’t treat persons as mere imprints of sociocultural structures, molded by socialization processes and the transmission of cultural forms from one generation to the next. On the other hand, practice problematics emphasize the conditions that make different phenomenological perspectives and sociocultural identifications possible. As persons participate in situated activity within a historically forged social world, they are shaped by their relations to the historically produced world as they contribute to how that world persists and changes over time. Marx’s famous maxim draws these two points of view together, “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1978 [1852], 594). Thus, persons must make their lives within an objectively structured sociocultural world, but if and how those historical structures are reproduced or changed depends on how differently situated agents work with the world they inherit.

A problematic of practice thus offers an alternative perspective on relations between schooling, technology, and social reproduction. Instead of focusing on one-sided “socialization,” “interpellation,” or “media effects,” practice problematics join with situated activity problematics and draw attention to the active and creative ways that persons make their lives together. In the context of schooling, a social practice problematic rejects reductionist theories of social reproduction for failing to take into account agency and the partial autonomy of the cultural level (see Willis [1981] for a thorough criticism of both structuralist and individualistic perspectives). Willis (1977), Bourdieu (1973), and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) offered early examples of how a social practice problematic could be used to study schooling’s role in the re-production of privilege. These authors wrote against structuralist theories of social reproduction that reduced culture and agency to epiphenomena of social class. Both Willis and Bourdieu and Passeron drew attention to relations between students’ out-of-school lives, which were seen as structured by historically produced class relations, and students’ orientations towards the purportedly culturally neutral practices of schooling. Willis emphasized the role of young people’s participation in semi-autonomous peer-cultures, whereas Bourdieu and Passeron drew attention to the relations between cultural sensibilities acquired in the home and the cultural standards that schools used for social selection. In Willis’ case, working class boys, or “lads,” took part in reproducing their families’ dominated positions in social class relations partially through their “partial penetrations” of schooling ideology. According to Willis, these “partial penetrations” suggested the possibility of political resistance by the working-class, a potentiality that was unfortunately limited by the lads’ anti-intellectualism, sexism, and racism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Willis’ term for social practice is “cultural production,” a term that is also used by Holland et al. (1998). For an account of the differences between “social reproduction,” “cultural production,” and “cultural reproduction” see

Bourdieu and Passeron also acknowledged the significance of class-structured cultural sensibilities, but their model suggested a tighter fit between cultural sensibilities and school-based social selection. Drawing on Bourdieu's larger problematic, enduring cultural sensibilities – which he locates in the *habitus* and defines as unconscious generative principles for perception, appreciation, and action – are forged through participation in situated activities, with extra significance given to early life experiences organized in the home. The *habitus*, in turn, generates strategies for navigating newly encountered situations that have been historically structured by agents competing in “fields” of practice, the education system being one such field. Each field has its own “arbitrary” cultural standards that are treated as partially autonomous from the economic realm.<sup>11</sup> These standards represent the “official” or “objective” culture within a field, and they are used as the basis for legitimate distinction and social selection within fields. While seemingly objective, these standards actually reflect the cultural sensibilities of the dominant classes at a given historical moment. According to Bourdieu's model, children who grow up in privileged families come to schools with advantageous supplies of the “cultural capital” that is recognized and appreciated by educational standards, but the connection between the culture of the home and the culture of the school is not recognized, hence leading to the belief that those who obtain privileged positions in adult society did so in a meritocratic manner (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1986; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Wacquant 2006).

While these accounts of schooling's role in producing privilege purport to overcome the limitations of the structure/agency dualism, both Willis and Bourdieu can be seen as slipping towards forms of economic determinism. In Bourdieu, it is difficult to find agency after one maps the capital distributions that define fields and the home environments that forge the (unobservable) *habitus*. De Certeau (1984) pointed out that Bourdieu's version of practice theory tends to reduce all practices to “strategies” in competitive battles over locations in fields of practice objectively structured by capital. As de Certeau observed, Bourdieu's problematic tends to reduce all practices to “an economy of the proper place” (1984, 55), that is, a jockeying for better objective positions within more-or-less closed social spaces (e.g. “fields”).<sup>12</sup> For Bourdieu, everything of value is scarce and everyone in a field competes to accumulate the same profits (economic, cultural, social) of a given field. This is especially evident in Bourdieu's more sociological work (e.g. 1984), which relies on surveys and interviews to represent practices and, in the process, reduces the practices of dominated groups to rather facile, and arguably condescending, schemas.<sup>13</sup>

While Willis' work grants less-privileged classes agency and a capacity for resistance, he also tends towards economic determinism. Willis routinely acknowledges that the cultural level is partially

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Willis (1981).

11 Bourdieu and Passeron use the term “cultural arbitrary” to refer to the cultural standards that get institutionalized in sites like schools as the normative cultural standards for all even though they reflect the interests of the dominant groups in a social formation. The concept is similar to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. For example, consider language dialects or accents: the dominant group is seen as having no accent whereas others are “marked” and expected to conform to the “accent free” standards of the dominant group.

12 A similar criticism is made by Becker. See Becker (2008, 372-386) for a comparison between Bourdieu's notion of “field” and Becker's notion of “world.”

13 See Miller (1988) for an ethnographic account that undermines Bourdieu's account of consumption and life styles, such as Bourdieu's claim that the consumer tastes of the working-class are “a taste for the necessity” (1984, 372).

autonomous from the economic level but his analysis primarily foregrounds the reproduction of labor power, arguably at the expense of other historical and emergent structures of privilege. Willis does draw attention to the lads' masculine sexism and racism, but he does not offer a robust account of how structures of privilege rooted in gender and race relations operated in relation to, but also partially independent from, class relations. It seems that any theory of how privilege gets produced needs to account for how persons come to form attachments and identifications that may not center on class relations. It would be interesting, for example, to have learned more about why the "ear'oles" – the lads' pejorative terms for peers who took a conformist stance towards schooling – did not "penetrate," to use Willis' term, capitalist schooling ideologies. It would also be interesting to hear from voices that "partially penetrated" the workings of capitalism but still endorsed it, perhaps with reservations. Without a diversity of such perspectives, one can get the impression that everyone except the lads (and Willis) was a dupe, which raises the question of whether Willis substitutes one overburdened theory for another. One gets this sense reading Bourdieu as well. The problem, as I see it, is that by rightly drawing our attention to the significance of class domination (a topic frequently overlooked, especially in America), the theory crowds out all other aspects of social life, including many joys and meaningful moments that have little to do with class domination or resistance per se. This emphasis leaves readers not only with a pretty bleak picture, but one, more importantly, that probably overstates both the tragic and the heroic aspects of class struggles and risks projecting the analysts' concerns with (economic) injustices onto research participants whose primary concerns may lie elsewhere.

In the U.S. context there have been several notable works that employed practice-like perspectives to study the relationship between schooling and the processes that make and remake privilege. In the spirit of Willis, Eckert (1989) looked at how peer cultures mediated the production of class-rooted social identities in middle school and high school. Like Willis, Eckert drew a sharp distinction between school conformists (identified by peers as "jocks") and those who took a more oppositional stance towards schooling (identified by peers as "burnouts"). Eckert's work is notable because it examined the micro-processes by which students from different class backgrounds became "jocks" and "burnouts" in middle school and high school, including an account of how working-class students had access to more age-heterogeneous social networks outside of school and hence "grew up" faster than the middle-class standards inscribed in schooling practices. Eckert also helped illustrate how the social identities of "jocks" and "burnouts" were produced in relation to each other – to be a "jock" was partially about not being a "burnout" student and vice versa.

Lareau (1987, 2003) also used a practice-inspired problematic, but to study and analyze relations between social class, child rearing strategies, and institutionalized social selection in schools. Lareau interpreted Bourdieu's theory to argue that regardless of racial identification, a family's social class position structured distinct "cultural logics" for child rearing and these different approaches were reinforced differently in schools. For Lareau (2003), middle-class parents tended to manage their children's home and leisure activities in ways that cultivated their "talents" and produced a sense of entitlement that was advantageous for navigating adult-centered institutions such as schools. Lareau named this clustering of child-rearing practices "concerted cultivation." On the other hand, working-class and poor families tended to practice a child-rearing logic that Lareau referred to as the "accomplishment of natural growth." These parents and caregivers were primarily concerned with their children growing up safely and healthily, not with grooming them for maximal advantage in institutionalized social selection. Working-class and poor families did not place as much emphasis on organized leisure activities and they drew sharper distinctions between children

and adults, including adults who worked in institutions. According to Lareau, schools also promoted concerted cultivation strategies and hence the child rearing sensibilities of working-class and poor families were out-of-sync with institutional standards.<sup>14</sup>

While these works have made important contributions to theorizing relations between a family's social class position, schooling, and the processes that make and re-make privilege, both Lareau and Eckert continue the class-centric tendencies of Willis and Bourdieu. As an alternative to these more structuralist accounts, several scholars have proposed more middle-range notions of social order, from "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991), "activity-systems" (Cole and Engeström 1993), "participatory cultures" (Jenkins et al. 2006), "figured worlds" (Holland et al. 1998), and "affinity groups" (Gee 2003). Each of these notions attempts to get beyond unchanging structural categories and the corresponding notions of learning as socialization or cultural transmission. As such, they offer better resources for studying and analyzing a changing world. Lave and Wenger (1991) reject socialization and cognitive development in favor of a process by which newcomers learn to become members of a "community of practice," a sociocultural process they refer to as "legitimate peripheral participation." From this perspective, identities are constituted and transformed through *changing participation* in ongoing social formations, "communities of practice." All activity is situated and all situated activity involves participation in some form of social life. Persons can't make any identities they like since their participation depends on recognition by and coordination with others who co-participate in the community of practice (cf. Taylor 1994). A practice problematic also draws attention to issues of power, and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Analysts can study how persons discover, access, and bid for membership in communities of practice (or affinity groups, or figured worlds, or participatory cultures, etc.), as well as how communities of practice patrol their boundaries and confer legitimacy and status on some forms of participation and not others. Historically accumulated capital (economic, social and cultural), gender normativity, and racialization play a role in these processes, but they do not determine them.

In my opinion, Lave (1991, 1996, 2011), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Holland and Lave (2001, 2009) offer the most robust approach for bringing together theories of situated activity with theories about the making and remaking of the social order. I am drawn to their work because they offer a non-essentialized notion of culture without turning away from the significance of social class and other historical structures of privilege in the ongoing processes that make privilege *in situ*.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, both "participatory culture" and "affinity groups" portray a version of social life that is too voluntary and individualistic, suggesting perhaps a normative vision for the social world rather than an account of social world as it is. In Jenkins' case, participatory culture is defined as one type of (ideal) culture amongst many. Affinity groups also suggest a voluntary affiliation. Both dovetail well with liberal notions of the individual but they have more difficulty accounting for issues of domination, power, conflict, and coerced participation. In keeping with my notion of techno-cosmopolitanism, both seem interested in distancing themselves from politics rooted in

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14 Lareau avoids Bourdieu's terminology in her main text but acknowledges Bourdieu's influence in the appendix as well as in various journal articles. Translated into Bourdieu's terminology, concerted cultivation equips middle-class children with more of the cultural capital that is recognized and appreciated in the educational field.

15 I am not an expert on the notion of "activity systems" as found in Cultural Historical Activity Theory (e.g. Cole and Engeström 1993) but upon quick review it appears to have much in common with the approach I'm advocating here, especially overlapping with Holland's contributions to Holland and Lave (2009).

social class and various parochial identities, promoting instead a normative vision of social life where persons assemble harmoniously around shared interests. As Gee (2003, 226) wrote, “Learners constitute an ‘affinity group,’ that is, a group that is bonded primarily through shared endeavors, goals, and practices and not shared race, gender, ethnicity, or culture.” In my opinion, one reason these concepts underestimate issues of power is that they begin with a notion of culture, or discourse, rather than practice, and, as such, they tend to under theorize issues related to the body and geography. Given this different starting point, it is not surprising that both “affinity groups” and “participatory cultures” are often used to describe online social life.

By drawing attention to the significance of “local (contentious) practice,” Holland and Lave offer a theoretical and empirical handle on the ways intimate identities and longer-term institutionalized struggles are re-produced and transformed in local practice. This notion allows for a broader understanding of how privileges are produced and reproduced; according to these scholars, various historical structures of privilege – including, but not limited to, social class, gender, and racial relations – are brought to the present in contested local practices. By attuning to contested local practices, researchers can gain insight into how different historical structures of privilege become significant or not in new situations. Focusing on local struggles also helps reveal where salience lies for different participants, a feature of social life that can be difficult to accurately document through surveys and interviews.

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of “community of practice” has also influenced my empirical/theoretical approach. The community of practice concept has been widely used in many different fields, often in ways not supported by Lave and Wenger’s original text.<sup>16</sup> One of the recurring criticisms of community of practice (e.g. Gee 2004) is that the word “community” suggests a harmonious, homogeneous, and unchanging social formation. But as Duguid (2008) notes, the key term in Lave and Wenger’s original use of communities of practice was “practice,” not “community.” In its original usage, the term was meant to suggest heterogeneous participants coming together in a common undertaking that nevertheless involved conflict and power, primarily through struggles over legitimate participation. According to Lave and Wenger, communities of practice are sites of struggle and change; contentious relations between “newcomers” and “old-timers,” in particular, can lead to changes within the communities of practice as well as relations amongst communities of practice.

Importing the communities of practice concept into settings such as schools and some workplaces where the practitioners are more transitory deserves some qualification. Educators organizing students into groups or classes, and managers placing workers onto teams, does not necessarily constitute a community of practice. Educators typically assemble students together based on criteria such as age, and institutional views of skill, not based on practices where some members are more expert at the practice than others. While educators’ and managers’ organizational plans might not constitute communities of practice, communities of practice often still exist within organizations. One of the reasons I see participation in schooling as a contentious site is precisely because numerous communities of practice tend to co-exist within a school. Educators and managers often attempt to quell and control some communities of practice while overlooking or reinforcing others. In schools, age-heterogeneous groups such as sports teams, theater troupes, and

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16 For a review of how the concept has been taken up, as well as a clarification of its original use, see Duguid (2008) and Lave (2008).

the student newspaper have many of the characteristics of communities of practice, and new students often have their school-based identities transformed as they become full participants in these social formations. The same can be true for new teachers who may learn more about their trade from old-timer teachers than they do from professional development seminars and the like. In this dissertation, I have been inspired by Eckert (1989) and Willis (1977) and I approached students informal groups, or cliques, with the analytic concept of communities of practice in mind (chapter 6). Making such an analytic move for the Downtown School requires a few caveats. For one, since the school was new and did not have an existing social order amongst cliques, the social field was initially fairly wide open for students to position themselves as more expert “old timers” amongst their peers. Doing so involved different students jockeying for which sorts of practices should be considered legitimate amongst peers, with different students putting forward different practices that they were more familiar with based on their participation in communities of practice that formed *outside of the school*. In this sense, some students were “old timers” compared to their schoolmates when it came to certain practices (e.g. how to curse, how to make movies in iMovie, how to talk about sexuality, being a music geek, playing *Call of Duty II*, etc.), but there was much contestation over which practices were legitimate in a school context and ultimately educators and privileged parents played a significant role in shaping what sorts of extra-curricular expertise would be approved at school (chapters 5, 6 and 7).

While Holland and Lave’s version of social practice theory offers a rich problematic for studying the ways historical privileges are made and remade *in situ*, there are several aspects of their theory that deserve more attention. For one, while social practice theory does a good job bringing together theories of situated activity with theories of larger historical structures, it does not offer a robust account of how situated activity and longer-term historical structures are supported and transformed by institutions and organizations.<sup>17</sup> In social practice theories, institutions and organizations tend to show up rather abstractly as “institutional arrangements,” “fields,” “the state,” and so forth. Studies that make use of social practices theories do not tend to acknowledge that organizations have their own structuring dynamics and frictions, including tensions over scale, control, and adaptability within bureaucracies. Situated activity often takes place within bureaucratic settings and, as such, situated actors not only work with inherited structures of privilege but also with the rules and regulations, “best practices,” and infrastructures that have been put in place in an attempt to manage large-scale organizations. These “institutional arrangements” do not determine practice any more than social structure does, but they need to be accounted for if scholars want to produce a robust account of how privileges get produced. Throughout this dissertation I attempt to address the more institutionalized pressures that local actors had to deal with in their situated activities, including: families navigating the Department of Education’s (DOE) “choice system” (chapter 3); the educational bureaucracy’s attempts to use standardized testing and market principles as a way to overcome some of the limitations of managing and provisioning services within a large bureaucracy (chapter 4); educational reformers’ attempts to design progressive pedagogy within these constraints (chapters 4 and 5); students’ orientations towards highly regimented schooling practices (chapter 6); and parents’ attempts to shape the practices of educators within the confines of the rules defined by the state and the DOE (chapter 7). While I am not an institutional theorist, one of my arguments is that privileges were partially

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17 See Brown and Duguid (1991) for an attempt to link “communities of practice” to organizational settings as well as Duguid (2008) for a reflection on how this work has been taken up in business schools and organizational theory.

produced by the ways different families navigated and controlled these institutional arrangements. Privileged families, in particular, were able to insinuate themselves into the gap between bureaucratic rule following and institutionalized practices and hence were positioned to shape institutional practices in their favor.

In a related limitation, many social practice theories do not extensively theorize the role of media and technology. Social practice perspectives often absorb media technologies within concepts of material and symbolic culture. Communities of practice have specialized equipment, and participants may come to learn to use that equipment in ways considered skillful by the community of practice, but those tools and artifacts are not often analyzed in much depth. On the one hand, the tendency to downplay the intrinsic features of a technology guards against the perennial temptations of technological determinism, yet it can also render media technologies as nothing more than embodiments of social relations. Recently, some scholars have shown promising interest in theorizing the relations between media, technology, and practice (e.g. Couldry 2004; Postill 2010; Miller and Horst 2012), but these efforts are still relatively nascent and much work remains to be done theorizing the relations between media technology and the re-production of privilege, a gap that this dissertation can hopefully help fill. My approach has been to reject the deterministic accounts espoused by the school and to try to offer an alternative account of how tools and equipment played a role in producing social divisions in relation to practice. In doing so, I show how different actors made use of the affordances of different digital media equipment to facilitate certain practices, but I also look at when and how those media practices were recognized (or not) by participants and outsiders, including educators, as legitimate “technological practices.”

## 2.4 Ethnography

A problematic centered on social practices assumes a mutually constitutive relation between theory and empirical work. Given the importance placed on situated activity, social practice theory encourages an ethnographic approach. In this section I lay out my approach to ethnographic practice from a social practice perspective, noting the advantages, limitations, and dilemmas of such an approach.

A social practice problematic urges researchers to locate themselves in the places where participants make their lives together. The approach involves attempting to understand what matters to the persons play a role in producing collective practices: what engrosses them, what tensions, dilemmas, and conflicts they face, what they are fighting for, and so on. Taking such an orientation to fieldwork involves being open to emergent themes and issues, which may or may not correspond with the theoretical interests and frameworks researchers brought to the field. If fieldworkers give too much attention to their own interests and frameworks they are likely to overlook much of what is going on in the situated activity. Then, when it comes time to write up an account, the scholar will likely severely distort social life as they attempt to press it into their tidy theoretical framework.

While ethnography encourages remaining open to emergent phenomena and themes, researchers also inevitably have to make choices about which dimensions matter in a given social situation as well as draw boundaries as to where the research site ends. Since social practice theory takes practice as a synthetic given – bringing together past with present as well as multiple levels of analysis – researchers need some “tricks of the trade” (Becker 1998) to start pulling apart practices

in an attempt to identify analytic categories and frameworks. One such trick for identifying analytic salience is to pay attention to what seems to really matter to research participants. The fieldworker listens for what is on the tips of research participants' tongues, what seems to grip them, where their passions lie. Doing so often requires a shift of perspectives. So, for example, to study learning in school, researchers would attempt to garner what seems to really matter to students, not what educators necessarily think is important. This discrepancy in research perspectives revealed itself several times during my fieldwork when various education researchers joined classes to study the Downtown School's new model. I watched as researchers took notes anytime a student seemed to demonstrate an understanding or misunderstanding of the concepts the educators were trying to communicate to students. The school researchers were understandably trying to assess how well their model was accomplishing its stated goals and, as such, they took an institutional view of the situation. From my perspective, though, acquiring abstract curricular content was not what seemed to grip most of the students. Instead, many seemed preoccupied with negotiating peer relations, even during classes (chapter 5). Another "trick" for researchers using a social practice perspective is to stay attuned to the dilemmas, contradictions, and conflicts that all participants face as they attempt to do things together. Paying attention to these more profane aspects of social life helped expose fractions and fissures within collective undertakings as well as the unpredictable, unstable, precarious character of reproducing what was already going on. Further, the ways in which conflicts were resolved helped reveal where power sat within various social formations. In my case, paying attention to tensions and conflicts was especially fruitful for understanding peer culture divisions (chapter 6), parental anxieties (chapter 7), and power relations more generally.

Even if researchers employ these tricks, the best researchers can hope to accomplish is a partial understanding of other people's lives. "The art of the possible" (Hannerz 2003) requires that researchers bound their field site somewhere (discussed shortly). Additionally, it is impossible to provide a fully "objective" account of other people's lives and all representations entail politics. The politics of ethnographic writing fruitfully came into debate during the 1980s through a series of "postmodern" attacks on "modernist" ethnographic practices, attacks that have since come to be called "the crisis of representation" or the "cultural critique" (see in particular the volume edited by Clifford and Marcus [1986]). Mostly a cultural/literary criticism of modernist ethnographic writing practices, postmodern scholars attacked ethnographers' tendency to ignore their own social and cultural "positionality" in the texts they produced. Critics observed that modernist ethnographic writing positioned the ethnographer's account as an all-seeing perspective on the lives of "others." Modernist ethnographies suggested a "view from nowhere" that purported to be objectively authoritative. Given anthropology's historical involvements in colonial projects, this rhetorical style was seen as masking power relations between researchers and research subjects and overlooking the political agendas supported by ethnographic work. Not only did cultural critics attack modernist ethnographers for failing to account for their own positionality, but they also criticized modernist ethnographic writing for its tendency to produce reductive, stereotypical representations of "exotic others," overlooking contingency and difference within "native cultures" in the process. Further, because the "others" that anthropologists studied were mostly excluded from academic communities, ethnographers were seen as constructing their authority by excluding voices that might challenge their account. As a remedy, cultural critics encouraged more experimental writing styles that encouraged a diversity of voices and reflexivity on behalf of ethnographers. They also encouraged making the criticism of representational practices one of the

central concerns of ethnographic practice.

These criticisms drew important attention to the overlooked cultural politics of modernist genres of ethnographic writing. However, the cultural critique also obscured other limitations. For one, the politics of fieldwork and other forms of critical engagement with the world were overlooked in favor of directing critical attention at representational practices. The focus on ethnographic writing encouraged the view that power relations were primarily constituted in texts, rather than stretched across all domains of social life. It also inspired a recursive tendency that some anthropologists feel led to “professional involution” (Lave 2011, 7). Further, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argued that the cultural critique paradoxically reified us/them, we/other, here/there frameworks because the postmodernists started with a dualistic split between “our culture” (presumably a monolithic western culture) and “their culture” located in another place.

Since the early 2000s, a different vision of ethnographic practice has gained traction, one that encourages the inclusion of multiple theoretical and empirical approaches, attention to changes in global political economic arrangements, and a renewed emphasis on the centrality of long-term fieldwork in ethnographic practice (Willis and Trondman 2000; Wacquant 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Lave 2011, 8-13). For the work reported on this dissertation, I took an approach inspired by these more recent perspectives on ethnographic practice, working through various dilemmas as I did so. I have attempted to approach my research practice reflexively without going so far as to conflate research practice with reflexive writing practices. I have also tried to include the views of my research participants without retreating to an entirely relativistic perspective where all views are considered equally legitimate. Most importantly, I have tried to look at how power and privilege (including my own power and privilege) were made and remade through material practices in the world, not just through texts or discourses, even though texts and discursive practices inevitably played a role in these processes. I will now report on the details of how I went about generating documentation and producing a written account of my case.

### **2.4.1 The Study**

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, I began this project with a general interest in how historical and emergent structures of privilege were being made and remade for children coming of age in the so-called “digital age.” My initial focus was to look for processes by which forms of association, belonging, and social distinction were made and remade *in situ*. As an entry point (Burrell 2009; Couldry 2003), I chose a school, in part because schools remain one of the primary sites where young people spend their daily lives, in part because schools remain key sites in processes of social selection, and in part because the school I gained access to was influenced by optimistic views about the power of new media technologies to transform the social order. I did not deliberately choose a middle school but I am glad I did since the middle school students in my study gave special salience to issues of peer identification and differentiation.

I was also fortunate because the school ended up with an atypically diverse student body for a Manhattan public middle school. The gap in students’ social class backgrounds was especially wide, creating a bimodal distribution. Around half the students came from privileged households where at least one parent held a graduate degree and worked in a professional field. Most of these parents worked in the culture industries, including academia, design, publishing, information technology and new media, and the arts. Throughout this dissertation I refer to these families as “privileged”

and to parents in these families as “professionals,” or, when applicable, as “creative professionals.” Contrasting sharply with this group, were students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, about 39% of the student body.<sup>18</sup> Many of these students had parents or guardians with some or no college education. They tended to be employed in comparatively low-paying service work or were unemployed. Throughout this dissertation I refer to these students and families as “less-privileged.”<sup>19</sup> These large differences in social class corresponded closely with institutional classifications of race and ethnicity. According to the DOE’s official categories, 37% of the student body was “white or Caucasian,” 26% was “Hispanic or Latino,” 26% was “black or African American,” and a little over 12% was “Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.” Almost all of the students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch were recorded as Hispanic or Latino or black or African American on the DOE’s forms, and almost all of the privileged students were recorded as white or Asian American.<sup>20</sup> These institutional categories of race and ethnicity did not register the diverse transnational migration flows of students’ families and recent ancestors. Across social class divisions, many families had either lived abroad at some point during their children’s lives, had moved to the U.S. prior to having children, or had recent ancestors who had moved to the U.S. While many of the school’s families had transnational histories and social networks, families crossed national borders from significantly different positions of economic and political privilege. Several privileged white students had recently moved to New York after living extensive periods in Western Europe, Africa, and China, primarily for their parents’ careers. Further, several privileged students had professional parents who had grown up in Israel, Japan, Western Europe, and Korea. Almost all professional families traveled internationally for vacations and a few owned homes in other countries. In contrast with these privileged transnational families, about half of the less-privileged students had parents or grandparents who had moved to the U.S. with modest means from significantly poorer nations, primarily the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and other Caribbean nations. These families also had transnational networks of friends and kin and some would occasionally travel internationally to visit their relatives. They did not, however, tend to travel outside of the U.S. for their work or careers. As noted above, the Downtown School was atypical for having such a diverse student body and this diversity ended up being a unique opportunity for examining some of the more optimistic claims about technology’s potential to smooth and flatten historical social divisions.

Several other unpredicted factors also aided my fieldwork. For one, school leaders and educators welcomed me into their school and provided me with exceptional access. So long as I did not disrupt their lessons, educators allowed me to come by the school whenever I wanted and to enter

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18 Free and reduced price lunch is a common marker of economic disadvantage amongst education researchers. In the year that the fieldwork was conducted, families qualified for free and reduced price lunch if their family income fell below 1.30 and 1.85 times the federal poverty guidelines respectively.

19 There were only a handful of students that did not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and who did not have a least one professional parent. When I refer to these students and their families I refer to them as “lower-middle-class,” or the “more middle-class of the less-privileged,” or I provide specific information about their parents’ educational credentials or occupations.

20 Three privileged white families I met had adopted children from overseas: one girl from Ethiopia, one boy from Guatemala, and one girl from Cambodia. The girl who had been born in Ethiopia lived with an adopted white mother and father. The girl who had been adopted from Cambodia lived with her adoptive white mother. I don’t know the family arrangement of the boy who had been adopted from Guatemala, though I did meet his white mother at a few PTA meetings.

their classrooms anytime. Further, I benefited from being in graduate school and from having financial support from scholars who sponsored my work with their grants. These factors allowed me to dedicate myself to fieldwork fulltime for over a year, and to analysis and follow up research nearly fulltime for several years thereafter. Such support greatly expanded what Hannerz (2003) called “the art of the possible.” In particular, it allowed me to dedicate extensive time to participant observation and an equal amount of time to writing field notes. Such immersion allowed me to slowly develop a “thick” understanding of daily routines and embodied practices within the school as well as how those routines changed over time. It also allowed me to consider the more tacit and informal aspects of my participants’ practices, features of social life that can be difficult to document through other methods such as interviews, surveys, and experiments.

While the Downtown School served as my entry point, and hence shaped the general scope of the persons involved in my study, my research interests required moving beyond the school’s walls as well as moving backward and forward in time. Developing an understanding of the processes that were producing emergent privileges amongst this diverse group of students required an understanding of how students’ out-of-school lives were organized, how families oriented towards schooling, how the school was designed, and how broader historical changes, especially with respect to globalizing political economic relations, were related to the practices I was able to observe more intimately. As many ethnographers have observed, the radical interconnectedness of contemporary social life makes the ethnographic study of any social phenomenon a formidable task. Whether one practices “multi-sited” ethnography (Marcus 1995) or “ethnography on an awkward scale” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003), the best any ethnographer can hope to produce is a partial account, inevitably limited but hopefully still illuminating.

In my case I pursued several strategies to expand my field site beyond the local confines of the school. For one, I drew on Marcus’ (1995) advice and did my best to follow people and biographies, especially for Downtown School students but also for their family members and for the educators. Throughout fieldwork I continually asked myself the following questions: How did these different people end up at the Downtown School? Where had they been before and where did they see themselves going after?

These questions directed me into realms of social life that I could not observe directly. Many of these practices had taken place before I entered the field; others took place in settings that I could not access in person. To develop an understanding of these phenomena I relied on participants’ accounts of their own practices, histories, and imagined futures. I gathered this data primarily through semi-structured interviews but also through numerous informal and overheard conversations while doing participant-observation. I also attended PTA meetings, public assemblies, and field trips to get to know family members. After becoming known by students, educators, and many parents, I invited all students, parents or guardians, and educators to participate in a semi-formal interview.<sup>21</sup> Most of the parent or guardian interviews took place in

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21 Of the 75 students who attended the Downtown School in its first year, 43 students (24 of whom were girls), 22 families (11 of whom had daughters at the school), and five school staff, four of whom were teachers and one of whom was one of the school’s founders, agreed to an interview. In terms of family members, I interviewed 19 mothers, seven fathers, one grandmother, one aunt, one uncle, and one boyfriend of a student’s mother. Most of the privileged students I interviewed lived with both their biological mother and their biological father. About a third of the less-privileged students I interviewed lived with their biological mother and biological father, a small handful lived with family members other than their biological parents, and the rest lived with their biological mothers. I did

their homes and included a tour of their domestic space. These interviews were fairly evenly distributed between privileged and less-privileged families. I also conducted a series of show-and-tell style “media tour” interviews with 14 students who were particularly involved with media production. Most of these also took place at the students’ homes. Interviews with students were approximately 45 minutes and interviews with adults ranged from one-and-a-half hours to six hours, averaging around two hours. Media tour interviews were between one and two hours.

In addition to demographic and household information, I asked all students and parents or guardians about their weekly routines and how those routines changed throughout the year. I did so to learn of students’ participation in organized out-of-school activities as well as the rhythms of different students’ lives when they were not in school. I asked students to describe which media and technologies they had access to, which media practices they participated in regularly outside of school, and which media practices were amongst their favorites. I also asked students to share how and why they chose the Downtown School, how they felt it had been going, and what they would change about the school. Finally, I asked students to describe and characterize the cliques at the Downtown School and how they saw their place within those formations. These accounts were complemented by my participant observation at the school. For media tour interviews, I had students narrate their history with media technologies and especially their history with media production. I also had them show me examples of their work and model how they went about producing projects. I asked parents and guardians many of the same questions about their children’s current media technology practices, their children’s access to and history with those technologies, and the rules and regulations they attempted to impose on their use. I also asked parents and guardians how they found the school, why they had chosen to send their children to it, how they felt things had been going, how they interacted with the school, and how they envisioned their children’s near-term future. In discussing weekly routines I asked parents and guardians to narrate their children’s history with various out-of-school activities and how they came to be involved in them. In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation of parent-educator interactions at PTA meetings, field trips, various showcases, festivals, and parties sponsored by the school, and informal interactions during and after school.

In keeping with social practice theory’s focus on contentious local practices, as well as Marcus’ (1995) advice to follow conflicts, I was especially attuned to conflicts and controversies that emerged throughout the year. I learned of controversies amongst students largely by way of hanging out at school. Controversies amongst parents and between parents and educators surfaced in interviews as well as at PTA meetings and in quotidian interactions at the school. Upon learning of a controversy, I would often follow up with parents, students, and educators in casual conversations and in interviews. Controversies also surfaced in the online portion of my fieldwork.

There were several ways that online sites, mediated communications, and public media extended my field site. First, the school and its institutional supporters published a surprising amount of materials about the school online, including school websites, websites for partner organizations, academic reports and presentations, Flickr and Picasa accounts, promotional videos, and so on. In addition to being material for analysis, these publicity materials helped attract the interest of local,

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not ask about the sexual orientation of parents or guardians but I did ask students about who they lived with. One of the teachers told me that one of the less-privileged girls lived with her mother and her mother’s lesbian partner, but the girl was not part of my interview sample since her family did not provide consent for an interview.

national, and international news organizations. These news outlets produced and circulated public stories about the school, often presenting the school as a model of education reform for the twenty-first century. This publicity helped construct, reinforce, and legitimate the school's institutional identity as a cutting edge school that was simultaneously playful, creative, and technologically hip. In addition to public-facing media about the school, educators provided me with access to mediated communications amongst members of the school community. One of the school's founders added me to the school's main email listserv for educators and parents. Further, educators made me an account on the school's internal social network site that had been designed for the school's students and educators.

In addition to these more institutional realms of digital media practice, families and students shared some of their digital communications. Some parents shared email exchanges with educators and other parents. Further, about halfway through the year students started inviting me to be "friends" on Facebook. I had not anticipated these invitations and was initially unsure about whether or not to accept. The policy I settled on was that I would accept invitations but I would not initiate them. Since Facebook was a realm of students' lives that excluded most adults, I decided that I would not scour their pages systematically in a typical researcher fashion. I felt that students were inviting me into their online social worlds much as they had at school, but I did not feel they had invited me to systematically record and evaluate every move they made on Facebook. As a compromise, I tried to interact with the students' Facebook accounts much as I do with any other "friends" on Facebook: I checked out their profiles when we first became friends, I noticed their updates when they appeared in my news feed and I would follow developing conversations, and I would occasionally check their profiles if we had not seen each other in a while. In addition to Facebook, several students told me to check out their YouTube accounts and personal websites, which I did.

In addition to including online sites, I expanded my field site to develop a more institutional and historical account. To develop an understanding of the recent history of school reform in New York City, New York, and the U.S., I relied on research by other academics, newspaper articles, DOE documents, summaries of legislation, and congressional reports. When working with these materials I attempted to trace discursive flows and the practical implications of policies. As with the rest of my fieldwork, I paid special attention to controversies and concerns. This archival research richly illuminated the salience of economic anxieties about globalization in recent state-driven educational reforms. It also helped draw my attention to the managerial challenges educational bureaucrats faced as they attempted to rework public education, as discussed in chapter 4.

Doing ethnography at this "awkward scale" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003) had drawbacks and benefits. Most ethnographies that explore relations between schooling and the production of privilege focus on either relations between peer cultures and schooling (e.g. Willis 1977; Eckert 1989; Thorne 1993; Pascoe 2007), or relations between families and schooling (e.g. Heath 1983; Lareau 2003). By attempting to account for both sets of relations at once I am sure I have sacrificed some of the nuance and detail that I might have captured if I had only focused on one set of relations. I have attempted to document micro-practices in detail, but I have also attempted to look at how those practices were situated within a wider matrix of social relations and historically produced institutional arrangements. Such an approach involved moving forward and backwards in time and space as well as across seemingly isolated sets of relations. In keeping with a social

practice theory problematic, I attempted to view each from the perspective of the other. I believe this has been a fruitful approach even if it has required me to give less attention to any single realm of situated activity.

## 2.5 Enduring Dilemmas in Studying “Others”

As noted earlier, the 1980s “crisis of representation” drew important attention to the politics of studying and representing the lives of “others.” In my case, I found these dilemmas numerous and challenging to navigate. All of my research participants occupied significantly different social positions from my own. The lines of difference were numerous and the power-relations complexly asymmetrical. I was 30-years-old when I began this study, much older than the students and yet younger than many of the parents, the school’s leadership, and several teachers. In the context of school, I had much more power than any of the students. I could come and go when I wanted to. I did not have to follow the steady flow of directives given by teachers, and I could use my position as an adult to issue directives of my own. In addition to these privileges rooted in age-relations, I identified and was identifiable as a white male. For much of the study I was dating a woman and while I did not advertise my sexual orientation many students asked me if I had a wife or girlfriend. Further, I grew up in a middle-class family and tended to participate in more middle-class communities when I was not doing fieldwork. While I was living on a limited graduate student budget during the study, I possessed educational credentials and cultural capital that my less-privileged research participants did not have. Since fieldwork, I have predominantly participated in academic communities not accessible to most of my research participants. While I could not overcome the limitations of my positionality, I did use numerous tactics in an attempt to mitigate their effects.

In terms of sociocultural age-divisions, I knew I could not “pass” as a sixth grader and I did not want to give the impression that I was trying to do so. But I also did not want to come across as a typical school adult. Because I wanted to become a legitimate, albeit peripheral, participant in the school’s peer culture, I tried to position myself as an interested young adult that was not affiliated with the educators. I imagined my relation to students as something like a camp counselor or cousin, older but not as strict as teachers and parents. I usually wore jeans, a simple t-shirt or sweatshirt, and casual sneakers. I made a rule for myself that I would not participate in pedagogic practices, classroom management, or school discipline. My one exception was that I would take on the role of an authority figure if I felt there was the possibility of physical violence. Such an episode happened once during fieldwork when I had to break up a fight between two boys that happened after school around the corner from the school’s exit. One student had already thrown a punch by the time I arrived and I got into the middle of the circle in an attempt to keep more punches from being thrown. Several girl students and I then walked the boy who had been punched back to the school where he met with educators. Later, the boy who had thrown the punch accused me of having gotten him in trouble, but I reminded him that I had always said I would intervene in the case of violence. It took a while for me to regain rapport with this boy but after a few weeks he seemed to once again treat me as a non-authority figure.

In addition to eschewing most normal “adult” roles, I tried to take on some of the constraints and responsibilities the students faced. Especially early in my fieldwork, I sat with them during classes, participated in group-work, took tests, kept quiet unless I was called on, and remained in my seat

until the students were dismissed. During transitions between classes I traveled with the students in single-file lines. At lunch I went with the students to the cafeteria where I sometimes ate by myself, wandered around, or, if invited, sat with different groups of students. During recess I wandered the spaces where students were allowed. I hung out, mingled, and sometimes participated in their games. When the school day ended I usually left with the students and sometimes I traveled with groups for the first part of their commutes.<sup>22</sup>

At the beginning of my fieldwork my position in the school seemed to confuse teachers and students. I caught quite a few shifty eyes in the first few weeks. But as time went on many students, educators, and parents gradually seemed to accept me. After several episodes where I saw students break rules but did not punish them, I heard students telling more suspicious peers, “Christo’s cool, he can’t punish us.” Students and teachers started teasing me, especially for hanging out on the student side of the student/educator divide. Students started approaching me to strike up conversations, I got invitations to sit with students at lunch, and some students recruited me into their games at recess. Some boys started slapping my hand (which I never really mastered) when we passed each other, others began offering me food, gum, and candy at lunch or in the back of the class, and many students started teasing me for countless shortcomings, including being “old,” not knowing how to say various catch phrases the right way, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> By late in the year, several students were suggesting that I should be principal, presumably because I was an adult who never disciplined them.

These successes aside, some social divisions were more difficult to cross than others. Many of the students and families that initially welcomed me were from similar or higher social class backgrounds from my own and a few of the parents were even academics, including one who was an ethnographer. Early in my fieldwork, I started writing memos about the opportunities and challenges of studying similarly positioned families as well as “studying up” (Nader 1972). As a positive, the presence of creative professional families offered an opportunity for reflexivity. When I wrote about these families I often thought about my own upbringing and future. I too had attended public schools that were economically (but not ethnically) diverse. I recalled that my own parents had been involved in the PTA and that they had helped mobilize other middle-class parents to influence the school. I reflected on having been segregated into a “gifted and talented” program called “GATE” between second and sixth grade, and I remembered a moment in seventh grade when I learned that non-GATE students had pejoratively been calling us “Gaters” for years. I recalled that my neighbor whose dad was a truck driver had been a childhood friend until around middle school when we started running in different crowds, liking different music, dressing differently, and so forth. I remembered that my parents had been friends with the local doctor and how my parents, the doctor, and the doctor’s wife tried to get their respective children to be friends, with modest success. I thought about the extra-curricular activities that my parents had

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22 I do not want to suggest that I was subjected to all the same rules and expectations as students. For example, I did not do homework, nor did I attend the full schedule of classes they attended every day, nor was I welcome to join a clique anytime I liked. My goal was to get a sense for what it was like to be in sixth grade without becoming a full participant in sixth grade peer culture, which, of course, would have been impossible.

23 In one memorable episode a group of girls had taken over a portion of the main hallway at recess by sitting on the floor in two rows that faced each other, making a sort of gauntlet of evaluation and potential ridicule for anyone who passed. When I finally walked through one of them released a balloon that made a sound as if I had passed gas, which they all immediately commented on, laughed, and called teachers over to tell them what I had just done.

encouraged and discouraged, my friends they liked and did not like, and so on. I also thought about how I might behave if I had children of my own in the New York City school system. I figured there was a good chance that I too would have tried to send my children to the Downtown School, that I too would have been attracted to its “progressive” ethos, its “student-centered” curriculum, its focus on “creativity,” its creative professional parents. In short, producing this ethnography has partially been an ongoing exercise in reflecting on my own privilege and, as such, when I turn a critical lens towards the practices of the more privileged students and families, readers should know that I include myself as a target of those criticisms. I also recognize I am different from these privileged parents. Not having children myself, I likely portray a dispassionate attitude about the numerous demands parents face when they make choices about their children. I believe being an “outsider” to parenting has allowed me to draw out aspects of parenting practices that parents might overlook. But I do not pretend that I can fully know the challenges they face, nor can I claim that I would have acted differently if I had been in their shoes.

I also faced dilemmas related to the politics of studying and representing “otherness.” Early on I recognized that it would be more difficult to build rapport and to develop an understanding with many of the girl students as well as the students and families from less-privileged backgrounds. In an attempt to address these challenges, I made extra effort to get to know these students and, when possible, their families. The degree to which I have been successful is undoubtedly mixed. While I feel that most students eventually warmed up to me, I imagine that there were many aspects of their lives that they did not want to share with me. Some issues, such as dating and sexuality, felt inappropriate to broach across child/adult divisions, especially when those divisions intersected with gender divisions.<sup>24</sup> Race relations were also difficult to talk about and I would be surprised if there were not racialized views and practices that I was not able to observe or learn about. I did learn a lot about my own tendency to ascribe racial stereotypes, often without initially realizing that I was doing so. Consider the following episode: In the spring I went to interview a privileged mother who had twin girls at the school. They had recently moved back to New York from Europe and they came across to me as amongst the most privileged students at the Downtown School. They routinely presented themselves to their peers as European, frequently noting, for example, that they had lived in Germany, France, and London. I knew that their dad was born in Sweden and now worked in finance in London. They wore what appeared to me as the fanciest clothes of any students at the school, and I knew that they attended expensive private after-school programs. When I arrived at their “prewar” building on the Upper West Side – a much-coveted style of apartment amongst privileged New Yorkers – I took an elevator to a hallway with only two doors. After greeting me, the mother led me into a spacious apartment adorned with books, artwork, and antiques. NPR was on the radio as the mother took me into a large living room and offered me coffee. As the mother took off down a hallway and turned into another room, presumably the kitchen, an elderly African American woman poked her head out of the room the mother had just entered, glanced at me, and then popped back into to the kitchen. I immediately made a mental note that I should write about the incident later, thinking that I should pay attention to how the

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24 I did end up learning about some of the students’ courtship practices by hanging out at school and on Facebook but I did not make these practices a focus of my research. In general, it felt creepy to ask students, and especially girl students, to share about sexually inflected practices even though those practices were an increasingly salient aspect of the school’s peer culture. I imagine it would be less difficult to talk about sexuality with older students and perhaps boy students but it seemed to me that most of the sixth graders would have considered it invasive and creepy if I had attempted to do so.

girls' experiences with an African American domestic worker might affect the ways they oriented towards racialized class difference amongst peers at school. Just after I made this mental note the mother came out of the kitchen and said, "I should introduce you to my mother," and the elderly African American woman again came out of the kitchen. It turned out I was in the grandparents' apartment and the twin girls and their mother were living there while they looked for an apartment of their own. I had conflated my reading of social class markers with stereotypes about race; I had assumed that the girls were white in part because of their displays of privilege, and I had assumed that the African American woman was hired help because she was in a place filled with displays of privilege. The mother and I ended up having a lengthy conversation about racial categories in different countries. She noted that she identified as black but that her daughters were just beginning to learn about racial categories in America. As she put it:

Now being here, they just say, "I'm half-American, half-Swedish," and that's it. It's a long process for them to understand the ethnic, racial dynamics in America, as opposed to Europe. I don't want to say they're confused, they just kind of don't deal with it, but they'll have to at some point.

The episode was an embarrassing reminder of how easily and instinctually I can classify difference and ascribe stereotypes. There is no easy solution to this problem. By drawing attention to the *production* and *reproduction* of racialized, gendered, and classed identities I risk being read as someone who treats those categories as natural and reducible to stereotypical representations. To discourage this reading, I have included instances where students and families do not fulfill stereotypical expectations and I have attempted to emphasize that peoples' lives can never be reduced to the stereotypical representations that others ascribe to them. As I conducted fieldwork and wrote, I tried to routinely reflect on where the various cultural categories that I am using to describe others were coming from. Were they coming from theory? Were they coming from institutional classifications? Were they coming from my own taken-for-granted prejudices? Were they coming from other participants in my study? Were they self-identifications? Further, even after a social label has been applied, what characteristics or attributes came along with it? Again, where did those clusters of assumed traits come from?

The approach I have tried to apply in this dissertation is to focus on processes of racialization (including my own, as just shared); that is, I attempt to convey when and how participants, including institutions, ascribed racial categories and racially inflected codes to persons and what sorts of clustering of characteristics seemed to be carried along with those practices of classification. Additionally, I looked for when participants identified with and resisted racial categories and various interpretations of what such categories meant. I have not, however, limited my account to only hybrid, queer, or edge cases that trouble normative stereotypes and social boundaries. In practice, some students and families played to stereotypes some of the time, and some played against them. One of the reasons some students seemed to play to stereotypes some of the time was because, from a dialogic perspective, the stereotypes were recognizable to others and social status depended on recognition by outsiders. Different actors judged this recognition in different ways – for example, practices that educators and privileged parents assessed negatively were initially judged as high status amongst many of the students – but those with more power were able to influence which judgments won out institutionally. For example, in chapter 6 I discuss how a group of less-privileged boys initially won "cool" cred from their peers by playing to a precocious "jock" stereotype. But I also show how educators and privileged parents increasingly

framed such practices as deviant, often in racially inflected ways (chapters 6 and 7). It's important to emphasize that social divisions were produced in part through the ways cultural stereotypes were ascribed and fulfilled relationally in practice and not as a consequence of inherent and essential attributes of different "types" of persons.

Social class differences were another line of division that presented challenges. While I ended up interviewing roughly equal numbers of privileged and less-privileged families, I had to exert more effort to recruit less-privileged families and several wanted to conduct the interview in a coffee shop, by phone, or by email. I can imagine several reasons for their reluctance to participate in general and especially to invite me into their homes. For one, since less-privileged parents and guardians did not have many opportunities to visit the school and attend PTA meetings, I had fewer chances to meet them prior to my sending a request for an interview. Additionally, many of these families lived outside of the school district and some may have worried that participating could get them into trouble for having their kids in "the wrong" district. Similarly, several less-privileged families had come to the U.S. from abroad and it is possible that they too felt that interacting with a researcher was not worth the potential risks, especially if they or family members were undocumented. Others might have worried about class-inflected embarrassments for them and their children, a practice that could be seen as an instance of what Thorne (2008a) has called, "shame work."

Another line of difference that I wish I had paid more attention to were classifications of disability. While I did not have access to institutional records, I slowly learned that quite a few students of various class backgrounds had been institutionally classified as having various "learning disabilities." By the end of my study I had learned that providing "appropriate" services for these students was a major challenge for the educators and that obtaining services was a significant concern for many of their families. But because these students were integrated with the regular classes I did not initially register the degree to which disability classifications were shaping their relations with the school. Unfortunately, I did not recognize the salience of these issues until it was too late, notably when I learned that several parents who had children with a learning disability status were pulling their children from the school after the first year. When I spoke with some of these parents they said they liked the school but that it was not large enough to provide the services their children needed. Clearly the collective production of "disability" shaped these students' trajectories as well as negotiations over who the Downtown School would serve, but regrettably I did not do justice to these dynamics.<sup>25</sup>

### **2.5.1 Anonymity in a Digital Age**

One final dilemma I have wrestled with is how to protect the anonymity of my research participants in an era when so much material about a field site can be discovered online. In my case, I had the additional challenge that my field site was unique and, as such, it would be impossible to fully camouflage it without leaving out what made the site theoretically important (e.g. the school's "game-like" pedagogy, its prominence in public media accounts about school reform, its location in cosmopolitan New York City, etc.). While I have given the school a pseudonym so as to fulfill my IRB protocols, I am aware that curious readers will be able to identify the school if they choose to do so. As such, I have put much more effort into protecting the anonymity of

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<sup>25</sup> For a thoughtful and original analysis of the cultural production of learning disabilities see McDermott (1996).

individuals than the site itself. One way I have attempted to do this is by using slightly more abstract language, such as saying “a creative professional parent” rather than the specific job of the person in question. Similarly, since there were multiple teachers and other adults playing educational roles in the school I have tended to treat them uniformly as “educators.” In terms of the school’s planners, principal, and leadership team, I often say “planners” or “school leaders” which, in reality, encompassed nearly 10 people. Finally, when I report on someone that could potentially get someone in trouble (such as attending a District Two school while not living in District Two) I attempt to mask identity further. While these abstractions sacrifice nuance and detail, I hope they provide my participants with a sense that I have attempted to protect their privacy as best as I can given the semi-famous character of the field site.

As for students, all names have been changed and, again, I skewed my descriptions towards more generic accounts on some occasions. While I know members of the school community will be able to recognize some of the students I hope my representations are sufficiently opaque for readers who only know of the school from afar. I have also taken a cautious approach to how I represented the artifacts they posted online. I avoid quoting students verbatim from any materials they posted publically online. And I only included images of online artifacts that do not include pictures of the students or other personal identifiers (chapter 6). While the images students post of themselves online offer valuable insights into what it is like to be a sixth grader in a digital era, I do not feel comfortable publishing those images, even in cases where students encouraged me to do so, and even though the school publishes many images of the students in publically accessible channels. I do quote several snippets of emails by educators and parents, but I believe I have been able to protect the anonymity of the author to outsiders since these emails are not accessible online. Members of the school community will likely be able to identify the authors of some of these emails since they were sent to a school-wide email list, but I see them as similar to comments parents or educators made at PTA meetings and other forums where the whole school community was invited. I only quote emails that were not sent to a school-wide mailing list when the author of the email shared them with me directly.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In sum, to examine how digital media and schooling are playing a role in the production and reproduction of privilege, I drew on a social practice problematic that emphasizes the ways historical structures of privilege are made and remade *in situ*. Such a problematic attempts to draw on the advantages of both objectivist and subjectivist theorizing without succumbing to the limitations of each. A social practice problematic encourages an ethnographic approach, albeit at an “awkward scale” given the radical interconnectedness of contemporary social life. I chose a new school that was influenced by enthusiastic ideas about digital media as my entry point, but then extended my field site out of the school to consider students’ out-of-school lives, the roles of parents and caregivers, and the institutional context in which the Downtown School emerged as a highly touted new model of public education. I now turn to the roles that spatial relations played in producing social divisions between adults and children but also, importantly, in making social divisions between children.

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## **“You have to beat the crowd”: Accessing Enclaves for Children and Youth**

Spatial relations play a major role in the ongoing constitution of children and young people’s subjectivities, identities, and sense of life-trajectories as they navigate a historically produced social world. As noted in the introduction, contemporary children and young people spend an increasing portion of their weekly routines and longer periods of their lives in institutional settings designed for near-age peers but managed by adults. To describe and analyze how different children came to participate in these social formations I introduce two terms: “youth enclaves” and “adult-managed youth practices.” By using the term “enclave” I mean to draw attention to the spatial segregation of children and young people into specific sites of organized activity, what Chabon (2009) characterized as a “system of reservations.” The concrete settings where adult-managed practices for children and young people happen are typically surrounded by, but carefully bounded off from, adult society. The spatial separation of children and young people from the “profane” world of adults is so institutionalized that many take its rationale for granted. But as will be shown in this chapter, enclaves also separate children from other children, often on the basis of differences in age, gender, social-class, and race. These spatial segregations constrain the population of peers with whom children and young people form social relations and construct identities (chapters 6 & 7).

Spatial segregations also generate theoretical and practical questions about what constitutes preparation for participation in the adult world. Most enclaves segregate children and young people from the world even as they purport to prepare them to eventually enter it. This enclave/world division entails assumptions about how the activities that take place in enclaves “transfer” to other settings of situated activity. Conventional wisdom suggests that culturally neutral, context-free, “objective knowledge” and “higher order” skills and thinking justify the separation. From this perspective, learning is defined as the process by which children and young people acquire general knowledge and skills that they can later apply to the diverse settings of the adult world (for a review see Lave [2011, 13-23]). Educators and educational media mediate the enclave/world relationship by offering simulacra of what the world is really like. As discussed in the next two chapters, progressive pedagogic reformers have long, and in my opinion rightly, criticized this decontextualized account of knowledge and learning. While rightly critical of conventional notions of learning, progressive pedagogic reformers tend to reproduce one of the main limitations of the conventional approach, namely the spatial segregation of learners from the practices for which they are purportedly being prepared. Once we look at enclaves not as sites of preparation for future situated activity but as sites of situated activity in their own right, we see that the processes that sort children into different enclaves (this chapter and chapter 7) and form social divisions within

enclaves (chapter 6) are in fact the ways that social divisions are re-made for a new generation.

My inspiration for the concept of “enclaves” comes from Lave’s (1988) notion of an “arena,” which she distinguishes from a “setting.” According to Lave, the concept of an “arena” represents the aspects of a structured place of activity that most participants cannot change. By contrast, a “setting” represents the more phenomenological way in which different actors experience arenas as they engage in situated activity.<sup>1</sup> Lave illustrates the distinction by giving the example of shopping in a supermarket. The spatial configuration of aisles and products constitute the arena (shoppers have little control over these arrangements), but the routine ways different shoppers perceive and navigate the aisles and products constitute their settings. The two terms depend on each other for their existence, but the power relations between the terms are asymmetrical since most persons have little ability to shape the configuration of the arena. The concept of an arena is especially apt for analyses of children and young people’s practices since most spend the bulk of their daily and weekly routines in places where they have little control over the material configuration of the environment.<sup>2</sup> I am choosing the term “enclave” instead of “arena” to emphasize the spatial segregation that typifies adult-managed practices for children and young people. In particular, I want to draw attention to how the boundary work that produces enclaves for children and young people within adult society often also produces social divisions among children.

The term “adult-managed youth practices” is more straightforward. It is intended to refer to the activities that adults design and manage for children and young people in schools and other enclaves of organized activity. Within an enclave, young people’s interactions with adults are typically limited to a few employees who have often been trained, vetted, and ordained as specialists that are supposed to know what sorts of activities and knowledge are appropriate and beneficial for different children and young people and whose approval must constantly be sought. Definitions of what sorts of activities and knowledge are normatively “proper” point beyond the physical walls of the enclave, as adults who work in enclaves must manage their accountability to parents, the state, foundations, and others who hold power over the adults that manage activities for youth in enclaves.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I describe and analyze the ways students at the Downtown School gained access to

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1 De Certeau (1984) makes a similar distinction in his famous essay, “Walking in the City,” by drawing contrast between a city’s plan, as seen and shaped by the strategies of city planners, developers, and other institutional players, and the tactics by which persons navigate the city in the course of their everyday lives. While the plans of organizing bodies structure the experience of persons on the ground, it doesn’t fully determine how persons go about navigating and experiencing the city. Drawing on the ethnomethodological tradition established by Harold Garfinkel (e.g. 2002), Suchman (2006) makes a similar argument in her famous study of human-machine interactions, as does Bourdieu (1977).

2 Young people’s lack of control over the material enclaves they inhabit is one of the reasons that bedrooms, lockers, and backpacks resonate so strongly with many young people. It is also one of the reasons that playing and hanging out online is appealing for so many youth, whether configuring a virtual home, hanging out with friends in more private chat spaces, etc. See Chapters 5 & 6 for an account of these practices amongst the students who attended the Downtown School.

3 Of course, these normative understandings vary historically and across cultural contexts. At the moment, developmental psychology and pediatrics often define authoritative standards of what’s good for children and adolescents. Both tend to provide naturalistic and universal accounts of the normal or healthy ways that children and young people of various ages and genders should live their lives. Additionally, state laws and lawsuits increasingly influence how educators orient to children within enclaves.

various enclaves. I first discuss the factors that shaped access to schools, before discussing the factors that guided students into different enclaves of out-of-school activities. It has been posited that that “participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins et al. 2006) offers a potential avenue for children and young people to transcend the limitations of locally structured activities, therefore I also discuss when students did, and did not, make use of digital media to participate in these forms of social life. By looking at how children and families accessed these various sites of collective activity, I argue that many of New York City’s youth-serving enclaves continue to remake social-class and racialized ethnic social divisions. However, in the case of some new public schools, such as the Downtown School, “school choice” reforms (chapter 4) are contributing to a reconfiguration of the sorting mechanisms. I argue that among those who stayed in the public school system, “school choice” placed greater emphasis on the cultural features of a school as families and schools evaluated each other for “cultural fit.” Additionally, I argue that the “choice system” rewarded families based on residential geography as well as those that were able to outnetwork their competitors. As I’ll show, professional families were able to amplify their influence by forming an informal “networked coalition” with each other before the year began. In terms of out-of-school enclaves, participation was highly shaped by social-class and gender. Going beyond class-based differences in parenting styles (e.g. Lareau 2003), access was substantially shaped by a family’s ability to pay, and families with comparatively constrained economic resources often had to “beat the crowd” in order to gain subsidized services for their children. After-school and weekend programs were also highly divergent by gender. Further, the sorting of children into different out-of-school activities played a significant role in how students made social divisions within the school, a relation that led some professional parents to strategically place their children in out-of-school activities that would support in-school friendships desired by the parents. Finally, I argue that while “participatory cultures” have the potential to offer children and young people valuable social alternatives to those available locally, in my study students’ online social activity mostly reproduced the social boundaries of their local enclaves. I suggest that this rather tight coupling of online and offline likely has much to do with the interrelated factors of age expectations, adult oversight, and discourses and practices of fear with respect to interacting with strangers online. These tensions were especially salient for educators such as those at the Downtown School who were simultaneously charged with breaking down historical social borders (chapters 4 & 5) while also patrolling enclave borders (chapter 7).

### **3.1 Controlling Access to Schools**

Controlling access to public school enclaves in New York City is a tricky and a politically fraught endeavor. For the most part, Manhattan’s public elementary and middle schools are highly segregated along the interwoven lines of social-class and racialized-ethnic differences. While there was variation between individual schools, there was a fairly rigid divide between schools that were predominantly white and/or Asian American, and schools that were predominantly African American and/or Latino/a. These racial-ethnic divisions tended to map to large differences in social-class, with some schools primarily serving families whose parents had graduate degrees and worked as professionals and others primarily serving families whose parents had a college education or less and tended to work in comparatively low-status service jobs.<sup>4</sup> Larger “zoned” schools tended

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<sup>4</sup> The correlation between racial and ethnic groups and social-class may be less stark in other boroughs, where some

to be similarly split, but with social sorting (or “tracking”) within rather than between schools.

In elementary school, the residential real-estate market, coupled with ethnically- and racially-segregated neighborhoods, were the main mediating mechanisms that produced racialized social-class divisions between public school enclaves. DOE policies prioritized the assignment of children to elementary schools based on the neighborhood where their families resided. The link between residential segregation, which is highly shaped by real estate markets, and school segregation was tight. One consequence of this policy was that demand for residences in neighborhoods with “good” schools was fierce and rising real estate values have pushed many less-privileged residents out of the school zone. For roughly the last decade, residential development in lower Manhattan has outpaced the capacity of local elementary schools. This shortage was partially produced by state sponsored efforts to “redevelop” lower Manhattan following 9/11.<sup>5</sup> Large injections of federal aid have led to rapid residential development in many lower Manhattan neighborhoods, leading to gentrification that has overcrowded local schools. These capacity problems led the DOE to sometimes break the taken-for-granted expectation that the geography of a family’s residence guaranteed their children a spot at a specific elementary school, unhinging the tight coupling between social-class and a school’s student population. These changes provoked testy conflicts between wealthy families and the DOE.<sup>6</sup>

One consequence of these conflicts has been greater enforcement of geographic boundaries. Wealthy professional families living in Manhattan have increasingly pressured the DOE to enforce zoning criteria in school admissions, undermining efforts by some “progressive” schools to admit less-privileged and more ethnically diverse students from outside their zone. In one of my interviews, a middle-class African-American mother who lived in Brooklyn but whose daughter had attended progressive schools in Manhattan since elementary school, described to me how her daughter’s progressive elementary school had changed with the influx of professional families moving into lower Manhattan:

There were all of these schools in Manhattan that used to feed kids in from Brooklyn. They’d say, “If you’re interested in this type of education, come on.” So then, after 9/11, there weren’t enough middle school seats... [The mayor] says, “We don’t have enough seats. There’s been so much development. There are so many people who are paying a million dollars for an apartment and their kid can’t go to a school. So these kids have to go back to their borough.”... All of this is to say that because of that, as [my daughter] grew up through [her elementary school],

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schools serve more middle class families from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

5 Several billion dollars in federal grants have been distributed for redevelopment. These funds are administered by the Lower Manhattan Develop Corporation, which, according to its website, is a “joint State-City corporation.”

6 See for example controversies over kindergarten access at lower Manhattan’s coveted schools in Elissa Gootman, “New York’s Coveted Public Schools Face Pupil Jam,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2008. For evidence that much of this strain on capacity has come from the influx of professionals, see Thompson (2008). Neighborhoods that are facing serious overcapacity problems include: Greenwich Village, the Upper East Side, the Upper West Side, Brooklyn Heights, DUMBO, Downtown Brooklyn, and parts of Fort Greene. All are neighborhoods with high, and in many cases rapidly increasing, household incomes. The median household income in Downtown Manhattan, for example, is twice as high as the median household income in Manhattan as a whole, see Amanda Fung, “Downtown’s Population Boom Seen Rolling On,” accessed on May 22, 2012, [http://www.craigslist.com/article/20100518/REAL\\_ESTATE/100519839](http://www.craigslist.com/article/20100518/REAL_ESTATE/100519839).

the diversity left. When [she] started it was very diverse and we were so excited to be there. But then, by the time she was graduating, it was less and less and less minority children in the school. The school took on this whole other culture.

The sorting process for middle and high schools was more complex and less dependent on residential geography. For middle and high schools, the DOE did not assign individual schools to neighborhood residential zones. Instead, families could apply to any middle school in their district and any high school in the city. As I discuss in the next chapter, this policy came about as part of a larger national trend where school reformers have attempted to create market-like conditions within public school systems. As part of this series of reforms, many large public high schools in New York City have been closed and numerous “small” middle schools and high schools have been opened in their place, often within the same buildings. These reforms have attempted to offer families “choices” over where they send their children, purportedly increasing families’ power as consumers and better quality schools as schools compete with each other to attract families.<sup>7</sup>

Alongside these reforms, new mechanisms for sorting students into different public school enclaves were emerging. Each school district covered a much larger geographic area than the elementary school zones and hence included more economically and ethnically diverse households. Families could apply to any of the small, often thematic, middle schools in their district, and if they didn’t get into any of those they would be offered a spot in one of the large “zoned” schools, an arrangement that was commonly referred to as the “choice system.” The Downtown School was located in District Two, the wealthiest school district in New York City. While the “choice system” offered the promise of transcending some of the social divisions produced by residential segregation, many of District Two’s middle schools remained largely segregated by social-class and racialized ethnic differences. By and large, professional parents at my site listed the same four or five small District Two middle schools that they considered desirable and acceptable. These schools were predominantly attended by white and Asian American students and had relatively few students on free or reduced-price lunch. Most of these middle schools produced segregation by using test-scores and other criteria such as attendance rates in student admissions. According to the parents I interviewed, many of these schools were enormously competitive to get into, with some schools receiving over 1,200 applicants for approximately 200 seats.<sup>8</sup> Parents also shared stories about the nuanced strategies families used to gain access to coveted schools. For example, several popular schools were rumored to only accept students that had the highest marks on their exams and that listed the school as their top choice on the DOE application.<sup>9</sup> If their sons or daughters were not admitted to one of these coveted schools, professional parents would either move out of the city, pay for private school, or attend one of the two large zoned public schools that had internal academic tracks dividing comparatively high-achieving “special progress” students from everyone else. What professional parents would not consider were the other small public middle schools, which some referred to as “problem schools,” and which had a much higher percentage of students on free and reduced-price lunch.

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7 The different, and unequal, ways that families exercised their “consumer sovereignty” are discussed later in this chapter, as well as in chapter 7.

8 One parent told me there were over 3,000 applicants for one of these schools. My research on the DOE website suggests that the number of applicants was closer to 1,200.

9 I also heard that one selective middle school had a relationship with NYU and gave priority access to children of NYU professors.

Without a residence-to-school link, many of the wealthiest professional families in District Two either left the public school system at middle school or moved to the suburbs. As one professional mother told me, “At middle school, rich people peel off for private, totally. They’re out.” The transition to middle school thus produced a rupture in the schooling trajectories of neighboring children from professional families. This rupture revealed and helped reproduce a split within the professional class that mapped to their differences in economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Whereas economically and culturally elite families shared neighborhoods and elementary schools, at middle school families with high cultural capital but comparatively less economic capital navigated the “choice system” without their economically privileged counterparts. Unless their children tested highly, less-privileged families had little chance of being admitted to one of District Two’s selective middle schools. Further, most of New York City’s less-privileged families lived outside of District Two and had increasing difficulty getting “variances” allowing their children to attend a District Two school, a point I’ll return to shortly.

As noted in the last chapter, the Downtown School had atypical ethnic and social-class diversity compared to most District Two middle schools, in part thanks to the “choice system” but also in large part because of concerted efforts on behalf of the school’s founders and parents or guardians living outside of District Two. In this chapter, I focus on how families chose the Downtown School. In chapter 7, I discuss how parents attempted to control who else would choose the Downtown School. In both chapters, I argue that “cultural fit” played an increasingly important role in the sorting process, and, as such, efforts to shape the school’s official “culture” were contentious, politically fraught, and dependent on actors’ abilities to construct networked coalitions in support of their cause.

### **3.1.1 “Choosing” the Downtown School**

Families that stayed in the public school system for middle school applied to prospective middle schools in the winter of their child’s fifth grade year. While children and parents or guardians co-participated in this application process, I got the strong sense that parents were driving the process in most cases.<sup>10</sup> As part of the application process, families were encouraged to attend “open houses” at prospective middle schools in the fall. They then ranked their top choices and waited to hear from the DOE about their school “match.” Newly created small schools, such as the Downtown School, were prohibited from using test scores and most other criteria in admissions. Instead, the Downtown School could mark whether or not they felt an applicant was making an “informed choice,” a designation that was mostly left up to schools to define. The DOE then supposedly ran an algorithm that “matched” students with schools, purportedly by using a lottery that took both family and school preferences into account.<sup>11</sup>

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10 I didn’t observe these negotiations but parents would often explain the school admissions process as if it was primarily their decision, saying things like, “I really liked...” or “I thought it would be a good fit for...” and so forth.

11 As far as I can tell, there’s no clear statement about exactly how this matching process works. Anecdotally, I heard school administrators mentioning numerous ways in which the DOE shaped school admissions, looking at factors such as the percentage of students with learning disabilities, the percentage of students who spoke English as a second language, and so on. Some professional families complained that they believed the DOE was “dumping” low-performing students on the Downtown School; I discuss this pollution rhetoric in more detail in chapter 7.

Most of the parents I spoke with suggested that the middle school application process was time-intensive, fraught with uncertainty, and anxiety provoking. Many professional parents compared the process to the college admissions process, and several suggested it was “crazy.” Against this complicated and uncertain process, the Downtown School offered a unique opportunity. First, many parents of various social-class backgrounds were attracted to the school because it was well funded, had small classes, had the backing of major foundations, was associated with faculty at one of the local universities, and was uniquely well equipped. Additionally, since the school was new it wasn’t part of the regular District Two admissions process in the first year and many prospective families were told by the school’s leaders that they would likely be given a spot if they applied and came to the school’s open houses. As I’ll show, most families saw this openness as an opportunity, but many professional families also saw it as a risk depending on who else passed through the opening. Additionally, the school’s focus on digital media and gaming attracted families with boy students more than families with girl students. As noted in the last chapter, in its first year the school was 40% female and by its third year this number had slipped to about 35%, an early indicator that the school’s presentation of itself as a “school for digital kids” entailed inherited cultural biases.

In addition to being more accessible in its first year, many of the creative professional parents were attracted to some of the school’s “progressive” techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities, especially its focus on student agency and creative production. In keeping with the school’s promotional materials, the creative professional parents who chose the school tended to define “progressive schools” in contradistinction with “traditional” schools, the latter of which were seen as overly focused on narrow definitions of achievement, excessive competition between students, lots of homework, standardized outcomes, and deeply rutted life-trajectories aimed at predetermined positions in adult society. Thus, by “choosing” a new progressive public school, creative professional parents differentiated themselves and their children from other professional parents and their children. Here, for example, is how a pair of creative professional parents described their affinity for their son’s progressive elementary school, as well as their attraction to the Downtown School:

Mother: When I say progressive, it wasn’t about test scores. It was about getting these kids to learn and be creative. That’s what I consider progressive. So this school, in a way, the Downtown School was a good match. [My son] really thrived in [his progressive elementary] school, and I could see that the Downtown School was going to be similar. We all got together, because it was crazy. Because it’s a brand new school, it was really the risk-takers that took it. We’re totally risk-takers, we just didn’t care. It wasn’t like we want to send him to medical school.

Father: [Laughing] Jump off a bridge? Where is it? I’ll jump.

Mother: A lot of people have an idea of where they want to be in life, and where they’re going to send their kids and go to medical school and everything. The Downtown School wasn’t on that trajectory. The Downtown School was definitely a school that you went to because you really thought, “Wow, this must be cool.”

There are several aspects of this exchange that deserve comment. First, the mother figures progressive schooling as a good “match” for her son, one that has allowed him to “thrive.” This

notion of students “matching” or “fitting” the culture of a school played a significant role in the sorting processes of the “choice system.” The mother’s sense that the school was “creative” and “cool” can partially be understood as a match between her and her husband’s professional practices and the school’s relationships to New York City’s art, design, media, and advertising scenes.<sup>12</sup> One important feature of these scenes is that participation involves remaining constantly abreast of what is considered “cool” at any given moment since the cultural trends and fashions they help produce are constantly changing. This family’s ability to recognize the school as “cool” articulated a division between those who could recognize and appreciate the school as “cool” and those who couldn’t or wouldn’t – presumably those parents who chose to guide their children down highly institutionalized pathways towards medical school and other preformed positions. Second, but in a related vein, the mother associated their family’s choice of a new progressive school with being “crazy” and adventurous “risk-takers.” The school’s promotional materials valorized similarly heroic notions as the school and its students were routinely presented as singularly innovative and adventurous pioneers on the frontiers of the twenty-first century.<sup>13</sup> This alignment of frontier discourse and a self-image as adventurous, cutting edge, risk-takers helped produce a sense of “cultural fit” between the family and the school as it helped mask the fact that they and their children were still navigating a bureaucratic system like everybody else.

In distinguishing progressive schools from traditional schools, some of the white professional parents also racialized the differences in approach, noting that Asian American children and parents were overrepresented in many of the selective schools. For example, when one of the white professional mothers described to me some of the selective District Two middle and high schools, she noted:

Mother: But honestly, and I know I’m being recorded, but it’s going to be a lot more Asian kids.

Christo: You can always tell me not to quote something.

Mother: It doesn’t matter; everybody knows that. At Hunter, and that’s true at Stuyvesant too. The Asian kids are going to do the best testing.

In another conversation, a creative professional parent suggested that many of the white professional parents in District Two anxiously compared themselves to Asian-American parents, a perturbation that typically entailed a judgment against “Asian” styles of parenting and especially mothering.<sup>14</sup> A similarly anxious orientalism was articulated in recent national policy debates about a twenty-first century American educational crises and the need for state-driven school reform.<sup>15</sup>

While creative professional parents tended to see their choice of the school as an expression of their

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12 As I discuss in the next chapter, one of the school’s founders was thickly connected to these scenes, and many of the school’s professional parents, including the two quoted above, worked as creative professionals in the culture industries.

13 As Turner (2006) observed, the association of digital media with this sort of frontier imaginary has a long history in discourses that celebrate the emancipatory potential of computers and the internet.

14 Later in my study, these anxieties were exacerbated up by the publication of Amy Chua’s (2011) polemical book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which describes a set of parenting practices almost diametrically opposed to many of the “progressive” educational virtues promoted by the Downtown School.

15 See chapter 4.

distinctively risk-taking disposition, it is worth considering how they framed the risks involved. For one, many professional parents noted that the school's model was "new" and "untested." This was a point of concern for several of the professional parents, but the school's esteemed leaders, the backing of major foundations, and the origins of the model in the "learning sciences" helped mitigate their uneasiness. A more pervasive, sometimes coded, but palpable angst centered on the school's apparent lack of mechanisms for controlling access to the enclave. As one professional father said to me on the first day of school, "The big unknown is the other students," before noting that school had not had time to implement selection criteria. Professional parents routinely revealed their unease over the high percentage of children on free and reduced-price lunch, which was correlated with institutional markers of race that the DOE published online. As one creative professional father put it, the professional parents were, "concerned about underperforming minority students."<sup>16</sup>

One way these creative professional parents mitigated their sense of risk – while simultaneously propagating the collective sense that they were adventurous risk takers – was by forming a "networked coalition" of mostly other professional families. This coalition was networked both in the sense that the participants formed a network of social relations and in the sense that coalition participants relied on networked communications technologies. The coalition was informal yet didn't exist independent of formal institutions; rather, it was formed precisely so members could wield greater power as they interfaced with a bureaucratic institution.

At the Downtown School, this coalition took substantive form before the school year even began. Several months before the school opened, one of the professional mothers contacted the guidance counselor at her child's gentrified elementary school in Greenwich Village to find out which other parents were considering the Downtown School. She also contacted guidance counselors at other wealthy elementary schools in Manhattan and asked for a similar list of parents who were considering the Downtown School. She then contacted these parents, started an email thread, and eventually invited prospective parents and children to meet each other at her family's apartment. Many of the parents who attended this meeting agreed to try the new school so long as a sizable number of others attended with them.<sup>17</sup> About a month after the school opened, members of this networked coalition held all of the PTA's leadership positions and they went on to shape the school in significant ways (chapter 7).

Several of the less-privileged parents and guardians were also attracted to some of the school's "progressive" techno-cosmopolitan ideals, but they often evaluated them differently. Like the more privileged parents, some of the less-privileged families were attracted to the school's student-centered focus on creative production and "learning by doing." About a quarter of the Downtown School's less-privileged students came from an elementary school that focused on the arts, and especially the performing arts. While their parents were interested in the school's focus on creativity, they tended to desire a more diverse collection of creative offerings, including offerings that weren't focused on digital media. As a mother and daughter put it to me during an interview:

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16 A school leader condemned this parent for this statement. In general, though, I routinely heard professional parents make similarly coded characterizations of these "others" within the school. Also, it should be noted that the parent's stereotyping was incorrect as some of the students who performed at the top of their class on tests were "minority students."

17 See chapter 7.

- Mother: I think the Downtown School has a great idea. I just think they should have more outside activities.
- Daughter: We're stuck in a little room all day.
- Mother: Yeah. Kids need to be able to release. You have a whole bunch of crazy little kids. You know what? A kid is not going to be stuck to the computer all day. Offer programs, offer dance classes, offer yoga... They should have drama. You know? For different kids, not just because [my daughter] likes it, but a lot of kids do school plays. And it expands the school. To be known, other people might want to apply. You might want to have a band, you know? A basketball team. Anything like that. Cheerleading. You know? Things like that.

Like the creative professional parents quoted earlier, this mother's comment helps illustrate the role of "cultural fit" in school selection within the choice system. In addition to calls for more diverse offerings, less-privileged parents did not tend to present themselves as pioneers and risk-takers. Instead, many saw sending their children to the Downtown School as a way to mitigate risks associated with their local neighborhoods – a very different notion of risk. As noted earlier, a good portion of the school's less-privileged students lived outside of District Two, and these families tended to see District Two as the main "choice" to fight for. In a different perspective on "choice," one mother from the Bronx told me, "It doesn't have to be the middle school of your choice... If you are in District Two, basically there are no bad middle schools in District Two." Similarly, another mother who lived outside of District Two stressed what made District Two schools distinctive:

District Two schools have the majority of the money. That is why a lot of parents want their kids there. They have the parents that are very active, and some of the parents there are freelancers, so they have all of this time on their hands so they can participate in school and do their work on the side as well. A lot of them are very well educated and probably went to college and probably have their master's degree. Compared to the schools here in this district, it is not like that. A lot of the parents are low-income families and not that well educated. That affects the school environment, unfortunately a lot.

There were a variety of ways students from outside of District Two got into the Downtown School. One family used a relative's Manhattan address on their application forms. One girl from Queens spent her weeknights at her grandmother's apartment in Manhattan and various family members took turns staying at the apartment to look after her. Another girl stayed at her aunt's apartment. One student from the Bronx had an elementary school teacher who went on a camping trip with one of the school's founders and introduced the family to the school's founder who then got the student accepted. Additionally, a large number of families had gotten "variances" from the DOE that allowed their children to attend an elementary school in District Two. Once enrolled in an elementary school in District Two, students were promised a spot in a District Two middle school as well. As noted earlier, less-privileged parents suggested it was increasingly difficult to get a "variance" given the influx of professional families into lower Manhattan after state-sponsored post-9/11 redevelopment projects led young professional families to swarm lower Manhattan, in large part to gain access to its schools. Of those who had variances, many obtained them because

their children had tested into the city's "gifted and talented" program.

While some of the less-privileged parents were in communications with the parents of children who had attended the same elementary school as their children, by and large the less-privileged parents did not form a networked coalition with each other, nor were they regularly included in communications amongst the networked coalition of more privileged parents.<sup>18</sup> Less-privileged families mostly interfaced with the DOE and the school's leadership on a per family basis, a relation that significantly diminished their political power even though the school's leadership was actively attempting to attract and empower a more diverse collection of families. As one mother told me, even after her children made the gifted and talented program, she had to aggressively petition the DOE to get her kids accepted at a District Two school, and she had to do so on her own:

My family and I, we kind of lucked up on the District Two... We were in a situation that called for the shelter to come in for a minute. And of course, sometimes people get there for different reasons; I know what my reasons were, and it wasn't because I wasn't taking care of my business. So they were wanting to just throw me and my babies in the school that was available for most people that were in the shelter, which was right there next to the building. And I was like, "Absolutely not! My babies have already tested for the talented and gifted program, and I need to find the school closest with that program." And they let me in it. That's what I had to do. I had to get a little muscle into it, a little bite, and I had to pull. My baby had to take the test over to get her seat and all these different things. But hey, that's what we have to do. And so when everybody asks me that question, "Well, how did you get your children into that school?" I say, "Excuse me, I worked to get them there."

A few aspects of her statement deserve comment. First, she framed her acceptance into a District Two school as "lucky." This view, which was common amongst families from outside of District Two, contrasted sharply with the more entitled views of privileged families who lived in District Two. Second, her reference to others questioning her about how she got her children into a District Two school reveals how her strategy, while impressive as an individual case, would be difficult to expand into a more general political strategy. Only a few lucky outsiders were allowed into District Two schools, and, as such, competition for these limited spots likely created divisions and jealousy amongst less-privileged families in local neighborhoods. Third, culturally biased as it may be, testing allowed several of the less-privileged students to circumvent geographic barriers and win a spot in a District Two school. This surfaced a recurring tension between the Downtown School's multiple mandates, as leaders welcomed these students as they also partially defined the school by contrasting it to a "testing regime."<sup>19</sup>

Many less-privileged parents had similar stories of working extensively within and around the DOE bureaucracy, and many suggested that their local schools "weren't an option." As one aunt

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<sup>18</sup> I can't offer systematic claims as to why these families weren't as thickly networked to each other, but I suppose that it had to do with limited access to time, less access to communications technologies that they could use for personal purposes at home and work, and perhaps a different orientation as to how they should relate to professional school officials.

<sup>19</sup> I'll discuss this tension in the next chapter as well as in chapter 7.

who looked after her niece said to me, “I did not want to put her in the school that everyone was going to. Only because some of those kids – and I’m not judging anyone – but some of those kids come from rough backgrounds.” A similar attempt to control their children’s interactions with children and young people that they saw as “rough” or “dangerous” was expressed by many of the less-privileged families. In one case, a less-privileged mother chose the Downtown School not because of it was flush with technology and used “game-like” learning but because the school her son had initially been accepted to required him to commute past a public housing project that had a history of conflicts with kids from their public housing project. As she said, “I didn’t want to risk it,” once again showing the variability in how families conceived of the “risks” associated with navigating the “choice system.”

In sum, families “chose” the Downtown School in very different ways and for a variety of different reasons. Most families were attracted to aspects of the school’s “progressive” techno-cosmopolitan identity, but different families were drawn to different facets of this identity. Professional parents, and especially creative professional parents, were mostly drawn to the school because it was distinguished from more conventional schools and conventional life-trajectories. Conventional schools were often seen as *imposing* an established order on students, a trespass against their child’s authentic self-realization.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, because the school was new, these parents rightly assumed they could exert a large degree of influence on its development. Finally, the school’s blending of the latest advances in digital media technologies with design and creativity inflected the school with a sense of “cool” that was recognized as such because creative professional parents participated as cultural producers in fields that similarly associated digital media with future relevance and being cutting edge. Less-privileged families also tended to define the Downtown School in relation to other schools, but these families tended to primarily identify the school with its location in District Two. For these families, the main facet of the school’s techno-cosmopolitan ideals that drew them to the school was the ideal of inclusiveness. Some less-privileged families were also attracted to the school’s focus on creative production, but they wished the school offered a more diverse collection of creative options. I now turn to how the students at the Downtown School ended up in different after-school and weekend enclaves. In chapter 6, I argue that these out-of-school activities were central to the ways students formed social divisions within the school.

### 3.2 “Choosing” After-School Enclaves

In addition to school enclaves, most students spent a good portion of their weekly routines in after-school and sometimes weekend enclaves of adult-managed practices for children and young people. Social-class and gender were the main mediating factors that shaped students’ access to, and participation in, after-school and weekend programming. A family’s ability to pay largely produced segregation in program participation along social-class lines. Swimming classes, for example, cost \$1,000 a quarter. Many privileged families noted that the after-school options in New York were great but “very pricey.” Both privileged girls and privileged boys tended to participate in a variety of private classes, lessons, and tutoring for musical instruments, foreign languages, academic enrichment, individualized athletic activity (working out, horseback riding, ice-skating, tennis,

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<sup>20</sup> See the introduction.

dance, martial arts, parkour, skiing and snowboarding, surfing, swimming), and religious classes.<sup>21</sup>

Less-privileged boys and girls tended to participate in after-school programming offered by schools or community based organizations like the Boys and Girls Club or Make a Wish Foundation or local churches. Several of the less-privileged boys were deeply involved in group sports, especially basketball and football, some of which were sponsored by not-for-profit community-based organizations like the Boys Club and some of which were offered by private leagues. These activities tended to organize children into groups, squads, and teams that shared a common goal, whereas many of the privileged students activities were organized around individual accomplishments and recognition. The Boys Club was significantly more affordable than the private leagues, but even some families with limited economic resources saved up for a private football league. As one grandmother who was the primary caretaker for her grandson mentioned to me:

I'd like for [my grandson] to get into basketball, but he likes football. He won a trophy. This football thing is coming up this year, so if I have the money, I can start paying on it. It's \$400, because they rent equipment, they travel places, and they find food and stuff. That's what I'm fighting for.

As discussed in chapter 6, playing these sports was an organizing interest for one of the main masculine cliques that formed in the school's peer culture. In general, the less-privileged girls tended to spend more time in activities that weren't managed and directly supervised by adults. Some hung out at libraries after school, others went to their parents' work, others helped babysit extended family members, and several went home. A handful of boys and girls from various economic backgrounds also attended counseling and therapy sessions after school. For the less-privileged students, these sessions were typically mandated by the school, often as part a disciplinary program for students who routinely got in trouble. I also learned of a few more privileged students who were in various forms of therapy or counseling not mandated by the school.

As with "choosing" a District Two school, many of the less-privileged parents and guardians worked concertedly to obtain affordable and desirable after-school and summer programming for their children. Consider, for example, how this mother from the Bronx went about getting her daughter enrolled in an affordable summer program offered by the parks department:

I don't know if you know, but parks departments are like these low budget community places that offer summer camps at a low cost to kids. There is one on 54th Street and 2nd Avenue, which is upper Manhattan, which is fabulous, okay? It is like one of these country club parks departments... [My daughter] has been going there for three years to summer camp. They start accepting applications in February. I left my house last year – they start accepting applications at 9:00 in the morning, they only have 40 spots – I left my house at 4:30 a.m. last year. Do you hear me? 4:30 a.m. When I got there, I was number 55. Do you hear me? 55. I was like, "Oh, my God. I can't believe it." But I took the number. You stay on the line because if you don't have all your paperwork and you don't have the stuff, they won't take your application. You have to have everything. So there were a few people that didn't have their stuff or whatever. This is what you have to do. This

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21 Participation tended to be quite gendered though, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 6.

year I left at 4:00. I was like number 30 or something like that... People were there, from the neighborhood, and, you know, they feel like, “This belongs to us. We are in the neighborhood so we should have first choice.” If you want your kid in something nice, these are the things that you have to do. If you can’t really afford some of this stuff, you have to beat the crowd.

Like the controversies over out-of-district students attending District Two schools, this mother’s story illustrates how families in wealthy neighborhoods feel a sense of geographic entitlement to publically sponsored services. Her account also illustrates that there are not enough services to go around, hence creating competitive relations amongst families seeking opportunities.

The Downtown School sponsored after-school programming with reduced fees for students who had less ability to pay. At the beginning of the year, all of these programs focused on creative production with digital media, including how to make comics and animations, computer programs, “hacked” toys, a marketing campaign for a new video game, electronically enhanced fashion items, and so forth. In keeping with the school’s tendency to attract more boys than girls, these programs were almost exclusively attended by a group of boys who also tended to hang out with each other during the school day. These programs helped constitute this clique and buttress their generally positive reputation among educators and many parents. Only one less-privileged girl, who I’ll call Nita, routinely attended the school’s after-school programs with the boys.<sup>22</sup> The only after-school program at the Downtown School that attracted a group of girls was a trimester-long program focused on incorporating simple electronics into clothing items that the students would design and sew. The school offered this program in an attempt to increase girls’ participation in its after-school programs and it succeeded in attracting a handful of girls, and no boys, for this one trimester.

While the Downtown School’s after-school programs had difficulty attracting girls, they did attract a mixture of privileged and less-privileged students. Generally, though, the students that continued to work on media production projects at home were from families with professional parents. These differences in home-use were likely shaped by differences in access to equipment, workspaces, outside instruction, and parental or sibling supports in the home. Almost all of the privileged boys, and to my knowledge all but one of the less-privileged students who attended after-school, had recent Macintosh computers at home that could run the media production software that the students were learning at school. Most privileged boys either had their own computer or shared a computer with a sibling. Additionally, all of the privileged students who produced media at home had parents who encouraged their media production interests and provided them with tools and guidance. Most of these parents worked in culture industries and used computers extensively in their professional lives. Further, when their children expressed an apparent interest in media production, these parents often supported their interest by buying specialized equipment – such as green screens and editing software – and some paid for their children to enroll in private classes focused on media production.

In terms of social relations that formed by way of participation in out-of-school activities, I didn’t

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<sup>22</sup> Another challenge to after-school enrollment was that the programs required students to attend them several days a week. This requirement didn’t align with the out-of-school schedules of some more privileged families who had their children enrolled in a diversity of programs. They also didn’t align with some of the less-privileged students who helped care for siblings and cousins on some afternoons.

learn of many privileged students establishing significant new friendships by way of their participation in private after-school or weekend programs and lessons. When asked to share how they had met their friends, most privileged students pointed to their elementary schools, the Downtown School, a neighbor in their building, or family friends. A few mentioned having a friend or two in their neighborhood. Thus, while privileged students were exposed to a diversity of cultural offerings, they do were not exposed to children from a diversity of economic and cultural backgrounds.

By contrast, many of the less-privileged students suggested that some of their closest friends were kids they had met through their sports teams, cheerleading squads, and performance groups, or that they knew from their neighborhoods, through extended kinship networks, and through their churches. Hanging out with friends from the neighborhood were more spontaneous and involved less family orchestration (cf. Lareau 2003). For example, Jamal, one of the less-privileged boys, explained:

On my block, I know a lot of people. For fun, I'll just go outside and I'll play with my friends. Or I'll go to my friend's house that lives in my grandmother's building, who I know really well. Or I'll go to my friend's house a couple of houses down on my block.

Similarly, here is how Troy, who lived in a public housing complex, explained to me his after school routine:

Lately I've been just getting out of school, go home, wait for my best friend to knock on my door. He lives in a building right in front of this building. Then we play basketball, or we go to my friend's house, or we play with Nerf guns, or we sit at my house and watch TV, or we just go to the library or to the arcade if I have any money. We do that until like 7:00 and then I come home, take a shower, eat, go to sleep.

While these activities were more spontaneous and less managed by adults than privileged students' out-of-school activities, the family members of less-privileged students still played an oversight role, such as by granting their children permission to go outside or to a friend's house, checking in by cell phone, and directing them to avoid certain local spaces. For example, Troy and his friends walked 10-15 minutes to a park to play basketball, even though there were courts in his housing complex. When I asked him why he said, "My dad doesn't think it is good because there are trouble kids around here. That is why I don't play around here." While adults played a role, less-privileged students had more freedom over their activities. These informal activities also tended to be more age-heterogeneous, hence supporting precociousness, a major factor of identity negotiations within the school (see chapter 6).

While after-school programs for privileged students didn't appear to introduce them to close new friendships, I did learn of many cases where participation strengthened relations with peers they had met through school or through their parents. In several cases, privileged parents attempted to arrange their children's friendships by coordinating their children's after-school and leisure activities with other "suitable" parents. Here, for example, is how Eli, a white boy with two creative professional parents, discussed the formation of his friendship and creative partnership with Corin, also a white boy with two creative professional parents. Eli and Corin made numerous videos together and were widely recognized by students and educators as the most advanced video makers

at the Downtown School:

You know, it was like one of those mom things, where it's like, [falsetto] "Ohh!" [Laughter] Like your mom, like his mom was like, [falsetto] "My son makes movies." And my mom was like, [falsetto] "My son does too! You two go to Corin's room and make a movie." It was like one of those mom-encouraging things. We did and it was actually a lot of fun and that is when it started.

When their children were younger, many privileged parents attempted to arrange their children's friendships through "play dates." Many privileged parents still attempted to arrange "play dates" but some of their children were beginning to resist the practice, presumably because of its association with younger children and less autonomy from adults. For example, Jennifer, one of the privileged girls who hung out with the "Cool Girls" (chapter 6), asked her friend to not use the phrase, "play date," and instead suggested that they call it a "hang out." Even so, parents still coordinated with other parents to arrange social time for their children, to chaperone collective outings, and to enroll their children in the same after-school programs. These practices of trying to nurture selected friendships were especially common amongst parents of the privileged girl students. According to some of the privileged parents of daughters, their efforts were both pragmatic and strategic. Pragmatically, several privileged parents took turns chaperoning each other's children as they shuttled them between homes, school, after-school activities, and outings in the city. Their ability to do so was partly supported by flexibility in their work schedules. As discussed in chapter 7, this time and work flexibility also facilitated more quotidian interactions with educators, which, in turn, allowed some parents, and not others, to gather information that was then circulated amongst the networked coalition. One professional mother had a routine of letting a handful of girls hang out at her apartment on Wednesdays, a day when school was let out early. Another mother sponsored a weekly ice-skating trip by paying a babysitter to accompany the girls to and from the rink. As this mother noted to me, her involvement was also an attempt to facilitate her daughter's social life at school:

Pretty early in the year... I realized that I needed to help facilitate her social life more than I anticipated doing. In elementary school, we walked to school and walked home, and it was easy, and she had friends in the neighborhood. Coming together for all of District Two, where the kids are from all over the place, it's much harder to manage socializing, and [my daughter] was a little more lost socially in this place. So I organized – my babysitter picks them up on Fridays and takes whoever wants to go skating, skating. So usually like ten kids go skating every Friday, it's fantastic... A lot of the [girls'] moms coordinate stuff. A lot of the [girls] eat lunch together. And that definitely helped them feel more comfortable at school. So that's one of the things they do, that's just a social activity, but it's definitely a nice thing for them, that they have a social thing with other kids at school.

As this mother recognized, students' out-of-school activities often played a significant role facilitating in-school friendships and cliques (chapter 6). Moreover, while she presented the ice-skating service as open to all – "whoever wants to go" – in practice, primarily privileged girls from one clique attended.

In sum, differences in social-class and difference in gender identifications were the main mediating

factors that shaped differences in after-school participation. In general, the private after-school offerings and leisure activities pursued by privileged families did not establish new friendship relations but they did help facilitate school-based friendships that consolidated historical structures of privilege. Less-privileged students participated in fewer programs than their privileged peers and the programs they did participate in tended towards group or team endeavors. Less-privileged girls participated in the fewest organized activities, in part because of the lack of availability of desirable programming and in part because some helped family members with domestic work such as looking after siblings and cousins. The school's after-school programs focused on media production attracted students from across social-class divisions but tended to primarily appeal to boys. Ideally, networked computing held the potential to offer opportunities for participation in collective practices that transcended the limitations of these local arrangements. But, as I will now show, the vast majority of students at the Downtown School did not pursue new social relations online. Further, parents used networked computing to consolidate, rather than overcome, existing structures of privilege.

### **3.3 Accessing “Participatory Cultures” Online**

Much has been made about the potential for children and young people to participate in forms of social life that primarily form online, what have been called “networked publics” (Ito et al. 2010), “participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins et al. 2006), and “affinity groups” (Gee 2003). These authors argue that the social formations that are emerging online offer promising new ways for children and young people to learn and participate in civic life. In keeping with the techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities discussed in the introduction, these authors see such collectives as formed around shared interests for eclectic cultural phenomena that transcend local and even national geographies. They are often celebrated for having low barriers to entry for participation, age-heterogeneous participants, and numerous opportunities for learning. Additionally, participatory cultures are seen as blending the spheres of production and consumption, with “consumers” working from and with commercially produced cultural forms to create their own cultural forms, practices, and collectives. Examples of participatory cultures include Harry Potter fandoms, online gaming communities, fan-fiction sites, anime subtitling communities, virtual worlds, and so on. In keeping with techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities, participation is seen as more-or-less voluntary, creative, and self-fulfilling. Similarly, identity and belonging are seen as forming around shared interests – which can be multiple, varied, and eclectic – rather than around shared race, gender, culture, ethnicity, or nationality. Finally, social relations are primarily seen as supportive and cohesive. As Jenkins et al. (2006, 7) explain, “let’s define participatory cultures as one,” with, “low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement... strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others... some type of informal mentoring,” where, “members believe their contributions matter,” and, “members feel some degree of social connection with each other.”

Many of these emerging social formations offer promising new opportunities for learning and participating in public life. Yet they also remain fairly uncommon, despite their seeming ubiquity online and in academic and public discourse about changes in media and technology. In all of my research on children and young people’s digital media practices, I have rarely found children or young people who developed lasting social relationships that originated online with people that

were not part of their local social worlds.<sup>23</sup> In this section, I describe when students at the Downtown School participated in practices that resembled these concepts. As I will show, students' online social interactions primarily indexed, rather than transcended, social relations formed in local enclaves.

The few instances I found of students' participating in "participatory cultures" mostly occurred when students were out of school. As I discuss in the next two chapters, the school carefully managed students' access to others via the internet. Instead of using the internet to connect students to participatory cultures that organized online, the school presented students with "game-like" simulations of the world. Students weren't permitted to go online without educators' permission, and when they did go online, educators almost always specified the websites they could visit. Instead of participating broadly in "participatory cultures" that matched their interests, students used software and websites that mostly connected them with other students and teachers at the school. These practices partly reflected educator and parent concerns over what sorts of content and persons the students might encounter online. Additionally, the DOE ran software that blocked access to many websites, a technical impediment that often frustrated educators as well as students.

Outside of school, online gaming was the most widespread form of participation in social activity that organized primarily online. These practices were primarily taken up by a group of boys who self-identified as "hardcore gamers," many, but not all, of whom came from privileged families (chapter 6). A handful of boys played games such as *Modern Warfare II* and *World of Warcraft* with people who they had not met in person. However none of these boys identified their online-only co-participants as close friends, and none interacted with these non-local players outside of the activity of game play. They did, however, tend to play these networked games with friends from school, and networked gaming was one of the ways that these boys constituted and sustained their school-based friendships. Quite a few students, and especially girls, had also used sites like Club Penguin, *The Sims Online*, and *Webkins*. These practices seemed to be dropping off by middle school, as students turned to social network sites like Facebook. A few less-privileged girls participated in youth-centered virtual worlds such as *Zwinky* and *Meez*. In these online games and virtual worlds, students sometimes interacted with characters they had not met in locally situated activity, yet here too the students did not list the people they interacted with online as persons with whom they had developed lasting relationships, and none suggested that someone they met online was a close friend.<sup>24</sup> Participation in online virtual worlds typically involved fashioning virtual characters, decorating virtual domestic spaces, playing games and quizzes, and sometimes chatting

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23 Online dating appears to be an increasingly popular example where longer social relations originate online. I didn't come across youth who use these sites in this study, likely a factor of their age position. In one of my previous projects (Ito et al. 2010), some of the less-well-off urban teenage research participants tried to use social network sites like MySpace as a way to meet new people to date. Often, but not always, they knew of, but hadn't met, the person with whom they were trying to connect.

24 I see these practices as a continuation of the online chat rooms that were used by some middle school and high school students coming of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Moral panics about online sexual predators have likely curbed these practices, but I would not be surprised if they continued in a clandestine manner. I don't have in-depth data about what my participants chatted about on *Meez* or *Zwinky*, but it wouldn't surprise me if the conversations covered "taboo" topics, such as sexuality, that can be difficult or scary to broach in local settings. For a short account of how one middle school boy used online chat rooms to discuss and explore vulnerable topics during the early 2000s see my case, "It was kind of a weird cyber growing-up thing" in Ito et al. (2010).

with other players.

A few students produced media to tap into trans-local participatory cultures such as fandoms, but they appear to have done so in a celebrity-driven manner. One privileged boy reached a fairly large audience of professional wrestling fans on YouTube. The boy posted videos of himself talking to the camera as he shared information and opinions about professional wrestlers and wrestling video games. About half of these videos attracted between 20 and 100 views and few comments. But a few of his videos attracted thousands of views and numerous comments, including one that received over 25,000 views and 400 comments. In the video, the boy made up a story suggesting that he had acquired a “demo copy” of the latest version of a popular video game that had yet to be released. He showed the game box, told a bit about its features, and suggested that people should buy it when it came out. Shortly after uploading the video, someone commented “fake\_faggot.” The comments quickly accumulated, most accusing the boy of lying about having a demo copy. Many insulted him and his post with putdowns such as, “a little biches,” “retard,” “n00b,” “little cock sucker,” “pathetic,” an “epic fail,” and so on. His second most popular video was a response to this controversy. In this video, the boy claimed that his first video was not a fake. He supported his claim by cutting to a video clip from the game. This video attracted over 4,000 views and more than 80 comments, many of which again suggested it was a fake and insulted the boy in a manner similar to the original post.

In some ways, this publicity stunt revealed an impressive understanding of how to use networked media to assemble an audience. Without the internet, a platform like YouTube, and accessible tools for video production, it is hard to imagine how an 11-year-old boy could reach such a large and distributed audience. One could also argue that the boy learned quite a bit about being a more public personality, and he was also exposed to discursive practices and norms that are common in some online domains. Yet it is harder to see how the hoax and subsequent comments were a prototypical instance of “participatory culture,” which, again, has been defined as providing, “strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others,” and “informal mentorship,” and where, “members feel some degree of social connection with each other” (Jenkins et al. 2006).

What seems more salient is the individuation strand of techno-cosmopolitan ideals. In addition to his YouTube videos, the boy was adept at gaining publicity for himself when popular media producers came through the school. Several of these media outlets featured the boy, figuring him as a prototype of what all kids – e.g. “digital natives” – will soon look like. He also took an interest in me once he learned I was planning to write a book, often telling me to write down various incidents that involved him. Finally, he spoke out frequently in class and took a unique interest in marking his body in ways that distinguished him from other students at school, including dyeing his hair multiple colors and using markers to draw elaborate patterns across his forearms (perhaps an early form of playing with tattoos). When I asked him about his hair and arm drawings he told me:

I made myself known. There’s some people, like Willow, that nobody knows who they are. I mean people might know what their name is, but nobody can remember them... Has Willow really made an impact to people? Because in 20 years will people remember people who haven't done anything? People will remember me in 20 years because I've done things that people will remember me for. Like my hair. That's something people will remember me for in 20 years. I started really intensely dyeing it right as I started my YouTube channel. It was actually sort of related I think.

The boy's linking of online and offline practices suggests a more general sensibility for personal distinction and promotion – a combination of individuating the self and recruiting an audience, which, if all goes well, may win him a spot in his audience's collective memories. The relation to the social world is primarily one of fame and recognition.

At The Downtown School, this boy was one of two students who regularly used networked media in an attempt to reach broad audiences they did not already know. The other was a girl who was a member of a Latina pop-group that made songs, music videos, and short narrative episodes. The group had formed at the girl's elementary school with the help of an educator who worked in the school's after-school program. The educator also worked as a talent manager for children performers, many of whom she met through her teaching. The Latina pop-group made use of Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, and a homemade website for publicity. Like the boy discussed above, they reached an audience beyond the school and family networks, but unlike the boy these publicity efforts centered on the group, with individuals demarcated within. The group's broader audience was primarily tied to the local Latino/a community, and much of their online presence consisted of announcements and promotion for performances at local events, such as Dominican street festivals. Further, most of the group's publicity work was handled by the adult educator and manager. She was heavily involved in orchestrating and out-sourcing the group's media production activities, including audio recording sessions, scriptwriting, dance choreography, and video productions. The girl's role was primarily as a performer, and she often presented herself as a sort of "diva" to classmates at school.<sup>25</sup>

While these two cases blur conventional boundaries between production and consumption, to me they warrant modest celebration of networked media's potential to provide democratic routes to positions of influence in the public sphere. While both students undoubtedly learned something about how public media gets made and distributed, they primarily oriented towards media production by refracting the aspects of public culture that they had access to as consumers, namely the representations that showed up in the cultural forms they consumed, hence the celebrity-driven character of the students' works.<sup>26</sup> Consumption – of both popular and niche media genres – was much more common. In addition to popular television, movies, books, and music, most students watched and shared YouTube videos, a few read fan-fiction (but didn't contribute their own stories yet), and a handful cultivated and shared their tastes for manga or Korean pop music. These niche and popular forms often referenced each other, especially with niche genres parodying popular media forms.

Instead of forming new relationship online, most students used network computing to manage and extend relationships that originated in offline contexts such as schools, families, neighborhoods, and out-of-school programs. Communications-based practices facilitated by Facebook, instant

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25 This is a term that some of her classmates used when describing her, sometimes in front of her, which didn't seem to bother her.

26 While celebrities (artists, athletes, etc.) are featured in consumable cultural forms, they are, of course, only a small part of the overall production process. Consumers do not see much of what goes into production, including obtaining financing, navigating and negotiating legal structures, crews of specialized laborers working behind the recording apparatus, access to privileged distribution channels and retailers (e.g. festivals, Walmart, Amazon, iTunes), coordinated widespread publicity efforts, and so on. I can see how imitating celebrities can be a point of entry into learning about media production processes, but moving further inevitably requires access to practitioners and practices that cannot be accessed with only a networked computer and media production tools.

messenger platforms, group video chat, and mobile phones were the most popular. Students tended to use these tools to converse with friends they had met in local contexts, or with family members who were located in different parts of the country or globe.

There are a few points to be made about differences in access to these online settings, as well as the social relations they supported. First, there were differences in the ways parents regulated their children's access to sites like Facebook. For many less-privileged children, their use of social network sites and communications media originated through family-centered practices as much as friend-centered practices. As Robert, a Puerto Rican and Dominican ("I'm half and half") who lived in public housing and accessed Facebook primarily from his phone noted to me, "I talk to my family, because most of my family has Facebooks. Everybody in my family, everybody from any side has Facebook." In general, less-privileged students were the earliest adopters of social network sites, chat programs, and mobile phones. Additionally, these communications-centered practices were much more popular with girls than with boys.

Yet the Downtown School, in keeping with many schools, tended to eschew, and sometimes condemn, these practices. Students were not allowed to communicate with each other via social network sites, chat program, mobile phones, or email while at school. Instead, the Downtown School implemented a custom internal social network site that I'll refer to as "24/7." Only Downtown School students and educators could access the site, and educators monitored and participated in activity on the site. During the school day, students accessed this site at times designated by educators, typically 10-20 minute increments a few times a week. Most students did not use the site when they were not directed to do so. And of those who did use it voluntarily, most were privileged students whose parents did not permit them to have a Facebook account. After two years, the school gave up on 24/7, in part because of recurring technical problems and in part because it wasn't very popular amongst most students. In addition to trying to create a school-based social network site, the school provided instruction on appropriate ways to behave when interacting online with Facebook or other social media. These lessons tended to focus on "online civility" as well as the dangers of participating online, including one set of lessons that was titled "digital self defense."<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the etiquette and safety of playing networked video games was not featured in the school's civics lessons, suggesting a familiar gendered dimension to moral panics over the domestication of new technologies.

As with other aspects of the school's curriculum, the school's orientation towards Facebook and social media tended to reflect the sensibilities of many of the privileged parents, and especially those who had daughters enrolled at the school. While many less-privileged students had gotten into Facebook and mobile phones through participating in family life, more privileged families tended to see social network sites as more youth-centered enclaves whose borders needed to be policed. While the activity that took place through these sites was seen as youth-centered, privileged parents also tended to retain the right to intervene if they felt their child was in danger or involved in inappropriate behavior. Many of the privileged parents had access to their children's Facebook accounts, but suggested they wouldn't access them unless there was an issue. Many

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<sup>27</sup> States, civic organizations, and parents have pressured schools to provide this sort of instruction in response to a series of moral panics about online dangers. Earlier in the 2000s, the adult sexual predator was the main specter of this discourse. During my fieldwork, the biggest perceived danger to youth and schools alike was "the bully," who was thought to operate in particularly malicious ways online. I discuss the fear of "bullies" in more detail in chapter 7.

followed similar rules with their children's cell phones.

In sum, while the internet held the promise of connecting students to social worlds that transcended local social formations, for the most part the students did not take advantage of these opportunities. And when they did, they primarily oriented towards the internet as a publicity tool for promoting themselves in the manner of a celebrity. Instead, discourses of threat and practices of protection led parents and educators to steer students' online interactions towards peers and adults they had met in local enclaves or through local and extended family networks. While I remain hopeful about the *potential* of "networked publics" and "participatory cultures," especially for students who do not feel like they fit into local social worlds, I caution against taking an overly enthusiastic view that exaggerates the power of networked computing and digital media production tools to radically democratize the public sphere.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, many New York City children and young people spend much of their daily lives in enclaves: spatially segregated places where legitimate situated activity is often designed and managed by adults. Further, participation in the practices that take place within enclaves establishes most of children and young people's non-kin social relations. This was less true for students from less-privileged backgrounds – who tended to have larger kin and neighborhood networks – but these students also had many of their non-kin social relationships shaped by enclave access. Such a finding suggests that researchers who are interested in the processes by which social divisions are made and remade should give attention to the geography of children's practices, and especially the economic and cultural-political dimensions of how enclaves are legitimately accessed.

In terms of the more institutionalized mechanisms that sorted children into different school enclaves, in District Two the "choice system" helped produce a split in the schooling trajectories of professional families with varying levels of cultural and economic capital. Privileged parents who remained in the public school system – families that Bourdieu would likely have classified as amongst, "the dominated fraction of the dominant class" (1984) – competed for access to a few selective middle schools, most of which used test-based selection mechanisms that tended to produce enclaves that were mostly segregated along social-class and racialized ethnic lines. For new schools, such as the Downtown School, it was not yet clear if and how the "choice system" would reproduce or reconfigure these historical divisions. The Downtown School was unique in attracting an economically and ethnically diverse student body. Yet their breaching of these historical – and in the case of social-class *widening* – social divisions was also an ongoing, and at times highly charged, matter.<sup>28</sup>

One way that spatial segregation appears to be happening within the "choice system" is through the processes that produce a shared sense of "cultural fit" between families and schools. At the Downtown School, attempts to produce this "cultural fit" surfaced inherent tensions within their "progressive" techno-cosmopolitan sensibility. Virtues centered on cultural inclusiveness often clashed with virtues centered on self-realization. Many of the creative professional families clustered towards ideals of self-realization, as epitomized in notions of creativity. The Downtown School was primarily seen as a superior alternative to "traditional" schools, which were seen as

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<sup>28</sup> I discuss these tensions and conflicts in more detail in chapters 6 and 7.

forcing children onto well-rutted life trajectories and preformed positions in adult society. As noted above, the vision of a free and open-ended life trajectory that nevertheless passed through large bureaucratic institutions can partially be seen as an attempt to resolve deep-seated tensions between sacralized ideas about childhood and parents' sense that they had to actively groom their children if they wanted them to succeed in the increasingly competitive struggle for positions of privilege in adult society.<sup>29</sup> Some of the school's less-privileged parents and guardians were also attracted to the school's "student-centered" focus, but they tended to wish that the school offered a more diverse assortment of creative cultural practices, ones that would appeal to a more diverse assortment of students. In a related vein, many of the less-privileged parents and guardians were attracted to the school's attempts to fulfill a different dimension of the techno-cosmopolitan sensibility, the ideal of inclusiveness.

In addition to school enclaves, many students spent a good portion of their weekly routines in various after-school and weekend enclaves. While class-dependent parenting styles may have played a role in producing this variation (e.g. Lareau 2003), participation seemed more significantly influenced by a family's ability to pay as well as student and parent orientations towards gender normativity. Both privileged and many less-privileged parents engaged in practices that could be considered "concerted cultivation," but a family's ability to pay substantially mediated access to New York City's diverse market of private after-school activities.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to subsidies, the Downtown School's after school program overcame some of these social-class divisions, yet it also contributed to rigid gender divisions.

Finally, students' potential access to online "participatory cultures" offered the possibility of overcoming social divisions constituted in local enclaves. In the course of my study, these possibilities were not often pursued. Given its techno-centric focus, the school paradoxically prohibited students from accessing online participatory cultures while at school. As such, students' online activity at school was largely confined to the social boundaries of the school enclave. This sealing off of the school from the world once again illustrated the paradoxical situation of progressive educators: on the one hand asked to break down social divisions, on the other hand asked to police enclave borders.

I now turn to the recent political-institutional dimensions of school reform so as to contextualize the emergence of the Downtown School as model "progressive" reform project for the twenty-first century. I argue that the school's embrace of "the digital" can be seen as an attempt to preserve

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29 Briefly, this competition stems from both an increase in the number of players involved (largely thanks to reconfigurations of global political economic arrangements) and contracting opportunities (largely thanks to recent economic crises). Prior to the economic collapse of 2008, the mainstream consensus was that the first factor introduced competition but also led to greater productivity and an expansion of opportunity that ultimately benefited "everyone." After the collapse, the hegemony of this view has been challenged as more and more voices call attention to who is really benefitting from the reconfiguration of global political economic arrangements.

30 It's possible that my sample skewed towards parents who tended towards "concerted cultivation" practices. As noted throughout this chapter, many of the less-privileged families that lived outside of District Two had to exert a lot of effort to get their children enrolled in a District Two school and, as such, these parents might not be representative of parents from their social-class position. This betwixt and between position likely made them more susceptible to being ostracized on both sides: not fully accepted by more privileged families from District Two, nor fully accepted by those from the areas whom they were fleeing when they bid for inclusion in District Two. Bourdieu has referred to such predicaments as having a "cleft habitus" (see Wacquant [2006]), a position many occupy at one time or another, myself included.

progressive educational ideals in an institutional context that had been mostly hostile to progressive pedagogic reformers. I also argue that the school's attempts to frame its pedagogic practices as "game-like" and "playful" can be seen as an attempt to resolve paradoxes associated with care and/or control in grooming practices as well as the school/world divide.

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## “Kids these days”: A Twenty-First Century Crisis in Education

Consider the following three quotes:

Whether we like it or not, we are beginning to see that we are pitted against the world in a gigantic battle of brains and skill, with the markets of the world, work for our people, and internal peace and contentment as the prizes at stake.

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Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur – others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

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Thanks to globalization, driven by modern communications and other advances, workers in virtually every sector must now face competitors who live just a mouse-click away in Ireland, Finland, China, India, or dozens of other nations whose economies are growing... An educated, innovative, motivated workforce – human capital – is the most precious resource of any country in this new, flat world. Yet there is widespread concern about our K-12 science and mathematics education system, the foundation of that human capital in today’s global economy.

The first statement was made by Ellwood P. Cubberley, the former dean of Stanford University’s School of Education, in 1909 (as quoted in Tyack and Cuban [1995]). The second comes from the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which was produced by a special presidential committee on education. The third comes from a 2005 report by another blue ribbon committee assembled by the National Academies, this one titled, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. In each of these documents, America’s economic competitiveness was seen as threatened and in each case public education was called upon to reform in order to resolve the crisis.

As educational historians Tyack and Cuban (1995) argued, school reform movements, and their entailed “crises in education,” have been a fixture of American public debates for as long as there have been public schools. Reformers in different eras have attempted to use public schooling to make America a country infused with Protestant values, to assimilate immigrants into the “melting pot” of American society, to promote America’s economic and military competitiveness on the global stage, to overcome racial discrimination and other social and economic injustices, to offering a meritocratic route into differentiated positions of adult society. According to Tyack and Cuban, once Americans discover social or economic problems, they routinely turn to education to fix them.

One consequence of this recurring tendency is that public schools have accumulated a complex assortment of mandates, many of which cannot easily be reconciled with each other. Perhaps the foremost of these competing mandates can be thought of as paradox between care and control, a paradox that has its roots in the relationship between schooling and the “real” world. Ideologically, schooling is routinely presented as a social good that benefits everyone who receives its treatment. In practice, schools may benefit children but they also exercise power over children by sorting them onto life paths associated with significant differences of privilege and influence in adulthood. Further, the ideology of schooling legitimates inequalities amongst adults by treating achievements as meritocratic. So long as students are individuated, evaluated against a common rubric, and then ranked against each other, schools will deliver some “winners” and many “losers” to adult society. The ideology of schooling presents this process as if it were fair and meritocratic since the standards of evaluation are treated as “objective” and culturally neutral. In reality, all standards have a social and cultural origin and the standards used to evaluate students in schools tend to reflect the culture of those who are already privileged. This more structural tension contributes to the perennial crises in education since inequalities have persisted, and even widened, despite offering more and more people the “treatment” of schooling. One way to account for the persistence of inequalities without abandoning the meritocratic frame is to suggest that schools did not deliver a more equal society because the schools are broken and in need of reform.

Further, those working inside educational institutions often contribute to the perennial crises and reform movements. In the face of criticisms and a reluctance to support public programs, educators have to repeatedly assert their relevance to policymakers and taxpayers. In doing so, educators and educational entrepreneurs repeatedly offer bold solutions to social and economic problems, often amplifying fears and hopes in the process. According to Tyack and Cuban, such structural dynamics lead reformers to imagine their projects as utopian transformations for “millennial” times, when, in fact, most projects end up tinkering with a relatively unchanged “grammar” of schooling. According to Tyack and Cuban, these utopian tendencies partly stem from the fact that the social and economic problems and ambitions that get attached to schooling far exceed what schools can realistically be expected to accomplish, and partly because radical change is difficult in large bureaucratic institutions.

At the time that the Downtown School was being imagined, the notion of a crisis in schooling dovetailed with several crises that were much more visible to the American public: intractable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, economic inequality at levels not seen since the 1920s, a lack of quality jobs, and, a year before the school opened, the collapse of the global financial system that led to the “great recession.” With the future looking increasingly bleak for many Americans, the Downtown School offered an optimistic plan for a brighter future. Not only could a “reimagined” school

prepare contemporary children for success in the twenty-first century, but it could do so in a way that fulfilled many long-standing “progressive” pedagogic ideals: the school would be student-centered, playful, non-authoritarian, egalitarian, and focused on students’ creativity. As I will show, the secret to such an optimistic vision lay in leveraging the intrinsic powers of digital media and especially games.

What follows is an attempt to contextualize the emergence of the Downtown School within the dominant tendencies in American educational reform since the late 1980s. I do so in order to show how the Downtown School braided its “progressive” vision of reform into institutional arrangements that it could not control. I suggest that since the early 1980s, national anxieties about global economic competition have propelled state-driven reforms in public education. These reforms have continued to rely on schools to “fix” America’s problems, and they have attempted to do so by “fixing” public schooling. These reforms have attempted to institute market-like conditions and state-defined assessments of “learning” within public schooling. Additionally, these state-driven reforms have placed increasing curricular emphasis on science, technology, math, engineering, and, more recently, “innovation” (in short, “STEM”) in an attempt to foster future economic growth. I argue that the narrow economic focus of these state-driven reforms has been mostly inhospitable to progressive pedagogic reforms, a tradition that has emphasized “student-centered” learning and social justice agendas since the late nineteenth century. I then analyze how the Downtown School was imagined as an ambitious new model of progressive schooling for the twenty-first century. I suggest that the model attempted to reconcile tensions within the progressive tradition: notably tensions between romantic notions of self-realization and commitments to social justice, as well as a tension between a theory of learning rooted in the world and yet the organization of education in spaces that are segregated from the world (chapter 3). The Downtown School’s new model also attempted to reconcile tensions between the progressive ideals expressed above and the mandate to efficiently produce standardized educational outputs, as defined by the state. I argue that in an attempt to bridge these numerous, and often conflicting, mandates, the school turned to millennial accounts of the present era and powerful myths about digital media, and especially games. As I argue in later chapters, these accounts and myths essentialized and exaggerated the power of digital media and games, obscured inherent contradictions among the school’s numerous mandates, and directed attention away from the more structural and political forces that shaped economic and social problems as well as schooling’s contributions to the re-production of those problems. In the conclusion of this dissertation I argue that the solution is not to naively “blame” schools but rather to allow schools to focus on the problems they can realistically hope to address, namely the interrelated problems of symbolic violence, biased social selection, and the perpetuation of a meritocratic myth that attributes success and failure to individuals.

## 4.1 Recent Educational Crises and Reforms

*A Nation at Risk* expressed the main themes of the early 1980s American educational crisis in a distilled manner. The report, and many similar analyses, associated the economic crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s with a crisis in education, which the authors defined in terms of rising mediocrity in America’s K-12 schooling. These reformers claimed that mediocrity was a consequence of weakening expectations for students to master standardized knowledge in established academic

domains such as English, math, science, and history. The discourse suggested a clear connection between the economic crisis, which was widely visible to the public, and an educational crisis, which was not easily visible to those outside of educational fields. According to these views, one of the reasons America no longer enjoyed the expanding riches of the post World War II period was because the education system had become lax and, consequently, American workers were not competitive.

The proposed reforms recommended that schools raise their standards in the “Five New Basics.” They should do so by implementing annual standardized testing that would measure what the students had learned. Alongside these calls for greater “accountability,” were calls for leveraging market-principles to promote quality and empower families. According to these arguments, one of the reasons schools and students had become lax was because schools were immune from competition. Without having to compete with other schools to attract students, public schools were thought to lack incentives to improve, or even maintain, quality. Once the educational crisis was defined in this way, the proposed solution also became clear: schools should compete against each other to attract students and families. Families, in turn, would be empowered by having consumer sovereignty over which school their child attended. Standardized tests would provide bureaucrats, educators, and families with objective evidence for evaluating school performance.<sup>1</sup>

While these proposed solutions have not been fully realized, the dominant trend in state-driven educational reform over the previous 30 years has been: a) an attempt to centralize control over educational agendas; while, b) decentralizing control over how those agendas are fulfilled; and, c) implementing market-like conditions that promote “choice” for families and competition amongst schools and students. This approach to reform has been termed the “autonomy for accountability exchange” (O’Day et al. 2011) and the “pragmatist solution” (Sabel 2005). From a governance perspective, this steady transition draws on ideas that came out of the business sector’s attempts to address problems associated with the hierarchical structure of large-scale bureaucracies. On the one hand, the power to set the overall educational agenda has moved upward. Working in partnership with education experts from academia and the private sector, states, and increasingly the federal government, define what sort of knowledge and skills all public schools should be teaching. On the other hand, the means, and much of the responsibility, for achieving the state-defined agenda has moved downwards. Principals and teachers are theoretically allowed more autonomy over their schools and classrooms so long as they produce standardized evidence of outcomes. Families, in turn, will theoretically be more empowered because they will have more “choice” over where they send their children.

In many ways, New York City has been a pioneer in this style of reforms. While initially called for by reports such as *A Nation at Risk*, such reforms were carried out by many states in the 1990s and were then extended to all states when the federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (hereafter NCLB). NCLB mandated that states implement standardized assessments of reading and math proficiency in order to receive federal funds. Similar changes predated NCLB in New York State.<sup>2</sup> Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein’s “Children First”

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1 Educational historian Diane Ravitch has famously taken both sides of this issue. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, Ravitch advocated for reforms based on test-based “accountability” and a market-like choice and competition (e.g. Ravitch 2000). More recently, however, Ravitch has reversed course in the wake of the turn towards testing mandated by No Child Left Behind, a bill she helped bring into being.

2 For a review, see Ravitch and Viteritti (2000).

initiative, which began in 2003, have carried this style of reforms further. Bloomberg and Klein attempted to erode the middle levels of the Department of Education bureaucracy by disbanding the publicly elected Board of Education and 32 community school boards. Doing so centralized administrative control over schools in the Mayor's office. Yet at the same time, the Children First reforms granted more power over budgets, pedagogy, and hiring to principals. Instead of reporting to superintendents who oversaw districts, school leaders chose from several "School Support Organizations" (SSOs) that were meant to provide support services rather than administrative oversight. As a tradeoff for these increases in autonomy, school leaders had to generate evidence of educational output, primarily measured by students' standardized test scores. These metrics allowed top-level bureaucrats to evaluate the performance of schools and set performance targets. Schools that failed to meet performance targets could be restructured or closed.<sup>3</sup>

This approach to management dovetailed with a belief that market-like competition was the most effective means to promote school quality. There is a long and complex history of education reformers pushing for market-like "school choice" but the movement gained traction in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> In New York City, school choice reforms dovetailed with the "small school movement," which began in the early 1990s with grants from the Annenberg and Diamond foundations, and then expanded significantly once administrative control was centralized under Mayor Bloomberg.<sup>5</sup> These reforms have dramatically reconfigured the landscape of New York City's public schools. By rapidly replacing large, often neighborhood-based, high schools with numerous small, non-neighborhood-based, middle and high schools, the reforms dramatically increased the number of schools and, theoretically, the "choices" available to families.<sup>6</sup> NCLB has advanced a similar agenda at the national level.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, recent trends in education reform at various levels of government have attempted to implement market-like management models that increase competition between students and schools, offer families more "choice" as to which schools their children attend, and grant local principals more autonomy and responsibility over how they manage their schools to meet these targets. In exchange, families and local educators have been mandated to give up control over the curricular agenda and to adopt standardized assessments to demonstrate that the state-defined curriculum has been learned. I now turn to one of the main trends in the increasingly standardized curriculum, the narrowing focus on science, technology, engineering, math, and innovation. Here too, we see national economic anxieties largely driving school reform.

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3 For a review of the Children First reforms see O'Day et al. (2011) and Hill (2011).

4 For a review see Cookson (1994).

5 The small school movement during the 2000s has been accelerated thanks to considerable grants from the Gates Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Carnegie Foundation.

6 To get a sense of the magnitude of these changes: in 1992, New York City had 99 public high schools; by 2009 it had nearly 400. For a review see Jennings (2010) and Corcoran and Levin (2011).

7 NCLB requires schools to make "adequate yearly progress," as measured against state-defined performance targets. Schools that fail to do so gradually lose their local monopoly. First, students are allowed to transfer to other schools, then educators and curricula can be replaced by higher level bureaucrats, and finally higher-level bureaucrats can close and replace "failing" schools with alternatives, which could include charters or multiple small schools.

### 4.1.1 Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Innovation

As with many of the recent reforms, the focus on STEM domains is not new. It is, however, an increasingly influential aspect of recent state-driven school reform movements. As with the focus on standards-based accountability, reformers who call for a focus on STEM often discursively link STEM to anxieties about national economic competitiveness. The *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* report from 2005, which I quoted earlier, is a paradigmatic example of this reform discourse. Like the *A Nation at Risk* report, an esteemed committee of experts wrote the *Gathering Storm* report. The committee consisted of college presidents, scientists, Nobel Laureates, high-ranking government officials, and CEOs from technology firms. Like the vignette that opened this chapter, proponents of STEM invariably point to studies that show U.S. students underperforming their international peers on standardized tests. The message is clear: American students are falling further and further behind their international rivals on standardized measures, especially on measures of math and science learning, which are easier to compare internationally, and this inferiority threatens the nation's economic and military supremacy. If anything, proponents of STEM reforms suggest matters are getting worse. In 2010, the same committee that wrote the *Gathering Storm* report issued a follow up with the ominous subtitle, *Rapidly Approaching Category 5*.

These paradigmatic examples knit together concerns over national economic competitiveness and jobs with a solution rooted in science, engineering and innovation education. As Norman R. Augustine, the chair of the committee that wrote the *Gathering Storm* report and the former chairman and CEO of Lockheed Martin, wrote in a 2007 letter to Congress:

Having examined a great deal of evidence, the committee concluded that America's ability to compete for jobs in the years ahead will depend heavily upon our ability to maintain a strong position in the fields of science and engineering. It will be these fields that will underpin the innovation that in turn will create quality jobs for Americans. And to fill these jobs, *all* our citizens will need the basic tools required to function in a high-tech world.<sup>8</sup>

Proponents of STEM education reforms represent science and technology as both the inevitable cause of the crisis (e.g. “thanks to globalization, driven by modern communications and other advances”), and the solution (e.g. “*all* our citizens will need the basic tools required to function in a high-tech world”). A major recommendation of the *Gathering Storm* report was to allocate additional funds towards STEM education. Under the influence of reports such as these, the state has pushed for STEM focused reforms. In August of 2007, President George W. Bush signed into law the America COMPETES Act, which included approximately \$3 billion in new provisions for STEM education between the fiscal years of 2008 and 2010.<sup>9</sup> The bill garnered

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8 “Can America Compete for Jobs?” a letter presented by Norman R. Augustine to the 110th Congress, accessed on May 31, 2012, [http://www7.nationalacademies.org/ocga/testimony/1Can\\_America\\_Compete\\_for\\_Jobs.asp](http://www7.nationalacademies.org/ocga/testimony/1Can_America_Compete_for_Jobs.asp).

9 While K-12 STEM education was often featured in reports such as *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, the bulk of the new provisioning in the America COMPETES Act, approximately \$30 billion between fiscal years 2008 and 2010, was directed towards scientific research. For a review, see, “It Is Too Early to Evaluate Programs Long-Term

broad bipartisan support, passing the House of Representatives with a vote of 384 to 45 and the Senate 91 to 8. In early January of 2011, President Obama reauthorized much of the America COMPETES Act through the fiscal year 2013. In addition to focusing on science, technology, engineering, and math, the reauthorization expanded the mandate to include educational initiatives focused on “innovation and entrepreneurship,” an expansion that knit techno-science ever more closely with business and industry (for a summary, see Gonzalez et al. [2010]).<sup>10</sup> In addition to these state-driven efforts, major foundations with divergent political leanings have also supported STEM related reforms. In the case of the Downtown School, both private foundations and NSF grants helped support the planning of the school and the research of scholars who advised the planners.

Like the reforms promoting school “choice,” STEM-focused reforms single out economic competitiveness as the primary crisis facing education and America. Also like the “choice” reforms, they place significant faith in markets to solve the nation’s economic crisis. These arguments often seem to make intuitive sense because they rest on taken for granted assumptions about the relationship between science, technology, and society. As I noted in the introduction, Escobar (1994) names these unexamined assumptions the “arrow of progress metaphor.” According to these commonly held views, scientific knowledge is discovered by way of research in a setting that is neutral, apolitical, and outside of society, even though the research is often supported and guided by governments and commercial interests. The arrow ends in human betterment and social progress, purportedly for all. Along the way, science moves naturalistically through technology, industry, and markets. As Escobar and many others have pointed out, this modernist myth obscures political, social, and cultural dimensions of social change and has long been used to legitimize imperialist projects. I now turn to how the Downtown School attempted to braid together these dominant reform agendas with an alternative, and seemingly incompatible, “progressive” tradition of reform. Ultimately I argue that the school’s planners turned to “mythic” notions of digital media and games in an attempt to bridge disparate commitments.

## 4.2 Progressive Pedagogic Reform Meets Digital Media

I’ve quickly summarized the dominant trends in the American educational reform at the time the

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Effectiveness, but Agencies Could Improve Reporting of High-Risk, High-Reward Research Priorities,” accessed May 22, 2012, <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-11-127R>. Additionally, the STEM education programs were overwhelmingly administered by the NSF, not the Department of Education. Of the total government spending on K-12 and postsecondary education, only one tenth of one percent comes from federal STEM funds for K-12 education. Yet in dominant discourses about American economic competitiveness, American K-12 education is frequently identified as one of the major problems and American students are frequently compared unfavorably to their international peers. For an account of the federal STEM education “portfolio” see the White House report, “The Federal Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education Portfolio,” accessed May 22, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/12/09/ostp-releases-federal-stem-education-portfolio>.

<sup>10</sup> The linking together of STEM with concepts like innovation and entrepreneurship is part of a longer-term trend towards public-private partnerships and the rising influence of business schools and management scholars in fields like education. This public-private braiding is a consequence of a more general bipartisan shift towards relying on markets and the private sector to fix economic and social problems. Whether or not “innovators” will create more jobs and tax revenues than they destroy is an open question.

Downtown School was designed so as to help contextualize the appeal and rationale behind the design decisions of the school's founders. In many ways, the plan for the Downtown School can be seen as an attempt to preserve "progressive" ideas about learning and pedagogy within the dominant trends towards standardization and STEM. While the focus on standardized testing largely went against progressive reform ideals, the increasing focus on STEM, and particularly "technology" and "innovation," offered one of those opportunities that progressive reformers have been repeatedly seduced by. It also offered a way for practitioners who worked in fields related to design and technology (myself included) to enter educational fields. Ultimately, I will argue that the school's planners appropriated utopian ideas about digital technology as well as millennial thinking by accepting these mandates. I suggest that both progressive reform ideologies and mythic ideas about digital media turn on an axis between the old and the new and the traditional and the cutting edge. I will first briefly review what I consider to be the salient features of the progressive pedagogic reform tradition before reviewing how the Downtown School hoped to revitalize this tradition and make an ambitious and exemplary new model of schooling for the twenty-first century.

While it's an oversimplification to group a diverse history of reform projects under the label "progressive" there are nevertheless common patterns that help give the term "progressive" analytic usefulness, especially as the term tends to be deployed in contradistinction with "traditional" approaches to education. Since the days of progressive social reformers like John Dewey, progressive educational reformers have criticized the dominant approaches to teaching and learning that have been employed in schools. Traditional orientations towards teaching and learning tend to start with an established body of curricular content and see the teacher as the transmitter of this curriculum to the students. Individuated students then evidence that they have acquired this cultural content through examinations and other formal evaluations. Teaching and learning is thus framed from the point of view of the teacher or, more accurately, educators and administrators who work at different levels of educational bureaucracies. Students, in turn, are largely figured as passive receptacles of existing social norms and cultural content. From this perspective, students have no agency and both culture and persons are unproblematically reproduced across generations.<sup>11</sup>

One common feature of the progressive pedagogic reform tradition is a criticism of this view of learning. Traditional approaches, progressives have argued, focus too much on ends rather than means, they turn schools into factories, where students are expected to efficiently memorize abstract rules and facts just so they can pass tests. Further, these abstract facts and skills have little meaning for students because they are separated from the concrete social and cultural experiences of the students' everyday lives. Traditional education is thus boring and instrumentalist and it is no wonder students aren't motivated to learn. Earlier I referred to this perennial problem as the school/world divide.

As an alternative to this conventional model, progressive pedagogic reformers tend to endorse views of teaching that are more "student-centered." They tend to emphasize taking a view of the "whole child" who has his or her own interests, needs, and cultural familiarity. Instead of conceptualizing learning as the passive acquisition of established knowledge, progressives tend to emphasize learners' active involvement in the process of learning. From this perspective, educators

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11 For a criticism of this model of social and cultural reproduction see Willis (1981).

should not be authoritative gatekeepers to knowledge but rather facilitators who help and support student-driven learning processes. To quote Dewey's famous maxim, people "learn by doing," not by memorizing general facts and rules that they then apply, or transfer, to other situations. Finally, by taking a student-centered view, the progressive tradition has tended to align itself with the needs and interests of the disadvantaged. Progressive reformers have helped bolster social justice agendas in public schools. These include a concern over privileges associated with class, gender, sexuality, and racial divisions, as well as mental and physical disabilities.

While progressive theories of learning have been popular in the academy, they've been difficult to translate into lasting pedagogic practices in classrooms. For one, there is an inherent contradiction between the sociocultural theories of learning that progressive pedagogic reformers often draw on and progressive pedagogic practices in classrooms and schools. Sociocultural theories of learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991) emphasize that learning results from direct observation of, and legitimate participation in, the situated social practices of experienced practitioners. Yet the situated practices of experienced practitioners take place in locations other than schools, which, as noted throughout, is a structural feature of the school/world divide. To get around this apparent contradiction, progressive pedagogies often attempt to model or recreate the practices of experienced practitioners from various "real world" communities of practice, a translation that cuts the activity from the social and cultural moorings that make it meaningful and valuable to practitioners in the first place. In a related vein, progressive pedagogic reformers tend to overlook the ways in which schooling itself is a historically produced site of situated activity that has been materially and ideologically shaped by many forces. As Labaree (2004) observes, administrative reformers, rather than pedagogic reformers, have largely shaped the canonical practices of schooling in the twentieth century. Regardless of what children actually learn at school, the institutions of public schooling have been primarily shaped by administrative reforms that emphasize the efficient production of "educated persons" (Levinson and Holland 1996). In this vein, the recent trend towards standardized curricula and high-stakes testing had mostly been a defeat for progressive pedagogic reformers.

Yet the move towards school choice coupled with the increased focus on STEM agendas also created new opportunities for progressive reform projects. Bloomberg and Klein's promotion of "school choice" created a need to quickly open many new schools. Given the accountability for autonomy exchange, the Mayor's administrators didn't attempt to dictate how schools should accomplish performance targets and progressive pedagogic approaches could be tried alongside traditional ones so long as they generated results. The recent focus on STEM has also opened tempting new doors for progressive reformers. As noted earlier, "creativity" and "innovation" have been posited as key elements for solving both the national economic crisis and the contemporary crisis in education. This mandate to produce innovators has offered progressive reformers a powerful opportunity to advocate for their distinctively student-centered pedagogic approaches. At the time the Downtown School was being designed, STEM discourses and mandates were ambiguous enough that both progressive and traditional reformers could claim that their approaches fulfilled the STEM agenda. For progressive reformers, the "technology" and "innovation" portions of the STEM agenda could legitimize a progressive pedagogic approach. The basic form of these arguments was as follows: traditional pedagogic approaches may succeed in getting students to memorize canonical content and to master tried-and-true ways of solving well known problems, but they don't equip students with the capacity to solve problems that people have not yet encountered or do not yet know how to solve. Finding solutions to new

problems, as well as better solutions to old problems, requires an additional human capacity that typically is called something along the lines of “creative problem solving.” Progressive pedagogic reformers, in turn, could claim that their approach would better develop students’ capacities as creative problem solvers since it offered students more freedom to experiment and discover solutions than traditional pedagogic approaches. The Downtown School’s pedagogic model was in keeping with this tradition, although they used the terms “design” and “design thinking” instead of the well-worn phrase of “creative problem solving.”

In addition to claiming expertise in “design,” the school’s planners appropriated optimistic, but I will argue mythic, ideas about digital technology in an attempt to bridge both progressive reform ideals and STEM mandates. The school’s planning documents and publicity materials tightly coupled, and sometimes conflated, digital media, design, innovation, and progressive pedagogies. These arguments drew on popular discourses by “boosters” of digital technology.<sup>12</sup> In the educational context, this discourse can largely be seen as a continuation of enlightenment discourses that educational institutions have long drawn on to legitimize themselves. In its contemporary form, digital media – rather than books, libraries, and schools – are featured as the powerful sources of illumination and social progress. The Downtown School’s publicity materials were crafted in this techno-utopian vein. Nearly all of the school’s publicity materials prominently featured imagery where a racially diverse collection of students looked deeply engaged as they interacted with computers or other digital media equipment. In keeping with a long tradition of educational institutions associating themselves with *fiat lux* imagery, the primary light source in these images often emanated from computer screens, digital projectors, or other digital media equipment. In both historical and contemporary cases, informational media are figured as the key bridge between the school and the world, a theme I will return to shortly. They are also routinely figured as inherently liberating.

While popular myths about the educational potentials of digital media often reproduce enlightenment discourses about education and abstract knowledge, essentialized ideas about digital media also dovetail especially well with many of the ideals of the progressive pedagogic reform tradition. In keeping with the progressive reform tradition’s focus on “student-centered” learning, boosters of digital media regularly associate digital media with personalization and individualization. Digital media devices are frequently designed and marketed as “personal” objects (e.g. “personal” computers, Apple’s various i-branded products, cell phones identified with individuals, and so on.). Further the internet is routinely figured as providing access to niche, rather than mass, content that purportedly matches the individuated “interests” of different persons. In a related vein, just as progressive reformers have long argued against authoritative pedagogic practices with a teacher leading the masses from the front of the room, boosters of digital media tend to emphasize the technologies’ flattening and decentralizing effects.<sup>13</sup> According to these views, digital media is networked, non-hierarchical, and peer-to-peer, not one-to-many. Similarly, just as progressive reformers emphasize “learning by doing,” digital media and video games are routinely assumed to be “interactive.” Students can use these tools to “tinker,” make choices, and experiment. Finally, just as progressive education has long fought for social justice concerns, boosters regularly figure digital media as democratizing and disruptive to historical structures of

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12 For a review and analysis of booster discourse see: Buckingham (2000, 2007) and Turner (2006).

13 For a review and criticism of this discourse see Brown and Duguid (2000).

privilege. Through digital media and games, persons are not defined by historical structures of identification but rather they can fluidly “take on” and play with various identities.

In the following pages I briefly highlight how the Downtown School’s founders imagined a version of schooling that would simultaneously bridge these progressive educational ideals, the long legacy of social mandates that have been attached to public schools, recent reform agendas focused on standardized curricula, and a renewed interest in STEM and innovation amongst educational reformers. I argue that in an attempt to bridge these multiple, contradictory, and ultimately irreconcilable goals, the designers of the Downtown School drew on mythic notions of digital media and games. By “mythic” I mean a discourse that is compelling and powerful because of its seeming coherence and simplicity but which significantly exaggerates the power of some factors at the expense of many others. One of the reasons mythic ideas are so powerful is because they simultaneously give people something to hold onto conceptually as they blind people to evidence that would undermine their views. I do not intend the term pejoratively since I too have subscribed to most of the mythic ideas about digital media that I am now interrogating.

### **4.2.1 The Digital Generation**

One of the main ways mythic ideas about digital media seemed to have influenced the school’s planners was through their appropriation of the notion of the “digital generation” (e.g. Prensky 2001; Palfrey and Gasser 2008). In its planning and publicity materials, the Downtown School routinely associated transformations in media and communication technologies with a rupture in the nature of childhoods. As the school wrote in a report for other reformers:

Today we live in the presence of a generation of kids who have known no time untouched by the promise and pitfalls of digital technology... [T]oday’s kids are crafting learning identities – hybrid identities – for themselves that seemingly reject previously distinct modes of being.

The document went on to suggest that the new identity that linked contemporary children together was one rooted in their shared immersion in digital media. Again, the school’s designers wrote:

The phrase that best explains this change comes from Mikey, a student, who in talking about games said, “It’s what we do.” The “we” he was referring to are kids these days, the young people of his generation.

The school’s founders emphasized this generational rupture prominently on its website and in its promotional fliers, branding the school as “a school for digital kids.” The slogan that was typically accompanied with an image of a smiling child rendered as a digital avatar. The digital generation stereotype was powerful because it seemed to help bridge several of the school’s numerous mandates simultaneously. In the progressive pedagogic tradition, the digital generation concept gave the impression that the school’s techno-centric focus was “student-centered.” By making the school “digital,” the school’s founders believed they were redesigning schooling to make it more accommodating to the needs and sensibilities of children who had been “born digital.” As such, they believed they were crossing the school/world divide by making school more attuned to the cultural practices and sensibilities of students’ out-of-school lives. This attempt to appropriate aspects of students’ out-of-school lives rested on assumptions about what “kids these days” were

like. In public presentations educators frequently suggested that they had designed the school, “with kids themselves in mind,” and that they had, “leveraged what kids are really interested in today, social networking, video games” and other digital media. The “digital” portion of the digital generation stereotype also seemingly satisfied the “technology” portion of STEM agendas. Finally, by emphasizing generational unity, other lines of historically structured difference and privilege were seemingly overcome. By associating the Downtown School with the universal “we” of the digital generation, the designers could see their school as promoting the social justice dimension of the progressive tradition. From this perspective, a “school for digital kids” would be welcoming, meaningful, and engaging for all. Frequently, this purported understanding of “kids these days” was coupled with a mandate to serve youth from less privileged backgrounds. As one of the school’s founders stated in a press release when the school was launched:

In an age when low-income urban kids continue to drop out of school at alarming rates, yet research is consistently showing the high levels of engagement youth are exhibiting in various media platforms, it is incumbent upon educators to take notice and indeed to redirect teaching methods to meet the needs and interests of students.

The limitations of this assumption are discussed in the remaining chapters of this dissertation, especially in chapters 6 and 7.

#### **4.2.2 A Network of Learning Spaces**

In addition to crossing the school/world divide by seemingly appropriating students’ out-of-school leisure practices, the school’s leaders figured digital media as a way to connect previously disparate aspects of students’ lives, allowing for “hybrid learning identities” that rejected “previously distinct modes of being.” According to this view, pedagogy and technology could obliterate spatial and temporal divisions. As the school’s founders wrote in a report to educators:

Rather than defining school as a separate place in time and space from the concerns and communities of children’s lives, the Downtown School defines it as a social landscape that reaches into the home as well as into the local and global communities to which students belong.

Effective learning, the school’s designers suggested, happened when similar learning activities were repeated across numerous settings and social relationships. As the founders noted in the report quoted above, “The more spaces, communities, and contexts that students gain experience in as practitioners of learning, the stronger they will grow.” As noted previously, this goal of connecting school-based learning to children’s out-of-school experiences has a long history in the tradition of progressive pedagogic reform, going back to at least Dewey.<sup>14</sup>

The Downtown School attempted to cross the school/world divide in several ways. Most obviously, like all schools the Downtown School planned to use pedagogic practices to provide

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<sup>14</sup> In recent decades, this split has often been defined in terms of the comparative binary of “formal” and “informal” learning. Lave (2011) offers a thoughtful analysis of how these familiar divisions came about as well as how they’re cemented in disciplinary boundaries, problematics, and politics. See chapter 2.

students with *knowledge about* the world beyond school. All schools do so by providing students with decontextualized knowledge, typically facts and rules, about what the world is like outside of school. In addition to these more canonical practices, the Downtown School planned to implement several more novel techniques for bridging this divide. The Downtown School hoped to use a variety of digital media tools to span school and out-of-school contexts. Foremost among these was a social networking site designed for just the students and educators at the Downtown School. This social network site, which I'm calling 24/7, was designed to be an online space for the school community to gather, share work that they had made and collected, give feedback on each others' creations, express their feelings, and generally communicate with each other. The site was imagined as a "learning space" that would seamlessly connect learning activities as students navigated different physical spaces. For example, in a presentation at a conference for educational technologists, one of the school's founders gave a hypothetical account of a day-in-the-life of a student. Shortly after waking up, this imagined student logged onto 24/7 to chat with fellow students about an assignment; after the school day was over, they logged back onto 24/7 to hang out with classmates as they did their homework. Regardless of where they went, 24/7 would connect them.

In addition to 24/7, the school implemented a variety of other digital tools for communications with parents. These included a homework website, a weekly email from the principal, and fairly regular email exchanges between teachers and some parents. These technology-enabled communications between the school and parents and guardians are discussed in more detail in chapter 7. Finally, the school offered an additional "learning space" after the formal school day had ended. These programs focused on media production and complemented the required media production class. These offerings are discussed in more detail in chapters 3 and 6.

### **4.2.3 Design and Innovation**

As noted earlier, the Downtown School frequently aligned itself with the STEM reform agenda's emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship. It primarily did so by emphasizing the creative capacities required of innovators. These, in turn, were thought to be best fostered by a progressive approach to pedagogy that emphasized giving students more power to make decisions and explore solutions, both individually and in small groups. Such approaches were frequently contrasted with pedagogic approaches that emphasized making students learn known ways of solving known problems. Such an approach will be familiar to those who know the "project-based learning" tradition amongst progressive pedagogic reformers. The main difference at the Downtown School was that these projects often made use of computers and other digital media tools – such as video cameras, digital photography cameras, audio recorders, and other mobile devices equipped with sensors – and the end product of these projects was often a digital media artifact.

The Downtown School's founders planned to implement this vision in several ways. First, all students would be required to take a media arts course as one of their main classes. In the first year, the media arts course would focus on game design. Students would be taught the basic elements of games, design principles for making games, software tools for making games and other digital media artifacts, and a process for making, sharing, and getting feedback on drafts of their work. By blending creative production with digital tools, this course fulfilled the loosely defined STEM agenda as well as the progressive ideal of "learning by doing." Second, the school's

designers intended to have media production of various kinds woven throughout all classes, including ones where the curriculum was defined by state standards. In addition to worksheets, tests, presentations, and short papers, students would be asked to create short videos, posters, podcasts, photographs, charts, and blog entries to demonstrate that they had learned the mandated curricular content. Third, for the last week or so of each term, the regular class schedule was suspended and students worked in small groups of approximately 10 students on a single project. I'll call this period at the end of each trimester "Level Up" in reference to the school designers' view that these sessions were the culmination of that term's curricular offering. In the Level Up session for the first trimester students were charged to design and build Rube Goldberg machines; during the second trimester Level Up students were tasked with writing and producing a series of short plays; and for the final trimester Level Up students were asked to design a series of original outdoor games for an end-of-the-year festival. Finally, as noted previously, the Downtown School offered after-school programs focused on media arts production. These programs were much like the required media arts course except they did not focus on game design. Over the year, after school programs included comics, animation, advertising, "hacking" toys, smart fashion, and video production.

#### **4.2.4 "Game-like" Learning**

The school's most ambitious and publicized innovation was an attempt to make the entire curriculum "game-like." As I explain how "game-like" schooling was imagined, I will draw attention to how such a vision attempted to simultaneously satisfy the competing demands of STEM agendas, legacy educational mandates, progressive reform ideals, and a state-defined standardized curriculum. In particular, I will emphasize that "games" were treated as a metaphorical bridge between the school and the world. In the next chapter I argue that the designers relied on a notion of games as perhaps the only way to bridge such mandates.

Here's how the school's designers envisioned "game-like" schooling. State-mandated curricula would be organized into and across thematic classes called "domains." Each trimester, the curricular content for each domain, what would normally be called a unit, was organized into a "mission." Each mission consisted of helping a set of non-school characters solve a problem they were facing in the world they inhabited beyond the school walls. Missions were designed by game designers and curriculum experts, some of whom worked for the school and some of whom worked for a non-profit institute associated with one of the school's founders. All missions were fabricated although some were presented as if they were real. Missions included a pair of quirky cartoon brothers from a fictional code breaking academy who needed help cracking codes, a clan of Muppet-like characters from a fantasy world that needed help with physics in order to build better houses, a real human actor who pretended to be a TV producer and who claimed he needed research on world geography because he was producing a new TV show, and a trio of real professional editors who worked for one of the world's largest publishing companies and who claimed they needed ideas for a new educational comic they were supposedly producing on ancient civilizations.

Classes and assignments at the Downtown School would then be organized around the students trying to help the out-of-school characters with their challenges. Students would need to learn state-mandated curriculum (physics, world geography, ancient civilization, fractions, etc.) in order

to do so. Each mission was broken down into smaller challenges called “quests.” The curricula for quests were mapped onto conventional curriculum subunits although, again, the need to learn this content was presented as if it was in service of helping the out-of-school characters with their challenges. A combination of teachers and digital and physical artifacts would act as mediators between the physical space of the classroom and the out-of-school worlds of missions and quests. So, for example, the teacher would lead the class in a Skype phone call with a virtual character who was being played by one of the school’s game designers in a room on the other side of the school, or a teacher would bring up a blog that supposedly belonged to a character from one of the missions, and so forth. Most of the time, though, students would work on their “missions” without interacting with the virtual characters, doing various classroom activities, some of which used computers and digital media but many of which did not (chapter 5).

In their planning and promotional documents, the school's founders suggested that their “game-like” model would simultaneously satisfy state curriculum standards, STEM agendas, legacy mandates from previous crises in education, and, most importantly, progressive ideals about effective learning. The model was imagined as satisfying state-standards since the missions were designed so that students would have to learn the standardized curriculum in order to help the out-of-school characters overcome their challenges. The model was seen as satisfying STEM agendas since the curriculum of missions and quests were heavily skewed toward math, science, and engineering (what they called “systems thinking”), and because students were often asked to use digital tools to fulfill missions and quests. Additionally, the model would foster an innovative disposition in students because many of the challenges would require creative problem solving as well as making digital and non-digital media. The model was seen as in keeping with legacy educational mandates – such as overcoming racial divisions, gender inequities, mental and physical disabilities, the Americanization of immigrants, and disadvantages associated with urban poverty – because all students were assumed to be equally interested in a coherent and unified notion of “digital media” and “games.” Additionally, the designed missions were often treated as culturally neutral. Instead of bringing identities from their out-of-school lives to school, students would “take on” the identity of a character in the worlds the designers had fabricated. So, for example, students would “take on” the identity of a code breaker in a code breaking academy, or “take on” the identity of a historian doing research for a TV show, or “take on” the identity of a physicist helping the Muppet characters, and so forth. As noted throughout, such a fluid view of identity was in keeping with what I have been calling a “techno-cosmopolitan” sensibility. In the next several chapters I will return to the limitations of these assumptions.

This notion of identity was entailed in the Downtown School’s somewhat unique take on progressive ideas about learning. Two strands of learning theory that are currently popular amongst progressive pedagogic reformers heavily influenced the design of the Downtown School. One strand stems from Jean Piaget, and especially a variation of Piaget’s theories that goes by the name “constructionism,” as developed by Seymour Papert and his colleagues at MIT (e.g. Papert and Harel 1991). Constructionism informed the Downtown School’s focus on students taking a hands-on approach to making media and technology as a way to understand abstract science and math concepts. The second, and more influential, strand of learning theory that informed the school was a variation of sociocultural learning theory developed by the sociolinguist James Paul Gee and his colleagues. Gee was an advisor to the designers of the Downtown School and his influential book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) was the primary theoretical inspiration for the school’s “game-like” pedagogy. Both the work of Gee and

his colleague David Shaffer (2006) was frequently cited in the Downtown School's planning documents and in reports produced for foundations and other education reformers. Gee and Shaffer's work can be seen as a translation of sociocultural theories of learning, and especially "situated learning" (Lave and Wenger 1991), into visions that more readily accommodate STEM reform agendas.

According to Gee and the founders of the Downtown School, game-like learning offered a way to address some of the problems that have traditionally plagued traditional school-based learning. Chief among these was the school/world problem mentioned earlier. As a reminder, one of the main critiques that progressive reformers have consistently made of traditional schooling is that schools present students with decontextualized curricular content. Taken out of context, this curricular content has little meaning and salience for students because it doesn't connect to practical experiences in their day-to-day lives. As Gee wrote in a later article, "people primarily think and learn through *experiences* they have had, not through abstract calculations and generalizations" (2008, 21). For Gee and the designers of the Downtown School who were influenced by his ideas, games could furnish students with a context for those missing experiences and hence make knowledge and other academic content meaningful. In keeping with the student-centered ideal of progressive reformers, Gee suggested that games provided players with a context in which they could actively explore as they solved problems. Instead of passively receiving knowledge, player/learners tested out different hypotheses as they attempted to beat a game. As Gee wrote, well-designed games are "*richly designed problem spaces*" and, "context here then means a *goal-driven problem space*" (2008, 26 [emphasis in original]).

In addition to returning meaning to curricular content by providing a designed context for problem solving, these "richly designed problem spaces" could furnish players with identities. As Shaffer et al. (2005, 4) wrote:

[Video games] let players think, talk, and act – they let players *inhabit* – roles otherwise inaccessible to them. A 16 year old in Korea playing *Lineage* can become an international financier... A *Deus Ex* player can experience life as government special agent.

For some games, what Shaffer calls epistemic games, players take on the identities of real-world practitioners, especially scientists, engineers, lawyers, and "other valued communities of practice" (2005, 19). As noted above, the founders of the Downtown School frequently suggested that their game-like approach to learning allowed students to "take on," or role-play, various real world identities shared this view. As the school's recruitment materials claimed, "the school focuses on learning to 'be' rather than learning 'about.' Students take on identities of mathematicians, scientists, writers, historians, and designers." By participating in these designed games, and by taking on the identities of those who are members of the communities constituted by those games, learners/players come to acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and "ways of thinking and acting" – what Shaffer calls, the "epistemic frame" – of that community of practice (Shaffer, Squire, and Gee 2005). I analyze some of the limitations of this interpretation of situated activity and learning in the next chapter but for now I want to point out the tendency of this discourse to slip between designed communities of practice and the communities of practice certain games attempt to recreate. Such slippage allows for a hopeful vision of "techno-cosmopolitanism" to stand in for the challenging task of producing cosmopolitan sensibilities and practices in a historically structured world.

In addition to providing player/learners with an immersive context for experiences that furnish players with meanings and identities, Gee, Shaffer and the Downtown School's founders suggested that games were pleasurable, engaging, and motivating, in ways that traditional schooling presumably was not. Gee, Shaffer, and the founders of the Downtown School interpreted players' deep engagement in certain video games as evidence of games being superbly designed "learning environments." One of the main reasons some games were so engaging, according to Gee, was because they were designed to continuously offer just the right amount of challenge. Well-designed games start off relatively simply but as players solve a game's early challenges they "level up" and are presented with similar, but increasingly more difficult, problems. Gee calls this insight the "regime of competence principle," which he defines as, "The learner gets ample opportunity to operate within, but at the outer edge of, his or her resources, so that at those points things are felt as challenging but not 'undoable'" (2003, 71).<sup>15</sup> Another reason Gee and the founders of the Downtown School thought games were motivating is because they were "goal directed." The designers of the Downtown School suggested that the goals of missions and quests, which were issued to students by characters from missions, provided students with a "need to know." In other words, by furnishing students with a constructed world and a challenge or goal within that world, students would be able to connect learning academic content to a pragmatic need. Again, this approach was often defined in opposition to traditional school, which was seen as asking students to learn academic content that wasn't attached to any practical need or use other than passing a test.

The somewhat utopian idea that learning can and should be pleasurable and self-motivating is in keeping with progressive reformers idealization of a student-centered approach to schooling and the entailed aversion towards authority and hierarchy. Such orientations have important implications for the role of the teacher. At the Downtown School teachers were initially imagined as primarily playing a supportive, rather than commanding, role. Teachers would present themselves as ambassadors between the world of the classroom and the worlds of the missions, delivering messages from the characters and reporting on what was transpiring in the fantasy worlds beyond the school's walls. They would also support the students as they worked toward fulfilling the goals of quests and missions. Importantly, the goals, directives, and assessments issued to players/learners would come from the fabricated worlds of the missions, not from the teachers. So, for example, it would be the Muppet characters who asked students for help with their houses, and it would be officials at the code breaking academy that requested students to take a paper and pencil math test as an "application" to enter the code breaking academy. How this attempt to displace adult power into the realm of the games worked in practice will be discussed in the next chapter.

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15 Interestingly, critics of video games make similar argument when suggesting that games are addictive. Both boosters and critics tend to suggest that it is the gradual increase in challenge built into the game's architecture that elicits engagement. Critics suggest this is a similar pattern to drug addiction, where users have to take more and more of the drug to bring about the same high. Boosters, like Gee, see this as evidence of games being effectively designed to encourage learning.

### 4.3 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the broader reform context within which the Downtown School was designed. I first drew attention to the perennial characterization of crises in education and suggested that the origins of crises are tied to structural contradictions between the ideology of schooling as a mechanism of for human betterment and its role in sorting students into a hierarchically ordered adult society. As a consequence of perennial reform, educational institutions have accumulated myriad mandates to solve social and economic problems, many of which they cannot fix on their own. As educational historians have observed, this dilemma leads reformers towards utopian visions and millennial thinking. Over the last several decades, state-driven educational reforms have focused on solving a national economic crisis related to contemporary globalization. These reforms have attempted to institute market-like conditions within public schooling, a STEM-focused curriculum, and standardized assessments. I argue that the Downtown School was designed as an ambitious attempt to braid aspects of the “progressive” reform tradition into these dominant institutional arrangements, many of which were at odds with conventional progressive commitments. I suggest that the designers of the Downtown School turned to mythic ideas about digital technology, and especially games, in an attempt to bridge the various, and often conflicting, mandates attached to schools, especially tensions between agendas committed to aggregate economic growth, individuated self-realization, equitable opportunities, and social cohesion.

### Useless Fun

On the Monday after Thanksgiving I headed to the cafeteria with a group of students. As we descended the stairs, I made small talk with Nico, a white boy with two creative professional parents. As Nico and I sat down to eat our sandwiches I asked him what he and his family had done for Thanksgiving. He told about that his parents hosted a big party, “with 20 adults and five kids,” at their apartment in Greenwich Village. He went on to tell me about an incident during the party when, “The kids locked each other in a bedroom and hit each other with stuffed animals.” Nico was speaking quickly and had a slight smile on his face as he recounted the pillow fight. He ended his story by saying, “It was useless fun.”

When I wrote my field notes that evening I paused over Nico’s qualification of the pillow fight as “useless.” I wrote the following short memo to myself in my field notes:

I wonder if Nico’s phrase has anything to do with privileged adults attempting to harness “fun” and “play” for productive purposes. It’s as if Nico has a sense of adults’ serious/productive expectations for “fun.” I wonder if Nico feels that he has to rationalize or justify his fun and play to me by showing that it’s important, productive, serious, etc., and, when it’s not, that he knows it’s just “useless fun,” perhaps protecting those activities from the realm of adult control.

Middle-class reformers have long attempted to rationalize children and young people’s play and leisure practices (Bailey 1987, 1989; Burke 1995, 1997; Halpern 2003). According to these historians, reformers’ attempts to rationalize play have occurred as part of a more general transformation towards ordered and institutionalized forms of social life. What is unique about my case is that the Downtown School reformers were seemingly attempting the opposite; that is, to make schoolwork more playful by appropriating cultural forms and practices that they assumed were part of students’ leisure practices. In this regard, the Downtown School’s efforts had much in common with recent attempts to “gamify” various forms of productive practice, from work, to schooling, to managing health and well-being (for an overview, see Anderson and Rainie [2012]). As I plan to show, students did not always go along with these appropriations, and some fought to preserve residual spaces for “useless fun.”

In this chapter I discuss and analyze how the Downtown School’s educators attempted to appropriate aspects of children’s presumed play practices as part of their efforts to make a model new school for the twenty-first century. As discussed in the last chapter, this reform project can be seen as an attempt to revitalize ideals about progressive education. As with many previous attempts

at progressive pedagogic reform, reformers thought their new model would break down divisions between schooling and the “real world.” Abstract curricular content would be “contextualized” so as to make it meaningful and interesting for students. The school would be “student-centered.” Unlike canonical schooling, this new model would “recruit,” rather than mandate, students’ participation. Teachers would be supportive rather than authoritative. Students would be creative, and students’ agency would be promoted. As a banner in the school’s entryway read, the school stood for “learning by doing.” As I will show, this vision of “game-like” schooling did not overcome the perennial challenges of the school/world divide but, rather, helped obscure schooling’s contributions to social reproduction by substituting a “game-like” version of the world for the “real world.”

Games, the founders suggested, offered a model for how progressive ideals could be realized in practice. Games were fun. People, and especially young people, played games *voluntarily*, often for hours at a time. Moreover, when young people played games they were constantly solving problems. Players were active and creative problem solvers. Games and digital media were inherently interactive. Further, games could help break down the school/world divide. Games could furnish the missing context that beleaguered educators’ attempts to make abstract de-contextualized content have purchase on the world beyond the classroom. Games constituted “worlds” that allowed players to “take on” the identities of new characters, assuming the identity of physicists, geographers, and code-breakers. All of these ideas rest on the assumption that the reformers knew what students were up to in their leisure practices and, as a result, these features could be imported into a school context. As I show later in this chapter as well as in chapter 6, much of what students were up to in their non-productive practices was neither recognized nor valued by reformers, nor could it have been without undermining educators’ institutionally-backed authority and responsibilities.

In this chapter I examine what this model of twenty-first century schooling looked like in practice. I begin by offering an illustrative case of how the school’s educators attempted to make the Downtown School “game-like.” I then show that despite the founders’ visions of reform, much of daily life at the Downtown School resembled canonical schooling practices. Further, when some students exploited the purported autonomy of the “game-like” framing for their own ends, and when performance on state-mandated tests failed to meet expectations, educators and parents worked to make everyday life at the Downtown School *more* structured and routinized (see also chapters 6 and 7). By illustrating the contrast between the reformers’ vision and daily life at the Downtown School, I draw attention to four interrelated dimensions of institutionalized schooling that were initially overlooked or downplayed in the founders’ visions of reform: compulsory participation, educator authority and control (e.g. “classroom management” practices), state mandated standardized curricula and assessment, and the social sorting function of the larger educational system. I offer an account of some of the everyday ways that students entertained themselves and exercised creative agency in the face of institutionalized practices that attempted to direct and control them. In the spirit of Nico’s quote, I call these cultural productions “useless fun” so as to emphasize that they were produced in a dialectical relation with adults’ attempts to structure their activity for “productive” purposes. I end the chapter discussing moments when the school’s adult-managed practices and the students’ cultural productions were in a more harmonious relation. In doing so, I draw attention to the promise of those practices to act as a basis for substantive democratic reform. However, I also caution that when such practices are relegated to a carefully bounded carnivalesque period they may, paradoxically, contribute to the reproduction of

inherited orders more than they galvanize substantive social change. These findings suggest that some of the inherent contradictions of canonical schooling – the school/world divide and the care/control paradox of institutionalized social selection – cannot be resolved by attempting to appropriate cultural forms and practices from realms of life where children have previously had some relief from adults’ efforts to groom and sort them into differentiated positions of privilege in adult society. Instead, fulfilling grooming and sorting mandates required educators to assert their hegemony, a structural feature of canonical schooling that was absent from the reformers’ utopian visions for a cutting edge model of schooling in the twenty-first century.

## 5.1 “Game-like” Schooling

Near the beginning of each trimester, the teacher in each course would introduce the students to the “mission” for that course. These introductions, which typically lasted for 20-30 minutes, consisted of the class communicating with characters that were portrayed as existing in a world beyond the school. These outsiders would typically be brought into the classroom by Skype phone calls, video chats, videos, blogs, emails, physical letters, and other mediated communications. For example, in the first trimester of the science-themed course, the instructor told the students they would be watching a video on Newton, but soon after the clip began it became clear that something was wrong with the video. There were glitches in the images and the sound was muddled. Sock-puppet characters – who I later learned had been appropriated from the popular video game *Little Big Planet 2* – appeared and bounced around the screen, as they made unintelligible squeals. It appeared as if someone had tampered with the educational clip on Newton.

The teacher stopped the video and acted as if he too was surprised by what they had just seen. He then told the class that he wondered if an email he had received that morning could help them figure out what went wrong. The teacher projected an email onto the screen. It was purportedly from the sock puppet characters: they had hidden a package for the students in the back of the classroom. Students were alert, their backs were erect and a few were even on their feet. One student called out, “Why are you doing this?!” The teacher ignored him and told the class he was going to form a “search party” to scour the back of the room. He asked for volunteers and most hands went up. The search party was formed and soon the selected students found a large manila envelope hidden beneath a table in the back of the room. The teacher opened the envelope and took out a letter from the sock puppets we had seen earlier. They needed the students’ help: their houses kept falling down because they didn’t know physics. The “mission” for this semester was to learn basic physics concepts so the class could help the sock puppets build better houses.

These expository sessions were a noticeable break from routine classroom activities and, as just noted, most students perked up when they occurred. On days when these communications with “outsiders” were staged, I would hear students at lunch discussing the episodes. Often these conversations consisted of students revealing what had happened to students who had not yet had the class. All in all, students seemed to like the interludes although at the beginning of the year the authenticity of the missions was disputed. Many students pointed out to each other, and sometimes the teachers, that the missions were obviously “fake.” At first, educators were not sure how to respond to these challenges. For example, in one introductory episode the students were

shown a blog that supposedly belonged to a “master game designer.” Students quickly pointed out that the blogger “had no comments” and “must be super unpopular.” In another class, some students made fun of the exaggerated tone of voice of a character, supposedly a child, who was communicating with the class through a Skype call. Several students made guesses about which teacher or staff member was playing the part in another room. At first many teachers tried to play the scenarios straight and many attempted to quiet those who were not willing to go along the fantasy. For example, when one student repeatedly called out, “this is so fake!” the teacher sternly snapped back, “Stop ruining it for everybody!” After these first episodes, though, teachers acknowledged that the scenarios were fabricated and both students and teachers mostly agreed to “suspend their disbelief.” Teachers stayed in character, but they tended toward a tongue-in-cheek presentation, and students knew the scenarios were fake but generally went along with the ruse.

While these moments of communication with fantasy characters were quite unorthodox for a public school, they were a relatively minor part of the Downtown School’s daily routines. Shortly after communicating with fantasy characters through digital media, classroom activity would return to more canonical practices such as lessons, worksheets, and mini-projects. School would resume. In most classes, these interludes of interaction with non-school outsiders happened two or three times during the trimester. For the rest of the trimester, teachers frequently used discourse that referred to the mission’s goal and characters, but they mostly did so as a way of framing more canonical pedagogic practices. So, for example, when the science teacher assigned students to make posters that explained the concept of “force,” they were told that they were doing so for the fantasy sock puppets discussed above. Or, when students took a paper and pencil math test, they were told that it was an “application” for a “code-breaking academy.” Additionally, teachers suggested that the out-of-school characters, not the teachers, were assessing the quality of the students’ work. So, for example, when giving students feedback on their posters the science teacher suggested that he was relaying feedback from the sock puppet characters, and the math teacher suggested that the leaders of the code-breaking academy had reviewed the students’ “applications.” Students, of course, knew that teachers were the ones assessing them.

I interpret these efforts to displace assessment into the fantasy realm as attempts to resolve some of the tensions that progressive educators face when attempting to connect school to the “real world,” a relation that legitimizes assessments and sorting. As discussed in the introduction, educators are in the difficult position of having to assess, sort, and shape children, and this authority sits uneasily with sacralized images of children, especially amongst progressive educational reformers. In addition to trying to displace this uncomfortable power into the realm of play and fantasy, the Downtown School tried to blunt the thorny tools of assessment by suggesting that the “game-like” fantasies connected the school to the “real world” as they simultaneously kept the world at a distance. Instead of being assessed with letter grades, students were assigned individual labels on a linear spectrum that ran from “novices” to “masters,” passing through the labels of “apprentices” and “seniors” along the way. Additionally, each location on this spectrum was broken into the equivalent of “pluses” and “minuses,” allowing for more fine-grained differentiation along the one-dimensional pathway. These labels did allow teachers to escape some of the historical baggage associated with letter grades. By relying on a single linear spectrum, and by plotting all students against the same spectrum, the school reproduced one of the basic features of canonical schooling: to individuate students as a basis for legitimate social selection. Indeed, many parents pushed educators to relate their unique assessment system to the standardized systems used by other schools. When pushed, educators offered a quick translation, noting how each of their new

assessment titles could be converted into familiar letter and number grades. I discuss these dynamics in more detail in the chapter 7.

In addition to these symbolic reforms, the school attempted to reform day-to-day pedagogic practices. In keeping with the progressive pedagogic reformer tradition of advocating for “project-based learning,” the school tried to incorporate small individual and group projects into the curriculum. Groups typically consisted of three to four students that the teacher put together. The duration and complexity of these projects varied, with some spanning portions of a few class periods, and others extending over more than a week. Projects were organized around the production of artifacts that included: a personal essay about each student’s perfect bedroom, a paper map of their classroom drawn to scale, a short video where students explained physics concepts, internal blog posts on animals, an individual presentation in front of the class reporting on an “athletic training component” (e.g. “speed,” “flexibility,” etc.), a paper poster that explained a concept they had learned (e.g. What is force? What is tyranny?), and so on. About half the projects made use of digital media production tools, including digital cameras, sound recorders, Google Documents, and game design software. Some teachers let students form their own groups, and when they did these groupings mostly matched the groupings students made during their free time (chapter 6). In other cases, teachers required students to work together who did not typically hang out with each other outside of class. In a few cases, these short-term groupings helped ameliorate the social divisions students formed on their own, especially when the group was competing against other groups and the members shared a sense of common purpose. Each group project was relatively short-lived, however, and they did not lead to longer term friendships across the social divisions students formed during lunch and recess.<sup>1</sup>

The school also promoted project-based learning by requiring a course on media production. During the first year, this course was focused on game design. Students worked individually or in groups of two to three to design both digital and non-digital games. When designing digital games, the students used game design software that ran on laptops that were provided by the school. This course and a course on “wellness” did not attempt to incorporate state-mandated curricula, and, as such these courses tended to involve more project-based learning activities. Finally, at the end of each trimester the normal school routines were put on hold and students worked in teams of eight-to-ten students on a single project for the duration of the week. I’ll call this period “Level Up,” a reference to the stage in a video game when players transition to a more advance level.<sup>2</sup> End of the trimester projects included building a Rube Goldberg machine, writing and producing a short play, and designing a series of small physical contests for an end-of-the-year field day. I will discuss Level Up in more detail at the end of this chapter since these were the moments when the school departed most noticeably from canonical models of schooling. They were also the moments when adult-managed practices were most in harmony with students’ everyday cultural productions. Before doing so, though, I will discuss the extent to which the school’s pedagogic practices resembled canonical models. As I go, I will highlight tensions between the school’s vision of reform and the more institutionalizing pressures of schooling.

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1 If group projects had persisted for a longer duration, it’s possible these friendships would have gradually taken hold. See also my discussion of “Level Up” later in this chapter.

2 The school used a slightly different term with the same general meaning. I am changing it to fulfill the spirit of my IRB protocol; see chapter 2 for a lengthier discussion about pseudonyms and privacy.

## 5.2 Daily Routines and Canonical Models of Pedagogic Practice

One of the reasons to do ethnographic field work is that you inevitably end up being surprised by some of what you find. As I will show, one of my greatest surprises while doing fieldwork for this project was the degree to which the Downtown School used instrumental pedagogic approaches despite its progressive ideals. In many ways, daily life at the Downtown School resembled Tayloristic models of organizations, and it became more Tayloristic as the school matured. Both managerial authority and efficiency-driven production processes are central to Tayloristic models. Experts analyze the production of known outcomes like an engineering problem in order to maximize efficiency: components of a production process are defined in terms of small functional tasks, and these tasks are then arranged according into an optimally efficient plan that minimizes input costs in relation to standardized outcomes. One key metric in these equations is clock time (discussed below), where the efficiency of production processes is measured against how much labor and machine time is “spent” on a production task. Managers ensure that workers carry out the production processes according to the experts’ plans. Given that these approaches attempt to deny agency and creative thinking to workers (which could produce disruptive variability and inefficiencies), I found it surprising and ironic to see them deployed at a school that championed student agency and creativity. As I will show, educators encouraged students to be constantly aware of how much clock time they spent on activities, often at a fine-grained scale.<sup>3</sup> This gap between the school’s espoused philosophy and its adult-managed routines reveals a deep tension over the role of authority in the former, a tension that I have previously referred to as the care/control tension, as well as tensions between state-defined production metrics and progressive learning ideals, the latter of which were difficult to measure and quantify. As educators worked through care/control tensions they revealed larger (often unexamined) assumptions about relations between the school and the “real” world, as well as tensions between progressive ideals and pressures to deliver standardized outcome metrics.

As Thorne (1993) observed, many school routines and rules address management challenges in a crowded setting where subordinates (students) far outnumber those in positions of authority (school adults). Under pressure to produce evidence of educational outcomes (increasingly test scores), educators adopt numerous tactics for sustaining adult control, what educators often refer to as “classroom management.” Yet educators do not typically see these practices as unduly coercive. Educators see classroom management practices as a necessary precondition for producing educational outcomes, and educational outcomes are widely seen as beneficial for all students. From this perspective, educator authority is legitimized as a matter of care, not control. According to these views, educational outcomes act as the key bridge between school and the rest of the world. Educators exercise power over students so as to help students succeed when they eventually join the “real” adult world. Yet relations between school and the “real” world are not that simple. Schools do not just equip students with culturally neutral resources that they then take into the world and apply generically to any social situation; schools also play a fundamental role in the processes that sort students into different positions of privilege and influence in the adult world, positions that have become increasingly asymmetrical with respect to economic rewards and political influence. So long as the adult world is hierarchically ordered, schools play a role in sorting

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<sup>3</sup> For example, after waiting for a class to be quiet, a teacher looked at his stopwatch and announced, “We just wasted eight seconds.” Educators commonly made references to such short durations of time.

some students into positions of privilege and others into comparatively meaningless work and positions with limited political influence. From this perspective, educators' relations to many students appear more coercive and controlling than caring. In practice, these endeavors are one and the same, with purportedly neutral pedagogic practices taking forms that help sustain adult control in crowded conditions and produce hierarchical differentiations among students. Efforts to control students, in turn, create conditions for oppositional behavior, especially amongst those likely to be sorted towards lesser positions of privilege in adult society, which, in turn, often leads educators to ratchet up "classroom management" techniques in an attempt to quell opposition, which can often lead to further oppositional behavior, which in turn elicits increasingly undisguised assertions of adult power. At a certain point, these rather naked assertions of power are difficult to square with the "care" frame. To recover a sense of legitimate authority, those with power often put aside commitments to equality and favor individuation, casting those who continue to resist authority as irredeemable, and, hence, beyond "care" and worthy of exclusion. Importantly, these dynamics depend on a more structural relation between schooling and the world, namely the imperative placed on educators to legitimately differentiate students for different forms of participation in an unequal adult society.

As noted earlier, the Downtown School's vision of reform was mostly silent about the ways teachers would manage their classrooms and exercise power over students. By appealing to the supposedly motivational power of games, the school's founders presented an image of schooling where adults did not have to discipline and sort students. Not long after the school opened it became evident that games did not, in themselves, have the motivational powers that the school's founders had attributed to them. In many ways, educators and privileged parents spent the rest of the first year attempting to assert their authority and secure hegemony, often without the aid of digital media. Almost immediately after opening, many school leaders, teachers, and parents expressed concern that the students were "out of control." Some students talked back, ignored or played with directives from teachers, and generally asserted themselves in ways that made it difficult for teachers to stick to their plans. In response to student resistance, the school quickly attempted to establish the authority of teachers. Here, for example, is a snippet from my field notes not long after the school opened:

We're lined up in the hallway waiting for Sarah [the teacher] to take us to the gym. Before heading up the stairs Sarah reminds us of the procedures we're supposed to follow after we arrive: place our bags and jackets against the wall, run three laps around the perimeter of the gym, then get in a big circle and quietly wait for her instructions.

Sarah goes on to tell us about the main activity for the day. She tells us we're going to split into two lines and play a game with basketballs. Troy shouts out, "Knockout!" Several other students follow his lead and also shout out "Knockout." Sarah ignores them and starts explaining what we're going to do: a student at the front of one line will shoot the basketball, then the person from the front of the other line will rebound the ball and give it to the next person in the shooting line. Each student will then go to the end of the opposite line and the process repeats.

"That's not Knockout," Troy says.

Sarah says that this is what we'll be "playing" today. Troy counters that Knockout is

more fun.

Sarah responds by telling Troy, “When you grow up and become a teacher then you can have everyone play Knockout.” Sarah also reminds the students that gym is part of their grade.

Raka blurts out, “Who knew so much fun stuff would be part of our grade?”

Sarah tells him to, “Knock off the attitude.”

For the rest of the year, educators incrementally added more and more “classroom management” techniques. Some of these were introduced by teachers who had taught in other schools, some were introduced by the school’s leadership team, and a good many were introduced by representatives from the Downtown School’s “School Support Organization” (SSO), which as noted in the last chapter, functioned as the replacement for school boards within New York City’s “autonomy for accountability exchange.” In several classrooms, desks were rearranged from inward facing clusters of five desks – an arrangement which put some students’ backs towards the teacher and allowed for easier peer communications – into sequential rows that all faced the teacher at the front of the room. Further, educators worked together in an attempt to implement a seamless flow of adult-managed activities. At any given moment during the school day, each student had a precise spatial location where they were supposed to be which was easily visible to at least one adult, as well as a narrowly defined task, however simple, that they were supposed to be doing. This direction included the movement of students between rooms in the school. During these transitions, which educators saw as moments when they could lose control, educators would lead students in single-file lines between spaces in the school. This technique was introduced about a month into the school year. Further, in the middle of the fall, all the teachers introduced a pedagogic practice where students were directed to immediately begin a silent, individual, teacher-defined task for five minutes upon entering a new classroom.<sup>4</sup> The idea was that teachers “lost” a lot of time at the beginning of classes as they tried to regain control over a new batch of students; these routines were meant to prevent that rupture in control.

In addition to introducing classroom management practices that made the Downtown School more like canonical models, even the initial pedagogic practices of the school had much in common with canonical schooling. In broad strokes, the social, spatial, and temporal organization of the Downtown School will be familiar to those who have experience with the western educational paradigm. From the beginning of its existence, students at the Downtown School were expected to be within the physical boundaries of the school between about 8:30 in the morning

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<sup>4</sup> Each educator gave these warm-up exercises a different name, from “brainercise” to “bell-ringers.” Despite different educator assigned titles, their form was the same and the mandate to implement them came from the school’s leadership, I believe in partnership with advisors from the school’s SSO. Each Wednesday afternoon educators, school leaders, and often representatives from the school’s SSO held a “professional development” session. While I was not able to observe these meetings, I noticed that all of the educators would introduce a new technique at the same time, typically following a professional development session. I got the impression, confirmed in some informal conversations with educators, that professional development sessions were a mechanism for distributing classroom management “best practices” among educators. More experienced educators and leaders introduced some best practices, but others appear to have come from the SSO. In subsequent conversations with educators from other schools I have learned that many of these techniques are used in their schools as well. While I do not have enough evidence to support the claim, I suspect that SSOs are acting as increasingly powerful intermediaries for disseminating “best practices” across numerous seemingly autonomous schools.

until 3:30 in the afternoon. A standardized schedule synchronized the movement of students between rooms and the transfer of authority between adults at nine points during the day. Thirty minutes at the beginning of each day was scheduled for a school-wide assembly, called “Morning Meeting,” and a follow-on 10-15 minute advisory period. There were then four 50-minute academic periods, followed by 45-minutes that was split between lunch and recess, followed by two more 50-minute academic periods, before ending the day with a 15-minute advisory session. Throughout the week, individual classes would oscillate between 50- and 100-minutes, taking up one or two scheduled periods. Four times a week, students would have a 50-minute “annex” period, where math and English literacy skills were “honed.” Students also attended gym twice a week for 50-minutes.

In the first trimester, students were assigned to one of four classes of roughly 20 students. These groups of students traveled together between various required courses. The demographics of each class of students approximated the demographics of the school as a whole, with the exception of one class where students who had been diagnosed with a learning disability made up about half the class; an extra adult, called a “learning specialist,” traveled with this class and provided support to the main teacher. At the beginning of the second trimester, and in response to teachers not having enough prep time, the school reorganized the students into three larger classes of approximately 25 students each. The distribution of students into these classes similarly matched the overall school demographics, although some students were purposely separated because teachers and staff believed they encouraged each other to act out.

In terms of the curriculum, all students were enrolled in the same five required courses. Given its newness and small size, there were no elective classes and there was no tracking, although the school began to introduce both as the year went on in response to requests by some parents.<sup>5</sup> Three of the school’s required courses focused on the state-mandated subject areas of science, English language arts, math, and social science. One course focused on “wellness” – which included everything from gym, to online etiquette, to understanding cultural differences, to “socio-emotional learning” – and one course focused on media arts, which, as mentioned earlier, focused exclusively on game design in the first year. The school called courses “domains,” and each domain was meant to offer a reconfiguration of conventional subject areas mixed together with “twenty-first century literacies” such as “teamwork,” “systems thinking,” and “time management.” The four subject areas listed above were combined into three courses, with English language arts and social studies collapsed into one course, leaving one course focused on science and one focused essentially on math. In practice, educators at the Downtown School frequently performed a translation between the names of the domains and the names of conventional subject areas. The twenty-first

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5 Perhaps in response to the sense that students had no choice in the curriculum, the school introduced mini-electives in the second half of the year called “X Pods.” There were X-Pods for dance, moot court, creative writing, knitting, math, animation, and chess. X Pods only met for about an hour one day a week, though, and, as such, they were not central to daily life at the school. Eckert (1989) sees these school-sponsored activities as central to how schools contribute to the social reproduction of social class and the production of social identities in high school. According to her account, one of key the ways that “jocks” and “burnouts” differentiate themselves is in their differing orientations to these “corporate” practices, with young people from middle class backgrounds embracing these practices and the social hierarchies they entail. As will be shown in the chapter 6, the production of identities rooted in social class divisions can occur in schooling even in absence of extra-curricular activities such as sports teams, student leadership groups, and so forth. One way that they have been done so in New York City is through the private provisioning of extra-curricular activities, as discussed in chapter 3.

century literacies were woven throughout classes. So, for example, whether students were in a science class or a class focused on ancient civilization, educators asked them to use terminology associated with “systems thinking,” basically a version of functionalism that allowed any object of study to be broken down into “elements,” “rules,” and “goals.”

As such, a good portion of the school’s curriculum was defined by the state and the students had to take standardized tests in math and “English Language Arts” in the spring. As mentioned in the last chapter, these test scores facilitated the “autonomy for accountability” exchange that partially made it possible for the school’s founders to try out their new “game-like” model. These relationships with the state and city bureaucracy were an ongoing source of tension for the school’s founders and educators. When one of the school’s founders referred to the current focus on high stakes tests, he would frequently call it “the testing regime.” Additionally, the school’s designers had to find ways to insert the state curriculum into their game narratives. As I’ll discuss later in this chapter as well as in chapter 7, these pressures led the school to move towards more canonical pedagogic practices as the school matured.

Students noticed these changes, and in some cases they suggested that the changes undermined the school’s promise to be a “school for digital kids.” Here, for example, is how Eli and Corin, both white boys with creative professional parents, discussed these changes with me in the spring of the first year. Eli and Corin usually supported the school more than most students, and Corin’s parents were quite involved with the PTA:

Eli: Honestly, all that stuff about like digital kids, and like playing computer games, it’s kind of an exaggeration. Like it’s not really digital anymore.

Corin: It’s digital.

Eli: Well, not as much as it used to be.

Corin: It’s still digital, believe me.

Eli: I know, but not like all the time. And it said school for digital kids so.

Corin: Okay, okay, we’re getting off track.

Christo: Actually I’m curious. What do you mean by that?

Eli: Well, like my mom always tells everyone about the school and she and my dad like have this speech that they give, “Oh it’s [the University that partially sponsored the school’s design] and Gates Foundation.” And that, “It’s a school for digital kids,” which makes you get the idea that you are digital a lot. And it was at first and it was a lot of fun but now —

Corin: Are you saying it’s not fun anymore?

Eli: No. I mean, it is – just let me finish. At first, we were on the computers a lot but now, it basically only [in the media arts class]. We don’t use computers as much in other classes. And in this trimester, we are not even doing game design anymore. I personally think that everything was much funner in the first trimester. Like in [the math class, framed as a “code breaking academy”], we actually had codes back then. Now it’s just math math math.

Eli’s objections express inherent tensions between the school’s image as a “cutting edge,” fun,

“digital” school – an image that registered with his parents – and the more structural factors of schooling – testing mandates, canonical curricula and pedagogy, achievement-driven practices – that made daily routines much like canonical models.

### 5.2.1 Intensifying Discipline

While many of the Downtown School’s daily routines were in keeping with canonical educational models, the fine-grained scale of scripted activity deserves comment. As already noted, daily routines consisted of a nearly continuous succession of adult-defined tasks. Most of these tasks lasted 20 minutes or less, and many were broken down into smaller successive step-by-step directions that effectively constituted an algorithm.

Typical classroom activities consisted of projects, “mini-lessons,” and short assignments. As noted earlier, projects were the least scripted activities yet even these tended to be adult-managed and fairly brief. Students typically worked on a project in increments of 30 minutes or less over several class periods. Educators defined project goals and assessed the quality of the work. For group projects, educators typically defined the roles and sometimes assigned students to different roles. Mini-lessons, which were a daily routine in most classes, followed the familiar lecture format. Teachers provided information and modeled phenomena as students took notes and sometimes asked questions. Mini-lessons were typically shorter than projects. Many were approximately ten minutes in length, and in longer class periods teachers would sometimes do more than one mini-lesson per class. Assignments were primarily information-seeking tasks or problem set exercises. For information-seeking assignments, teachers would provide students with a book, a photocopied packet (usually copied from a textbook), or a website. Students would then answer questions based on the information in the designated source. Sometimes students would answer these questions on paper handouts and sometimes they would use the school’s laptops to answer the questions in a Google Document that was accessible to the teacher.<sup>6</sup> When using the internet, the teacher would define which website, and even webpage, the students should use, and students would be reprimanded for leaving the specified website. Problem sets resembled standardized tests and were primarily used in the math-themed class. These too tended to be relatively brief, with many lasting 20 minutes or less. As with the classroom management practices discussed above, teachers relied on surprisingly homogeneous pedagogic practices. This homogeneity seems to have been produced in several ways. For one, weekly professional development sessions allowed educators, school leaders, and representatives from the school’s SSO to introduce and coordinate common practices. The school’s leaders were particularly insistent about implementing common standards and techniques across the classes; their theory was that consistency across classes made it easier for

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6 Several educators mentioned that Google Documents was the most helpful of the technological experiments tried by the school. The reason for this, they suggested, was that Google Documents eliminated having to collect paper assignments from students. Collecting and managing paper assignments is a surprisingly time intensive task for educators as students have to find the material in their binders and bags and then educators, or a student delegate, has to roam the room to collect the paper. Since students retrieve their assignments at different rates, this process can drag out even if only one or two students takes their time (much like a large party trying to order a meal in a restaurant). It’s also a process fraught with excuses by students, lost homework, assignments getting crumpled in students’ bags, and so forth. With Google Documents, the assignments were immediately accessible, although new issues arose, especially for students who had limited internet access at home. Home computer and internet access became visible at school partially because those students who didn’t have home access would have to turn in hard copies of their work, an exchange that was visible to other students.

students to understand the “rules” and removed grounds for confusion and contestation on behalf of students. Additionally, many of these different genres of pedagogic practice appear to have been part of the school’s plans. Teachers worked with a handful of game designers to design units and lessons. The same game designers worked with most of the teachers and I observed them recommending similar genres of activity to different teachers. Finally, given the small size of the new school, school leaders could exert rather hands-on control and oversight.

In addition to the short duration of each task, educators frequently drew attention to the “clock time” (Thompson 1967) associated with each task and sometimes subtasks. The school referred to this focus on clock time as a “twenty-first century literacy” called “time management,” which was ironic since students had little say over how they managed their time. What was encouraged was a constant awareness of how much clock time students were *spending* on a given task. Canonical schooling practices have long orchestrated activity in relation to clock time, but this orchestration was more fine-grained than I expected. Clocks were featured much more prominently than just the traditional clock in the back of the room with bells announcing period changes. When directing students to do an activity, educators would almost always tell the students how much time they had for the activity. Many would use their laptops to project a digital countdown timer for the activity onto the whiteboard at the front of the class, a continuous animation of clock time slipping away. Many educators also wore stopwatches around their necks, and educators routinely referred to their stopwatches and called out how much time was left before the activity ended.

While framed as a “twenty-first century literacy,” time management often had a lot to do with “classroom management.” Many educators saw timers as a useful way to keep students on task as they transitioned between numerous activities. Educators expected students to be in their assigned seats and listening for the next directive when a timer ended. The timers also tended to add a sense of urgency to the tasks. The approaching termination of the timer often turned the assigned activity into a sort of race against the clock, and as timers approached zero you could sense a palpable rise in the energy of the students.<sup>7</sup> Several teachers even punctuated the end of a countdown with the visualization and sound of a large explosion.<sup>8</sup>

Not only did educators prominently feature clock time, but they often evoked fine-grained increments. As mentioned earlier, sometimes educators referenced increments of less than ten seconds. Such fine-grained references to clock time were often mapped onto minute scripts for activity. Instructors routinely broke down each activity into “step-by-step” procedures. This sort of step-by-step approach was also spread amongst the teachers during the school’s weekly professional development session. Here, for example, is a portion of an email that one of the school’s leaders sent to the school’s faculty and staff:

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7 I find parallels between this management technique and the “scrum” and “sprint” techniques used in Agile software development. In both cases, managers impose an ambitious temporal constraint on collective tasks, and in doing so they can make the tasks feel urgent and important. As those who have worked in startups know, this feeling of being constantly “rushed” can be quite intoxicating and can help motivate employees to put in long hours. The original metaphor seems to have been taken from rugby, a highly physical and competitive sport that can evoke a similar rush amongst players.

8 At one point during the year, an educator made a game out of how quickly students could line up quietly before entering his classroom. He fixed a large piece of butcher paper on the wall outside his classroom and wrote how many seconds it took each class to line up quietly before being admitted into the room. This went on for several weeks and classes competed against each other until the winning class had achieved a time of less than four seconds.

During [our professional development period] we discussed the importance of the directions we give students. Are directions given both orally and in writing or are they only being delivered orally? Are they broken down into small steps or are there many steps embedded in narrative? Every lesson at The Downtown School thoughtfully considers what students are being asked to do. Please remember to review how you are asking them to do it.

In sum, most of daily life at the Downtown School looked quite a bit like canonical approaches to schooling, and these approaches became more controlled and scripted as the year went on. While the vision of reform suggested that students would voluntarily participate in “game-like” schooling, in practice teachers had to use numerous techniques to coerce participation and maintain control. While reformers changed the terms of assessment, educators still evaluated and sorted students on a linear scale. While the school tried to incorporate new “twenty-first century literacies,” much of the curriculum was defined by the state, and much of daily life was spent trying to get students to “acquire” that information. Thus, while the school purported to use games as a structure that would allow students to “take on” the identities and practices of scientists, geographers, code-breakers, and so forth, what the school’s designers actually had to do was find a way to place the state’s definitions of sixth grade appropriate scientific, geographic, English, and math knowledge into a “game-like” structure that preserved teacher control in a crowded setting. In short, what the school’s vision of reform overlooked was much of the school’s situatedness within institutional arrangements that it could not control, whether those were state-mandated curricula and assessments, funding for one educator guiding 20-30 students at a time, material infrastructures such as classrooms and desks, and, most importantly, schooling’s role in guiding students towards different paths of privilege and domination in the “real world.” While the vision for the Downtown School is appealing, its inattention to relations of power and privilege makes the vision more an expression of utopian thinking than a substantive challenge to inherited orders. I now turn to the ways students creatively produced semi-autonomous social practices in relation to these strictures of adult control.

### 5.3 Useless Fun

The picture I have been sketching thus far leaves little room for student creativity and generative agency, a paradox given the school’s purported focus on creativity, design, and innovation. Yet students did not simply execute the scripts they were handed. Instead, the students constantly engaged in creative improvisations that made their experiences at school more meaningful, less boring, and sometimes even fun, albeit “useless” fun. They did so even in situations where educators had carefully scripted the legitimate course of action. As shorthand, I’ll refer to students’ creative improvisational activities as “cultural productions.” The concept isn’t meant to designate a special realm of social life; rather, it’s meant to designate a point-of-view for discussing and analyzing the everyday creative practices that students collectively produce as they make their lives in tension with a world that has been structured by others.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Theoretically, these practices share many characteristics with de Certeau’s (1984) notion of “tactics” and Ingold’s (2011) notion of “wayfaring.” For my purposes, I’m using a notion of “cultural production” along the lines of Willis (1981, 49): “for a properly dialectical notion of Social Reproduction, our starting point should be the cultural

In chapter 6, I discuss the varied ways students' produced culture by way of their participation in the school's differentiated cliques. Those processes deserve their own chapter as they help illustrate how *one* consequence of cultural production in adult-centered educator spaces is the ongoing production, and often reproduction, of social divisions. In this section, I discuss some of the more common ways that students engaged in cultural production in tension with adult-led pedagogic practices. Students' cultural productions typically fell outside of the canon of legitimate educational activity, although in the next section I will show when educators and parents legitimated students' cultural productions as educational.

Borrowing from Nico, I am calling this genre of cultural production "useless fun" in order to emphasize that these activities were typically seen as unproductive from the perspective of educators, administrators, policy makers, and many parents. My category of "useless fun" grew out of working with an open coding scheme as I went through my field notes. In my initial pass, I had coded many of these practices as "fidgeting," "play," and "creative production." These practices were heterogeneous but they shared some common features. For one, they were mostly performed for other students, partly, it seems, because they fell outside of teacher-directed tasks and hence could elicit discipline if witnessed by educators.<sup>10</sup> Second, many of these practices were fleeting, especially when they were conducted during class time. Most were conducted when teachers were not looking or during times when students were permitted more autonomy, such as before school, after school, during commutes, on field trips, during lunch and recess, and, to a lesser degree, as students passed between classes. A student's willingness to engage in these practices in front of educators during class time became one of the main ways that students performed resistance, negotiated autonomy, and earned distinct reputations within the school's peer culture. As I discuss in the chapter 6, these distinct orientations towards student-educator relations were some of the main ways that social divisions within the student body were performed, negotiated, and understood.

Useless fun practices are difficult to classify because they are so heterogeneous. They included miniature games, catchy phrases, contests, and various displays of knowledge and skill that were not part of the official curriculum, even though the school celebrated "creativity" and "play" and designed some approved counter practices, as discussed later. Magic tricks, card games, word games, doodling, playing with small toys, contorting one's body in a unique way, dance moves, beat boxing, arm wrestling, telling jokes, riddles, puns, wordplay, playing make believe, "messing around" (Ito et al. 2010) with media production tools, and gossip were the sorts of practices that I am calling useless fun. If other students liked a performance of useless fun, the student(s) who offered the performance would often win cred from her peers. For example, one day a white boy performed a magic trick to his classmates when their teacher had to briefly step outside of the room. Students were impressed – including several popular girls who normally ignored or made fun of him – and asked how he did it.

The main time during the school day when educators permitted some useless fun practices was

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milieu, in material practices and productions, in lives in their historical context in the everyday span of existence and practical consciousness. We should investigate the form of living cultural productions that occur on the determinate and contradictory grounds of what is inherited and what is currently suffered through imposition, but in a way that is nevertheless creative and active."

10 Indeed, one of the ways I started to gain access to the school's peer cultures was by witnessing these practices and then not disciplining students for engaging in them.

during recess, a 20-minute period following lunch that was widely seen as belonging more to students. During recess, students either hung out in a single classroom with an educator present or went to the gym on the fifth floor. For students who hung out in the classroom during recess, useless fun practices were generally permitted so long as students were not too physical with each other, did not speak too loudly, and did not move around the room too quickly.<sup>11</sup> Some students read to themselves, a small group of boys played Yu-Gi-Oh, and the rest usually clustered in small inward facing groups. For students who hung out in the gym, they could either participate in a game of touch football that an educator ran, or they could check out jump ropes and various balls. At the beginning of the year, there was a heterogeneous assortment of useless fun practices that took place in the gym during recess and the setting was loud and seemingly chaotic. Students moved around noisily and fluidly, many impromptu games emerged, and participants moved in and out of various activities, changing their own course and the course of the activities in the process. Some students shot basketballs, some played with jump ropes, others did cartwheels, some roamed or hung out with friends. Many students moved between activities and social groups and there was no clear overarching plan or structure, perhaps suggesting potential for breaking down preconceptions about class, gender, and race. However, some of the educators felt this arrangement was too chaotic and noisy. As one of the school's leaders mentioned to me as we watched the students play, "I don't know if they can handle this. I could hear them from the street when I went to get lunch." Within a week, educators had taken control of recess in the gym. The football game, mentioned above, was introduced in half the space, and students were allowed to use the other half for smaller games so long as they were relatively quiet and spatially contained. Most students who did not play football stopped going to the gym after these changes.

Students also found ways to incorporate useless fun into the scripted tasks that educators assigned. As noted earlier, the more project-based aspects of the curriculum permitted students the most opportunities to participate in non-scripted ways. Additionally, several students resisted fully complying with official tasks. Even when they went along with tasks, many found numerous small ways to "drag their feet" and draw attention to themselves in ways that fell outside of the ways educators expected students to behave. These small and not so small acts of resistance are discussed in more detail in the chapter 6. Finally, students often overshot or redirected the official requirements of an assignment and found ways to add unassigned features to their assigned productions. For example, while writing an assignment or making a poster, students would often alter the color of the pens they used, or add little drawings in the margins, or sign their names in stylized ways. Figure 5.1 shows a case where a student added color to thematically code an advice letter she had been asked to write for incoming students. While these elements of style fell outside of the requirements specified by teachers, other students complimented each other for these seemingly extraneous aspects. Often, a student's original creation would be copied by other students, and sometimes these cultural productions spread widely and rapidly throughout the student body. This was especially true for jokes and short sayings. When a cultural production circulated, a student would often claim that they were the one who had first introduced it. Sometimes the origin of the production was disputed, and copying another student's formations

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<sup>11</sup> Controlling noise and movement were some of main ways educators attempted to maintain their authority. Adults in general got noticeably anxious whenever the students were loud, perhaps reflecting a general sensibility towards less chaotic environments but also, I suspect, because it is difficult to issue directives and maintain surveillance when students can "hide" their discursive practices under the cacophony.

was occasionally a source of conflict.

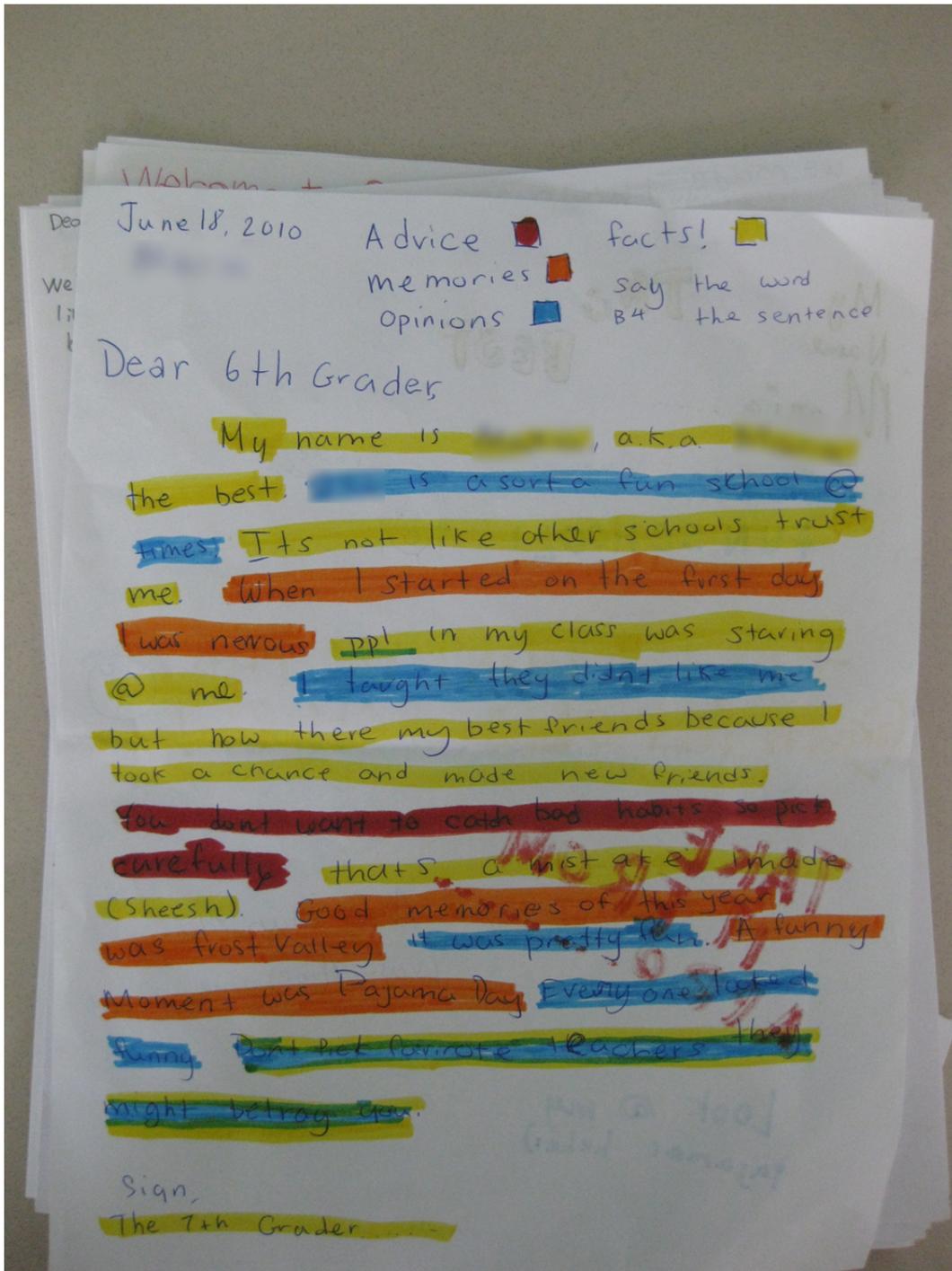


Figure 5.1: A student's solution to an assignment where students were asked to write a letter to an incoming sixth grader.

Students also debated when a cultural production was good and when it was just “dumb,” “funny,” or “annoying.” Frequently, these debates also addressed issues of identity and difference amongst students. Similarity and difference were often negotiated through useless fun practices, and

especially jokes. Here, for example, is a post that Bo, a somewhat socially isolated white boy, posted to the school's internal social network site. He was replying to a post in which Nita, a girl with a Peruvian dad and a Dominican mom, criticized a group of boys' humor as being "dumb." Both students were peripheral participants in the "Geeky Boys" clique.<sup>12</sup> Bo's post supported Nita's claim that the Geeky Boys' humor was "dumb":

I've created a list of all the dumb and pointless jokes you've [the Geeky Boys] "invented".

1. Did you do your homework (Say x5)? Are you sure (Say x5)? Are you gay? (Seriously, guys?!)
2. What begins with an N, ends with a R, and has two Gs' in the middle? Nagggers! (Oh, yeah...Make me look racist!)
3. Cheese touch. (1. Not original. 2. Not funny. 3. Annoying as all----four letter word I won't say)
4. Ohhh, -Blank-'s Eating gummmmmmm!!! (This is bad for two reasons. It's not remotely funny, and it's rude to pin something on someone who wouldn't break the rules.)
5. Responding to a polite comment with "Yo Momma is \*\*\*Blank\*\*\*\*". (Seriously. I can't count how many times I've had to say 'Knock it off!' To someone Saying my Mom's a protractor.)
6. Saying "What". (No comment.)
7. Calling people racist out of the blue. (Racism is the belief that race is a primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. NOT a white sheet of paper.)<sup>13</sup>

In addition to playing with social identifications, useless fun practices commonly involved inventive ways of working with the limited material culture that students were permitted to have and display at school. So, for example, in classes students often invented small games and fidgeting practices out of the few items they had on hand. Rulers, pens, pieces of paper, even the metal rings of their binders were turned into equipment for impromptu games and miniature challenges: rulers were turned into small swords; binder rings became a narrow passage way that one's arm may, or may not, fit through; pens became countless things, from weapons for annoying neighbors, to objects for chewing, to equipment for a game in which one tried to drop a pen cap onto a pen tip from increasing heights; a piece of paper on top of a binder could levitate when one blew on it from the right angle and with just the right amount of pressure; and so on.<sup>14</sup> These practices mostly occurred when students were especially bored which, to be fair to the educators, was only part of the time.<sup>15</sup>

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12 See chapter 6 for a discussion of the school's cliques.

13 Bo's definition of racism was nearly verbatim with a segment of the Wikipedia article on racism.

14 Some of these remind me of de Certeau's (1984) notion of "la perruque."

15 One of the reasons educators seemed to like "classroom management" practices like the clock racing scenarios described earlier in this chapter, was because such methods often prevented students from engaging in these sorts of

Following DOE protocols, portable video game devices and cell phones were prohibited during the school day, paradoxically given the school's attempts to cross the school/world divide by appropriating gaming from children's leisure practices. While the school's founders suggested they were blurring the boundaries between student's out-of-school practices and schooling, educators maintained a monopoly on digital media equipment during the school day. Not only did educators carefully control when and how students could use the school's digital equipment, but educators often treated access to digital tools as a bargaining chip for winning obedience, offering access for good behavior and threatening to take away the "privilege" if students acted out. Educators did allow card games and different card games occasionally became popular amongst both girls and boys (although games were typically segregated). One small group of boys played variations on Yu-Gi-Oh during lunch and recess for much of the year, and on occasion they would play the game without the material cards, pantomiming that they were holding cards in their hands and verbally announcing which card they were playing as they pretended to lay it down on the floor in the center of the circle. Sometimes students brought small toys, such as miniature skateboards called "Tech Decks," into the school, and the presence of new items often attracted a crowd of onlookers and bids to participate across clique boundaries (chapter 6). Yet when these items became too popular, educators often banned them. For example, small plastic wristbands that were shaped like animal silhouettes – known as "Silly Bandz" – became enormously popular at one point during the year. Students traded and gifted them frequently as part of friendship negotiations, and some students had over 50 Silly Bandz running up their forearms. Educators eventually banned the bracelets, in part because of conflicts over gifts not being reciprocated, theft, and numerous hurt feelings. Similarly, at one point in the spring, pomegranates became widely popular in the course of about a week. Like the Silly Bandz, students gifted segments of the pomegranate seeds to current and potential friends. They too were banned within a few weeks, in part for the same reasons that Silly Bandz had been banned and in part because the seeds frequently spilled on the floor, creating a mess.

In sum, students tended to participate in useless fun practices at the interstices, and often in response to, pedagogic practices that were driven by concerns about efficiency and control. While framed as "student-centered" and "game-like," many adult-driven activities paradoxically left students with little room for creativity and agency. As such, students found numerous modest ways to make the time they "spent" in school their own. Other students were the primary audience for these performances, and recognition by peers offered students an alternative status-system to the one promoted by educators. Instead of being defined universally as "students" and then evaluated by adults according to an adult-defined rubric, useless fun practices allowed for a more pluralistic and open-ended proliferation of practices and opportunities for recognition and for establishing and maintaining social relations. Moreover, students had more control over whether or not to participate in useless fun practices than they did in the school's pedagogic practices. While peers encouraged and discouraged each other to engage in different practices, students had power to negotiate their participation as well to evaluate the quality of each other's practices. The lack of an institutionalized social hierarchy, such as that between educators and students, often infused useless fun practices with a level of drama, excitement, and improvisational uncertainty that was missing from many educator-directed activities. In sum, useless fun practices frequently clashed with, and

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fidgiting practices. Even though many of those race conditions didn't ask students do anything especially complex (e.g. stand in line quietly), under time constraints, even mundane activities can take on a sense of urgency.

were partially produced in response to, the founder's notion of students' being motivated to participate in the school's idea of fun. While useless fun practices entailed the creativity, innovation, and agency celebrated by the school's progressive ideals, educators either overlooked or disciplined useless fun practices because useless fun was not in keeping with schooling's mandate to efficiently transmit the standardized curriculum, individuate students through evaluation, and legitimate social selection. I now turn to occasions when educator/student relations were less antagonistic. As I will show, these practices were much less shaped by efficiency concerns and educator control and, as such, they more closely resembled the founders' vision for a progressive model of schooling.

## 5.4 Age-Heterogeneous Cultural Productions and the Carnavalesque

With about a week and a half remaining in the first trimester, the Downtown School's educators significantly reconfigured the school's social, spatial, and temporal routines. All normal classes were suspended and students were assigned a single project, or "challenge," to work on with a small team for the rest of the trimester. For the first trimester, each team was challenged to build a Rube Goldberg machine out of non-digital everyday materials that parents and educators had donated. This was "Level Up," a special period that the school's founders had planned for the end of each trimester. According to the school's planning documents, Level Up was an opportunity for students to bring together what they had learned during the trimester into a culminating project. I found Level Up less of a culminating experience for the trimester and more an inversion of regular school routines, carnivalesque in its inversion of the normal school order and in its clear temporal confinement.

Level Up was the time during the year when the Downtown School's practices most closely resembled the ideals of its founders' vision. Socially, the conventional organization of 20-plus students working under one authoritative teacher was reconfigured into one adult advisor and eight-to-ten students. Students were assigned to groups based on their advisory class, leading to a fairly even distribution across gender, class, and ethnic divisions.<sup>16</sup> Educators also defined the overall challenge for each Level Up, but much of the design and building of the productions was left up to the students. In keeping with the school's progressive ideal of a student-centered pedagogy, educators mostly played a supportive rather than controlling role. They waited for students to request their assistance and only stepped in when conflicts between students seemed to be escalating. As such, the students negotiated with each other about what they should do next, struggled to execute on their decisions, failed to produce their expected results, passed judgments (both positive and negative) on each other's ideas and efforts, revised their efforts, argued with each other about who should do what, and so on. The practices had much in common with the students' useless fun practices, only now students were granted legitimate institutional time and space to engage in them.

Students spent a lot more time talking than they did during a normal school day, and the overall volume in classes was substantially higher. At one point, a teacher from the school that occupied

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16 This past year, the school diversified its Level Up options and let students sign up for the activity of their choice. I did not observe the Level Up session but I heard for educators that most students signed up for a few of the options, which led educators to assign some students to their second or third choice.

the floor beneath the Downtown School came upstairs to complain about the noise; his students were taking a test and the noise was a distraction. The organization of students onto teams also broke with the individuating tendency of the canonical pedagogic approach. While there were many internal fights over the direction of each team's project, each group oriented towards a common production. Many of the social divisions that were produced during lunchtime or recess were comparatively muted (chapter 6). A common stake and say in the outcome of the project supported these more cordial relations. Additionally, the structure of competition encouraged team-based affiliations. Instead of competing as individuals, as canonical schooling practices encouraged, students competed as groups against other groups.

Assessment was also more open ended and distributed during Level Up. At the end of the first Level Up, the school showcased the Rube Goldberg machines for parents and an outside panel of "judges" (mostly professional designers). The judges offered verbal feedback about what they liked and didn't like about each machine, and they awarded one team a prize for the best machine. As far as I know, no individual grades were given. Further, students and teachers would informally talk about the various projects, noting what they liked and did not like, which, again, was much like the students' useless fun practices but now with educators participating.

In terms of space and equipment, the school reorganized classrooms so that rows of forward-facing desks were broken apart and clustered into workspaces. Educators assigned each team to one-half of a classroom that they could use as a dedicated workspace for the entire Level Up. Educators also provided teams with a hodgepodge of scrap materials, from cardboard tubes, to toy cars, to PVC pipes, to rulers, to tape, to weights, to marbles, and so on. Educators allowed students to make a mess and leave their materials and in-process productions in their workspaces throughout Level Up (see Figure 6.2). Unlike normal classes, educators did not confine students to their seats, and many students moved fluidly around the classroom.



Figure 2: A workstation a few days into the first trimester's "Level Up."

Temporally, the school day had only a few divisions. Students worked on their machines for hours at a time and educators made few references to the urgency of clock time. At any given time, some students were not "on task," but educators generally did not intervene. Some students told their peers to stop wasting time, and sometimes a student asked an educator to direct their peers to participate. In general, though, Level Up felt much less scripted and rushed.

A few aspects of Level Up deserve comment. First, and as noted above, these were the moments during the school year when adult-directed practices most closely resembled the ideals articulated in the school's reformist vision. These ideals were also visible in the various small projects that courses tried to incorporate into the curriculum during the regular school year, but, as noted earlier, most projects were relatively short-lived, and many struggled to balance the ideals of hands-on learning with practical requirement of teaching state-mandated content. Level Up projects were, at best, tangentially related to the standardized curriculum. This departure from institutionalized standards created numerous risks for the school's founders and educators and they constantly had to legitimate their unorthodox approach to parents. As I discuss in chapter 7, some, but not all, of the parents exerted a lot of pressure on the school to become more like canonical models. Concerns over the school's performance on standardized tests constantly cast an ominous shadow over the educators' attempts to promote an unorthodox approach. When the school ended up with mediocre first year test scores – scores that were especially low in math – many parents and

educators expressed palpable anxiety. Given the school's alignment with STEM agendas, educators felt the low math scores had to be fixed. While Level Up remains central to how the school promotes and views itself, Level Up has been shortened and made more adult-managed as the school has matured. Further, in the second year, the school devoted its second trimester Level Up, which occurred immediately prior to the state tests, to test preparation, a reclamation of adult agendas that was not lost on students. In general, students liked Level Up and many expressed that it was their favorite time of the school year. A few compared it to camp, and I got the sense that students were simultaneously more engaged and relaxed. Being on a team without a clear hierarchy or division of labor created some internal team conflicts, but, as noted earlier, the sense of common purpose, the lack of formal assessments individuating team members, and competition between groups supported relatively cordial collaborations that students tended to avoid during their free time.

While Level Up offered a glimpse of what a "reimagined" school might look like, these approved counter practices were mostly relegated to a few carefully bounded times during the school year and it is unlikely that educators will be able to expand them. Educators were under constant pressure by parents to legitimate the educational value of making a Rube Goldberg machine or putting on a play. As I discuss in chapter 7, the need to produce adequate test scores constantly hung over educators' heads, and these scores were particularly significant for less-privileged families who were especially dependent on them for their children's institutional mobility. Because the Downtown School was part of a larger schooling system, it still had to prepare students for moving through New York's standard curriculum, Regents exams to graduate high school, competitive college admissions, and a workplace where many "good" jobs now required a graduate degree. Further, attempts to install market-like conditions within the public school system (chapter 4) were designed to increase competition between schools, and subsequently between students. Set against the background of reduced domestic economic opportunities, and widening domestic inequalities, all of these factors contributed to a particularly heightened, and often aggressive, form of competition between families and students as they faced institutions that played a role in producing the hierarchies of the adult social world. As one of the fathers said at a PTA meeting on assessment, "I don't like these tests more than anybody else. I actually pretty much despise them. But these are the rules made by the State. I don't make them. I just follow them."

Against the magnitude of these more structural forces, Level Up begins to look less like the seeds of change (although it still could be this) and more like a ritual that releases the pressures generated by an increasingly disciplined and oppressive social order but leaves its structural features in tact. It is because of this temporal confinement of structural inversions that I see Level Up in the spirit of the carnivalesque.<sup>17</sup> As with other instances of the carnivalesque in modern societies, the relationship between Level Up and significant social change remains ambiguous at best. On the one hand, the structural inversions of Level Up offered a refreshing reminder that alternative ways of doing school were possible. On the other hand, these momentary inversions might have released pressures that could otherwise have been mobilized for more substantial critique and hopefully change. For example, many of the parents, and especially the middle class parents, were exasperated by how competitive New York City's schools and were and how difficult it was to get into college.

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17 For a discussion of the carnivalesque as temporary structural inversion see Stallybrass and White (1986), who drew on Bakhtin. See also Taylor (2007) who drew on Victor Turner's (1969) analysis of relations between structure and anti-structure in rituals.

Theoretically, this disaffection could have motivated these families to join with less-privileged families in taking political action against some of the forces that generated such competitive relations. Instead, privileged families colonized a well-resourced new school, pushed out the most discomfiting of the less-privileged (chapter 7), and seemed satisfied with the school's "alternative" image even though much of daily life at the Downtown School resembled canonical schooling. The latter discrepancy deserves our attention in part because representations of the Downtown School – both representations that the school produced about itself and representations that popular media outlets produced about the school – almost always focused on the school's carnivalesque and "game-like" elements. Missing from these accounts are the countless ways that the school reproduced, and perhaps even intensified, canonical approaches to schooling that permit little room for student agency and creativity and that sort most students towards relatively meaningless work and limited political influence. Without this fuller story, it is rather easy for privileged "progressive" children and families to participate in an approved counter practice and subsequently imagine themselves as counter-dominant even though they actively contribute to the reproduction of relations of domination in the existing social order.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In sum, while some aspects of the Downtown School approached the school's vision of reform, a more comprehensive account of the Downtown School's daily routines shows that the bulk of the school's pedagogic practices were in keeping with canonical models of schooling. Further, the school became more canonical as time went on. This movement towards orthodoxy was partially propelled by educators' mandate to maintain control over a large number of subordinates in crowded physical settings. The general focus on efficiently producing test scores, discussed in the last chapter, also pushed educators towards more orthodox approaches. As will be discussed in chapter 7, concerns over tests scores did not simply flow top-down from bureaucrats, but, rather, parents played a significant role in pushing for more focus on testing.

In light of my account of everyday life at the Downtown School, many of the claims at the core of the "game-like" vision of school reform appear considerably overstated. The claim that "game-like" schooling would motivate students' participation was undermined by the fact that participation in schooling was compulsory. While this compulsory component of schooling was absent from the school's vision of reform, it became immediately apparent as soon as the Downtown School opened. Those who attempted to resist participation in the school's idea of fun were swiftly reprimanded, and increasingly so as the year progressed. In addition to overlooking the compulsory aspect of participation, the claim that "game-like" schooling would promote "student-centered" agency and creativity was contradicted by many of the school's daily routines. The bulk of the curriculum was set and measured by the state. Educators, parents, and students had some autonomy and responsibility over how they produced these results, but they had little say over which "results" mattered. In terms of student agency, students had no say over the courses they chose, nor much say over the curricular content of those courses, nor much say over the avenues they could navigate to "acquire" that content. In some cases, the procedures for accomplishing predefined educational goals were broken down into such fine-grained step-by-step processes that compliance involved little more than extracting symbols from one media format and slotting them into another highly-structured media format. Such practices obviously stand in tension with the

school's progressive ideals. This gap between theory and practice raises the difficult question of how educators and parents managed to resolve the apparent contradiction between their progressive ideals and daily life. I believe essentialized views of both children and technology made it easier to overlook these tensions and contradictions. By figuring games and digital media as *inherently* interactive, fun, playful, and motivating, and by linking such views of digital media and games to ideas that figured contemporary children as *inherently* interested in digital media and gaming, the idea of "game-like" schooling could too easily to pass as a fulfillment of the long held, but seldom realized, ideals of progressive reform. I now turn to how students negotiated identity and difference as they navigated the adult-directed activities of schooling.

## **“There’s the smart and nerdy and then there’s the cool”: Negotiating Identity Across the School/World Divide**

While the Downtown School’s founders hoped their “game-like” curriculum would bridge the school/world divide by recruiting students to “take on” the identity of geographers, scientists, and code breakers, most students were engrossed in a very different sort of identity work, one that also permeated the school/world divide, but not in the ways anticipated by the school’s plans. As noted in the introduction, ethnographers have routinely shown that young people develop an intimate perspective on the salient social divisions of adult society through participation in school-based peer formations, which, especially in middle school, tend to organize into informal peer groups or “cliques.”<sup>1</sup> From a social practice theory perspective, informal peer groups are integral to how historical and emergent social divisions are learned, embodied, and re-produced. Students come to understand how to be classed, gendered, racialized, and other socially identifiable adults in part by participating in the practices of these informal peer groups.<sup>2</sup> By participating in the practices of peer groups, students learn how to fashion themselves, speak, and act in particular ways that signify belonging and difference. From this perspective, social identities are always multiple, relational, and in states of ongoing construction as persons negotiate participation in some forms of group life and not others. Persons cannot fashion any identities they like since participation depends on acceptance by others who co-participate in the shared social practices. Further, while participation is partly a matter of belonging, it is also a matter of differentiation. Persons are identified and make their identities in part to say who they are and in part to say who they are not. Changing participation changes both identities and social formations, and yet some social divisions remain fairly consistent over time despite having to be rebuilt *in situ*.

For the students in my study, much of this process consisted of making bids for inclusion in peer groups as they navigated the adult-centered educator spaces of school and extra-curricular programs. Digital media offered students additional means for making and managing these peer

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1 Students’ emic categories for peer formations varied from more neutral phrases like “a group of friends” or “a group of kids,” to more critical terms such as “pack,” “gang,” and “cliques.” I am using “clique” because it is familiar and because it emphasizes the social boundaries produced by friendship groups, as well the ways the social formations often persist despite individual changes in membership.

2 A great deal of scholarship on identity begins with an analysis of the semiotic systems or discursive regimes available to persons at a given historical moment. The approach I am advocating begins with social practices and locates the re-production of discourses and representations in people’s ongoing practices. Under this framework, the practices and semiotic systems are dialectically related in that practices draw on existing semiotic systems as they produce them anew. For a discussion of this relationship, see Lave (1988, 177-180).

relations, but, as I will show, their media practices mostly reinforced the social divisions they made at school. Both at school and online, student-driven identity negotiations entailed struggles over what constellations of cultural forms and practices from the world belonged in different cliques as well as at the Downtown School more generally. For their part, and despite their hopes to traverse the school/world divide, educators made endless attempts to seal off the school from the world. While educators knew that students' out-of-school lives differed dramatically, educators downplayed these differences in their embrace of the "digital generation" stereotype and in their focus on "game-like" learning. As noted in previous chapters, these efforts can be seen as attempt to resolve one of the central tensions of schooling: on the one hand, schooling is widely seen as a way to promote social justice; on the other hand, schooling legitimizes inequalities in the adult world. Schools attempt to resolve this tension by adopting a meritocratic view of education-based social selection. The meritocratic view depends on a two-step process of identification and then differentiation. First, the institutional view identifies all children as the same: they are all "students" or "digital natives" or "citizens of the (digital) world." These identities are supposedly race-neutral, gender-neutral, class-neutral, and so forth; as such, the process of treating all students as the same creates a firm division between the school (culturally neutral) and the world (obviously differentiated). Second, students are evaluated, differentiated, and sorted into the adult world according to purportedly objective, or culturally neutral, criteria of educational institutions. According to this framework, the delivery of children from schools and into unequal positions in the adult world justly reflects differences in students' innate capabilities, effort, and judgments so long as educational institutions, and perhaps now information technologies, have been provisioned equally.

This chapter focuses on the how students negotiated identities in ways that troubled this model of relations between the school and the world. Rather than treating school as a bounded enclave, students brought their experiences of the world into the school as they negotiated identities and differences with each other. I first discuss when and how students assembled into different cliques. I focus on the dominant cliques since these mostly rebuilt historical social divisions despite the school's "new" model and even though many participants were fairly new to the U.S. I then discuss cases where students crossed these more entrenched divisions, noting when traversing boundaries appeared to overcome historical divisions and when they mostly reaffirmed them. I end with an account of how the dominant cliques were recognized and valued by insiders and outsiders within the school's peer culture. I draw attention to competing status-systems amongst students as well as the tendency of many students to racialize the less-privileged students who took a nonconformist stance towards the school. I argue that instead of treating schools as enclaves bounded off from the world we should recognize that schools, educators, and students are inherently in and of a single world that has been historically structured in unjust ways.

## **6.1 Differentiating Practices**

Within a few months of the Downtown School's opening, a fairly stable social order emerged amongst the main peer groups. While there were many smaller friendship groups, and while some individuals moved in and out of cliques, four dominant cliques came to anchor the social order for much of the first year. To refer to these groups I will use terms that outsiders from different social class positions used when describing these groups during interviews: "The Goody Two Shoes,"

“The Cool Girls,” “The Geeky Boys,” and “The Cool Boys.”<sup>3</sup> Later in this chapter I discuss the diversity of students’ labeling practices in more detail. For now, I am privileging the terms of outsiders from different social class positions for several reasons. First, insiders and outsiders from similar class positions often had difficulty labeling the groups, suggesting that they were, “just a bunch of kids,” or, when referring to differently gendered cliques of similar class positions they tended to reduce difference to gender difference, suggesting, for example, that the Goody Two Shoes were just “the girls.”<sup>4</sup> Second, I want to draw attention to how the Downtown School’s especially large class divisions contributed to pejorative views across the divide. As I discuss later, privileged students were ambiguous in how they viewed the “coolness” and “popularity” of the Cool Kids, sometimes admiring their practices and sometimes judging them condescendingly, especially once educators and privileged parents joined together to figure the Cool Kids as irredeemable deviants that did not belong at the Downtown School (chapter 7).

Through the lens of sociological categories, the school’s main cliques can be distinguished along two axes of difference: gender normativity and, more complexly, racialized ethnicities that were intertwined with significant differences in social class. The gender binary was rigid, with each clique almost entirely homogenous with respect to binary gender identifications. The Cool Girls and the Cool Boys tended to interact quite a bit, especially at the beginning of the year, but they typically did so while performing a heteronormative gender distinction. The racialized social class divisions were somewhat more porous and dynamic, although each group tended to skew significantly towards either privilege (in the case of the Goody Two Shoes and the Geeky Boys) or less-privileged (in the case of the Cool Girls and Cool Boys). This social formation provided four dominant ways to participate in gendered peer life at the school. Later in this chapter I discuss students who crossed these historical lines of division, as well as the students who did not routinely participate in these dominant cliques. What follows is a survey of the main routines through which students negotiated belonging and difference. Throughout I draw attention to how students customarily traversed the school/world divide as they negotiated inclusions and exclusions in entrenched and emergent cliques.

### 6.1.1 Congregating Before School

Students who arrived at school before the official day began were directed to the cafeteria where they sat at tables and waited for their friends. The first students to arrive staked out familiar tables and over the next 15-20 minutes students trickled in and either claimed an empty table or joined their friends. During this period the boundaries to clique participation were more porous, as students who did not normally talk to one other during the day sometimes chatted and, on occasion, sat together. One or two school educators always monitored the cafeteria, but they enforced rules about dress and electronics less stringently than during the main school day. Sometimes boys wore baseball caps and it was common for students to use and share cell phones, portable music players, and portable game devices, each of which was normally forbidden. As the cafeteria gradually filled with students and the official beginning of the school day approached,

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3 For ease of reading I drop the “scare quotes” when I use these terms for the remainder of the chapter but readers should continue to consider them as emic terms.

4 Several members of the Cool Girls also suggested that they were the “cool” or “popular” ones. The Cool Boys did not use these terms.

membership at tables increasingly took the shape of the main cliques described above, and the staff increasingly enforced official rules. Overall, though, this time of the day was one of the most relaxed, and social interactions were often more fluid with respect to clique boundaries.

### **6.1.2 Hanging Out Together at Lunch**

As has been noted by school ethnographers, negotiations over who sits with whom at lunch is one of the most visible and salient markers of clique membership. I paid a lot of attention to these groupings and so did students. As Jamal, one of the high-status members of the Cool Boys, said, “If you go to lunch for like two days in a row you’ll see the same kids sitting in the same seat with the same people,” an observation that was echoed by many of his peers. The entire school attended lunch at the same time. Upon entering the cafeteria, school rules required students to either form a single-file line for the hot lunch, or to take a seat at one of the approximately 15 round tables arrayed throughout the room. Privileged students almost never ate the school-prepared lunch and many considered it “gross.” As one of the privileged mothers noted about her daughter, “She refuses to eat school food. That’s one of those cultural things.” As such, the lunch-line was one of many routine ways in which out-of-school class differences were expressed within the school. While many less-privileged students also considered the school lunch “gross,” they often turned the lunch line into an opportunity for gossip and joking with friends. They often brought a similarly playful sensibility to eating the school lunches, playing with the food in an attempt to gross out their friends, for example.

School rules prohibited more than six students at a table and there was often a rush to claim seats with bodies, bags, and clothing. Sometimes, when a high status clique member arrived after a table had already filled, the bulk of a table’s occupants would relocate, awkwardly leaving behind one or two outcasts. Peripheral participants bid for inclusion with a variety of tactics including offering to share food, candy, and other small treats with established table dwellers. Having a friend who was already a welcome member of a table was a common way for a new person to gain a spot at a table. Similarly, one of the most frequent issues of conflict was when a friend joined a new table but did not bring along the friends they sat with previously.

Two teachers, a guidance counselor, and a “community associate” usually roamed the cafeteria during lunch, keeping watch, enforcing rules, settling disputes, and making casual conversation with students. For the most part, students could do what they liked at lunch so long as they stayed in their seats, kept the volume of their voices down, and did not make a mess. Under such constraints, individual tables became like small islands. Persons and practices from proximate tables would sometimes spill into each other, but typically the practices of distant tables remained fairly opaque to other students. The main activity at these tables was eating and talking and as I will discuss later both of these practices routinely indexed students’ out-of-school lives. At all tables, sharing, trading, and gifting food was common, and most tables conversed about a variety of topics from homework, to school gossip, to family life, to their tastes for, knowledge of, and previous experiences with everything from food, to TV shows, to music, to YouTube videos, to fashion, to travel, to after school and weekend adventures, to violence, to sexuality.

### **6.1.3 Hanging Out and Playing at Recess**

The cliques that formed at tables in the lunchroom migrated to recess with slight reconfiguration.

Recess permitted students more autonomy than any other period during the school day and, as a result, it was one of the main times for negotiating peer belonging. As noted in chapter 5, as the year went on, the students' recess practices became more rigid. Activity in the gym transitioned from an energized pastiche of student-organized games and activities into a regular game of touch football administered by an educator. This game often brought together boys from the Cool Boys and the Geeky Boys, as well as two or three girls who participated despite the game's masculine associations. Several of the Cool Boys also played football outside of school and they were widely recognized by their peers as being more expert players (e.g. they were often picked first, allowed to play quarterback for their respective teams, were frequently thrown to, and so forth). In the remainder of the gym a few socially marginal boys sometimes hung out, read comics, or threw a tennis ball back and forth. Activity in the classroom on the third floor was not as governed by adults, but the school counselor and often a teacher or the principal would patrol the room and intervene if students talked too loudly, touched each other in ways deemed excessive, or noticeably insulted one another.

Typically, students in the classroom would hang out in inward-facing huddles that matched the groupings they formed at tables during lunch. These huddles were usually tightly knit and hard for outsiders to enter. Often this formation was facilitated by useless fun activities (chapter 5). For example, on one occasion two of the Cool Girls got into a contest to see who could write in smaller handwriting on a piece of paper. As the writing got smaller and smaller the other girls in the huddle closed in and produced an even more closed-off and intimate huddle. Girls mostly formed these huddles although sometimes the Cool Boys joined the Cool Girls and there was a persistent group of five or so Geeky Boys that sat in a circle and played Yu-Gi-Oh or a hybrid role-playing game they had invented. Within most of these huddles, the primary activity was talk and the small, often fleeting, useless fun practices such as the note-writing contest described above. For most groups, the topics discussed were similar to the ones discussed at lunch and they frequently indexed the students' out-of-school lives. While focused on talk, these practices also buttressed intimacy through the physical closeness of the students' bodies. Girls sometimes played with each other's hair, wrote on each other, interlocked arms, and performed other small rituals of physical contact. For example, one time a girl in a huddle took her friend's hand and said, "Let me see if you're going to be rich." She then studied her friend's palm for a few seconds before saying, "Yep, you're going to be rich." The other girls subsequently requested to have their palms read (they too were going to be rich). Boys tended to frame physical contact as virile contests, participating in games such as arm wrestling tournaments or the football game at lunch. Touch and close physical proximity was much less common in the relatively rare interactions across gender divisions, primarily between the Cool Boys and the Cool Girls, which tended to take the form of playfully antagonistic games such as chasing, stealing something (an invitation to be chased), and pranking each other. All this took place despite a general school rule that prohibited students from touching, a rule that adults increasingly, but not uniformly, enforced as the year progressed and as some parents raised concerns about a lack of order and discipline (chapter 7).

Recess was also the only time during the school day when adults did not tightly control the students' movement. As such, students configured their spatial relations more fluidly than at any other time during the day. Pairs and trios would sometimes break off from a huddle and roam the room before reuniting with a huddle. In a bid to cross clique boundaries, individual students

sometimes ran up to someone in a cluster to ask a question, deliver news, or play a prank.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, though, cliques carved out distinct territories within the crowded classroom and gym space. The Cool Kids often moved from place to place every few minutes, sometimes stopping to fortify themselves between a table and a wall. About midway through the year, most of the Goody Two Shoe girls ventured out of the classroom and sat along the edges of the hallway, facing each other, and forming a gauntlet for anyone trying to pass. They held this territory for several months until the Yu-Gi-Oh players eventually took it over. A few individuals and pairs lurked amongst these groups, taking a spot on the floor or at a table near a clique, often innocuously reading a book.

Finally, some students participated in school-sponsored “clubs” during recess. Clubs were thematically defined groups that the students proposed and educators sponsored by provisioning space, equipment, and an adult adviser. Each club met during recess one day a week. Clubs that emerged during the year included the YouTube Club, the Art Club, the Comics Club, the Lego Club, the Newspaper Club, the Architecture Club, and the Special Event Committee. With the exception of the YouTube Club, the Lego Club, and the Special Events Committee, only a small handful of students attended the clubs, often members of the Geeky Boys who did not play football. A few “loners” also participated in some clubs. Members of the Geeky Boys primarily attended the Lego Club and the YouTube Club but both clubs dissolved or dissipated over the course of the year. The Special Event Committee, which organized school-wide festivities such as spirit days and candy grams for Valentine’s Day, was the largest and most resilient club. Girls from both the Cool Girls and the Goody Two Shoes cliques participated in the club, and it was one of the few routine activities where members of the two cliques voluntarily hung out together.

#### **6.1.4 Marshaled Transitions**

As noted in the last chapter, educators carefully controlled transitions between scheduled classes. Even so, transitions allowed students to finally be on their feet and to briefly interact with friends from other classes as they marched past each other in the hallway. Goody Two Shoe girls and Geeky Boys often smiled and waved at their passing friends, and the Cool Kids often exchanged quick bursts of conversation. At first, I could not understand these fractured exchanges. They seemed chaotic, unorganized, lacking in focus, and, ultimately, meaningless or superficial. Such practices seemed to support popular adult concerns about young people’s ability to focus and sustain their attention for long enough to produce deeper, more meaningful engagements. But as I traveled with the same students throughout the day I eventually realized they were picking up on conversations that had been disjointed by the adult-managed routines. Cool Kids, in particular, would briefly resume a conversation that had started in the cafeteria in the morning as they passed each other in the hallway only to have the conversation be put on hold again during class before resuming it again after the next period and so on throughout the day. Friends who shared the same class circulated and deliberated the new information they had gathered during these transitions, and when the entire clique finally reconvened at lunch or after the school day the conversation would resume in a flurry stoked by hours of anticipation. This pattern of disjointed conversations, with

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<sup>5</sup> One of the ways I started to feel accepted by students was when they started doing similar practices to me. For example, it was a significant moment the first time a student offered me candy (his last lifesaver, which, thankfully, was still in a wrapper), as well as when students started to make fun of me (chapter 2).

long periods of waiting and anticipation followed by brief moments of dialog and excitement, showed up again and again in the friendship practices of the students, not only in school but also through written messages online and via text messages on mobile phones, inverting conventional ideas about continuity and disruption in the school day.

### **6.1.5 Playing with, Challenging, and Consenting to Adult-Managed Practices**

As noted in the last chapter, students spent the vast majority of their school days in carefully scripted practices that adults managed. As students moved through these adult-managed practices, they nevertheless did significant identity work with their peers. Students differentiated themselves through the manner and style by which they responded to the expectations and directives of educators. Students constantly displayed their relations to adult authority and these displays accrued status differently amongst the cliques. During classes and other scheduled activities, students participated in their cliques by consenting to, resisting, or putting a stylistic mark on the standardized activities that educators attempted to orchestrate. Autonomy displays ranged from directly challenging educator rules and directives (e.g. not following directions, talking back, etc.), to breaking rules behind the teacher's back (e.g. talking to each other, throwing notes back and forth, listening to music while on the computers, etc.), to playing with the rules (finding exceptions not covered by the literal meaning of directives, referencing alternative interpretations of the directives, fidgeting with binders, rulers, and other school supplies, etc.), to going along with the rules but in a manner which signaled resistance.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with the findings of Willis (1977) and Eckert (1989), more oppositional stances tended to correspond to students who came from less-privileged backgrounds, especially high status members of the Cool Boys, but also, to a lesser degree, the Cool Girls. However, these challenges to authority were not always coupled with a disregard for standards of academic achievement. Several of the students who came to be known as troublemakers were also high academic achievers who cared a great deal about their grades and their challenges to authority can be seen as partially motivated by a desire to reconcile conflicting status systems: classroom achievements (which were valued by educators) and autonomy displays (which were valued by their peer cultures).

The Goody Two Shoes was the most obedient clique by far. Members of the Goody Two Shoes rarely acted out and consistently did what the teacher asked. The Geeky Boys were also fairly obedient, although they transgressed rules and ignored directives more readily when they were not being graded, such as in the school's after-school programs or when they had a substitute teacher. As discussed in the next section and in the next chapter, educators, privileged parents, and many students primarily identified the Cool Kids with these bids for autonomy as the year went on, figuring them as "troublemakers," "bullies," and irredeemable deviants.

### **6.1.6 Relations to After- and Out-of-School Practices**

As discussed in chapters 3 and 7, participation in out-of-school activities was significantly shaped by a family's ability to pay, as well by students' and parents' assumptions about gender normativity.

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<sup>6</sup> These tactics are numerous but often involved playing with the tacit temporal expectations of the adult-managed practice, such as walking more slowly than expected, taking longer than they were supposed to while providing an answer to a teacher's question, and so forth.

These out-of-school and after-school activities, in turn, supported clique formation within the school, hence troubling the school/world divide of educators' "game-like" model. For one, as already mentioned, students frequently discussed their out-of-school lives when hanging out together at school. Friends knew which out-of-school activities their friends participated in and some students began participating in after-school activities that their friends attended. As noted in chapter 3, the Downtown School's after-school programs focused on media production provided an additional setting for the Geeky Boys to get to know each other while also receiving recognition from educators and school leaders.

In general, privileged students participated in more age-segregated out-of-school activities than less-privileged students, and less-privileged students had more access to age-heterogeneous kinship and friendship networks than privileged students. This age-heterogeneity allowed some less-privileged students to observe and emulate the practices of older youth. Acceptance by older youth and cousins offered support for alternative maturity and learning trajectories to the ones promoted in more institutionalized settings such as school and adult-managed after-school activities. Here, for example, was how Troy, one of the high-status Cool Boys, explained how he got the nickname of "Kobe" while playing basketball at a local park, "When I was nine, I used to play [basketball] with [this boy who] is about 14 years old. After I played with people that are really good, I started to get better myself. That is when they started calling me Kobe."

Less-privileged students also used communications media like mobile phones and Facebook to query if any of their local friends were free and wanted to hang out in their neighborhoods. This greater autonomy from adults also corresponded with a more advanced understanding of some digital media tools as well as New York's geography and transportation infrastructures, knowledge that was brought to bear in friendship negotiations within the school. Here, for example, is an exchange where three of the Cool Girls discussed their attempt to get together over the weekend. Jessica and Jennifer were from privileged backgrounds while Niki qualified for free lunch:

Niki: You don't use your phone!

Jessica: Yes I do, I still text people.

Niki: No you don't.

Jessica: What are you talking about? It took like an hour texting you to come to my house. You were like, "Okay, what bus do I take?" And I was like, "Okay, um, take this bus." Hello? I don't know a lot of this stuff. And it's hard texting on my phone.

Jennifer: And then you were like, "I'm going to take a taxi," and we were both freaking out, like, "No! No! Don't do that!"

Niki: Why?

Jessica: Hello? You can't take a taxi alone at that young age.

Niki: Why? I always do.

These more mature practices and knowledge, in turn, helped support a precocious status that was valued within the Cool Kids' clique but which diverged from the maturity trajectory envisioned by educators and privileged parents.

### 6.1.7 Hanging Out with Friends through Media

In addition to hanging out in person, many students at the Downtown School spent quite a bit of time using media and communications technologies to hang out with friends when they were not collocated. These practices tended to occur from home in the afternoons, evenings, and on weekends. For the less-privileged students who were allowed to go out more and had less technological access at home, they also took place on mobile devices, at friends' houses, and at libraries and community-based organizations. Hanging out through media mostly consisted of one-on-one and group conversations facilitated across a variety of communications technologies, including instant messenger platforms (AIM, Facebook Chat, Gmail Chat, Blackberry Messenger, etc.), text messaging on mobile phones, group video chat with a program called ooVoo, telephone calls, private messages on Facebook, and more public exchanges through comments on Facebook. As noted in chapter 3, the vast majority of these practices involved students who already knew each other. Defying stereotypes about the digital divide, the less-privileged Cool Girls were the earliest adopters and most sophisticated users of communications media. They managed their social relations using a complex combination of Facebook, instant messenger, MySpace, email, Twitter, and ooVoo. The variety of tools they used was shaped by which tools their friends could access, constrained, as they were, by material resources and adult regulations. Here is how Hope, a regular member of the Cool Girls who qualified for free lunch, described the ways she moved between communications media to manage her various social relations:

Not everybody has a Facebook. Like Jennifer, I talk to her on instant messenger, I talk to her on AIM. And then Twitter I talk to my cousins that don't have AIM. Facebook, I connect with people I know, just people I know, not people I talk to all the time, but just people like I know. Like Penny, I don't talk to her all the time and I have her on Facebook, and we talk on Facebook. Natasha, we talk on Facebook. Like half the school has Facebook.

These tech-savvy girls tended to connect with friends from the Downtown School, friends from their neighborhood-based elementary schools, neighborhood friends, and family members, both immediate and extended. Their early adoption of these practices was partly supported by their relative freedom from adult-managed activities in the afternoon hours, as well as less parental regulations than many of the more-privileged girls at the school. The more-privileged Goody Two Shoes gradually started engaging in similar practices, but they did so at a later age and under a different style of parenting than the less-privileged Cool Girls (chapter 3). Most of the privileged parents, including the parents of Cool Girls Jennifer and Jessica, initially prevented their daughters from having a Facebook profile or a mobile phone. Some also prevented them from having an AIM account. These restrictions didn't prevent privileged girls from using digital media to connect with each other – they employed workarounds like Gmail Chat – but the restrictions did initially constrain their use of, and familiarity with, a diversity of communications tools. One of the consequences of this difference in parenting strategies was that kids from less-privileged backgrounds had more age-heterogeneous social networks, both online and off, which may help account for their more precocious practices and reputations, especially amongst educators and privileged parents who saw these practices as appropriate for older students.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter 3 and chapter 7.

In general, boys did not initially participate in these genres of communications practices. Several of the Geeky Boys had social network profiles, instant messenger accounts, and smart phones, but they rarely used them for communicating. Instead, these boys seemed more concerned with the material significance of owning sophisticated devices and collecting accounts. As William, a white boy who came from one of the most privileged families in the school, noted, "I'm on AIM, iChat, Skype, MySpace, Facebook, and I have five e-mail accounts. Actually, I have 10. I have so many." Yet when I asked him how he routinely used digital media it became clear he mostly played video games. The same pattern was true for cell phones. While the privileged boys tended to have the most versatile and expensive cell phones in the school (iPhones and Droids), and while these boys often debated the relative quality of phones at school, the boys rarely used their phones to call or text. Instead, they primarily used their phones for playing games, trying out apps, and occasionally taking pictures and videos. Many of the less-privileged boys also did not use communications media much, but their restraint seemed more influenced by parental restrictions. Several of these boys had their mediated communications regulated by family members. This was particularly true for the boys whose families worried about their sons getting into trouble at school or on the street. Like the privileged girls, these boys tended to find workarounds to keep in touch with their friends, but their participation and skill in these practices was more limited than their similarly classed, but differently gendered, peers.

## 6.2 Transgressing and Controlling Boundaries

Thus far I have been focusing on the practices that differentiated the main cliques. Students also routinely interacted across clique boundaries, yet many of these interactions reinforced the differences that divided the cliques. Members of the Cool Boys and the Cool Girls interacted with each other more than any of the other cliques, especially during the first-half of the year. Yet these interactions tended to emphasize gender difference by focusing on heterosexual courtship rituals. Generally, the Cool Kids focused on one or two potential couples, often the highest-status members of each gendered clique. For much of the first half of the year, the Cool Kids were absorbed with the potential, but never realized, coupling of Corey and Jennifer. Corey was widely considered the highest-status member of the Cool Boys. He was a star basketball player outside of school and he also outscored most of the privileged students on assignments and tests while not succumbing to the more-privileged students' conformist orientations towards authority. While significantly less-privileged than many of the students at the Downtown School, he was one of the wealthiest members of the Cool Boys. He lived in low-income housing but his apartment was nicely furnished and his mom, who had some college education, worked in a supportive role for a law office. Compared to his friends, Corey wore newer and more fashionable clothes and had an allowance that allowed him to buy food after school. All of these factors helped make Corey popular amongst the Cool Boys. Jennifer was one of two privileged white girls who routinely hung out with the Cool Girls and by the end of the year students from various cliques considered her the coolest girl in school, in large part because boys from various cliques treated her as a romantic idol.<sup>8</sup> Jennifer had spent most of her childhood overseas because of her parents' careers and she

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<sup>8</sup> Students' orientations towards romantic and sexual practices varied. There was very little dating, at least in the way adults tend to think of dating, and as far as I know students did not engage in practices like "making out" or even holding hands with each other. Some of the Cool Boys told stories of experiences with girls who did not go to the Downtown School but these, of course, were difficult to verify. I imagine the lack of sexualized practices had to do

dressed more fashionably and maturely than the privileged Goody Two Shoes. All of the Cool Kids knew about the latest developments between Corey and Jennifer even though the potential couple rarely interacted directly. Many members of the cliques played a supporting role in Corey and Jennifer's potential coupling, acting as communication liaisons, mediators, and protectors. For example, Niki, who was taller than all of the Cool Boys, routinely issued and returned putdowns at the boys and offered Jennifer shelter behind her body if the boys were attempting a chase or prank.<sup>9</sup>

Occasionally students got into fights with members of another clique. While infrequent, fights garnered passionate interest from peers and deep concern from privileged parents and educators.<sup>10</sup> Within the school's peer culture, fights brought attention to those involved, status to the perceived victor, and a public expression and disciplining of cultural standards. They also brought educator and parental attention and, regrettably, fulfilled some of the anxious parents' reductive stereotypes (chapter 7). In the fall, a Cool Boy punched a Geeky Boy in the face after school, purportedly because the Geeky Boy had "snitched" on the Cool Boy's friend. The Geeky Boy did not easily fit into the normative identity genres represented by the distinct cliques and his punishment can partly be understood as an affirmation of one genre of masculinity by repudiating another genre of masculinity. Both of the boys involved were African American, but the boy who got punched was more middle-class and less hegemonically masculine. He played football outside of school – an involvement the Cool Boys pointed out when they were taunting him about the possibility of a physical conflict, taunts that led him to "snitch" to the principal – but he was also lanky, wore glasses, and liked to hang out at lunch with boys that were into Legos, not football. In addition to punishing him for violating the Cool Boys' ethic against "snitching" to adults, the boy who punched him gained a reputation as "tough" amongst students, a status that initially won him power in the school's peer culture and cred amongst the Cool Kids. Up until that point, the Cool Kids had not really accepted boy who threw the punch. He was one of the poorest students at the school and unlike the high-status Cool Boys he did not have good grades, respected clothes, a computer at home, or money for getting food after school. While the high-status Cool Boys were featured players in the Cool Kids' courtship dramas, this boy only played supporting roles. What he did have, though, was superior "toughness," familiarity with street culture, and access to more "adult" knowledge that could be displayed in useless fun practices such as dirty jokes. He used these cultural resources in negotiations with other Cool Boys over masculinity, and after he demonstrated his toughness in the fight he was accepted as a legitimate member of the Cool Boys. For the rest of the year he and two other high-status Cool Boys hung out together as a fairly tight-knit trio, and everyone in the school knew who they were.

A few organized, but non-mandated, activities brought members from different cliques into interaction with each other in ways that downplayed the differences articulated by the cliques (see also my discussion of Level Up in chapter 5). As noted earlier, the Special Events Committee attracted girls from both the Goody Two Shoes and the Cool Girls cliques. Much like an

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with expectations about age-appropriate behavior as well as conditions of adult surveillance. In seventh grade, for example, there was much more open dating, and two boys shared with peers and teachers that they identified as gay or bisexual, but I was not at the school regularly enough to offer a confident account of what these practices entailed.

<sup>9</sup> See Thorne's (1993) concept of "borderwork" for a thoughtful ethnographic account of how these sorts of cross-sex interactions reinforce gender binaries.

<sup>10</sup> While educators were concerned, they did not react as strongly as privileged parents, likely because those who had worked in schools knew that fights were a fairly common occurrence in middle school.

emergent “student council,” these meetings had a serious tone and were focused on organizing school-wide events such as costume days, dances, and candy grams for Valentines Day. Another voluntary practice that drew together students from various cliques was caring for the school’s pets. Boys, girls, privileged, and less-privileged all lent a hand when the pets’ cages needed to be cleaned or when a pet needed to be fed. These practices also blurred conventional lines between educator and student as often both teachers and students would work side-by-side dealing with one of the small animals. The regular football game during recess was another occasion that drew together boys from different cliques, although boys often continued to perform their clique affiliations by picking friends to be on their team, throwing the ball to each other, and so forth. All of these activities tended to transcend clique divisions as students from various cliques worked side-by-side on a common purpose or project. An educator was often still in command, but their directives were focused on an immediate task-at-hand. Further, students had distinct roles and they were not explicitly evaluated against each other, unlike normal class work.

Finally, students occasionally crossed clique boundaries with digital media, especially on Facebook. As noted earlier, some of the Cool Boys and the Cool Girls communicated with each other through Facebook, cell phones, and instant messenger platforms. Later in the year, a few members of the Geeky Boys and Goody Two Shoes started participating in similar communications, a practice that became more pervasive in seventh grade. These online interactions were noteworthy since the Geeky Boys and Goody Two Shoes didn’t tend to interact during their free time at school. Additionally, the Geeky Boys and the Goody Two Shoes rarely hung out online with most of the Cool Kids even though they were friends on Facebook. These patterns of online interaction suggest that digital media may help facilitate interactions across gendered divisions more than interactions that cross racialized social class divisions.

### **6.2.1 Hybridity and Navigating the Interstices**

While the four cliques I have been discussing were the preminent peer formations available to students, many students formed smaller, often fragile, groups at the interstices of the main cliques and a few students mostly kept to themselves. Students who avoided the main cliques paid the price of social isolation, lack of recognition, and low-status amongst peers.<sup>11</sup> There were three smaller groups that lasted most of the year but tended to be overlooked and degraded by their peers. One was a group that was sometimes referred to as “Lego Lovers” or the “Lego People.” This group was primarily made up of boys and they tended to hang out peripherally with the more high-status Geeky Boys. Several higher-status students moved back and forth between the groups fairly regularly. Both members of the Geeky Boys and the Lego Lovers participated in the school’s after-school program and attended Lego Club once a week. But the Lego Lovers were less normatively masculine than the Geeky Boys, and, as such, they were more inviting to girls. One masculine girl, who I call Nita, routinely hung out with the Lego Lovers, and other more socially isolated girls sometimes joined them for lunch. While the Lego lovers enjoyed video games, most didn’t play the violent first-person-shooter video games that were popular amongst the Geeky Boys. The Lego Lovers also tended to be from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, and several came from lower-middle-class families, a position below the normative tendency of the Geeky Boys but

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<sup>11</sup> Students who kept to themselves were often referred to by higher-status peers as “loners” and “nobodies” if they were recognized at all.

above the normative tendency of the Cool Boys.

Another smaller group of boys formed around the game of Yu-Gi-Oh. Many of these boys were diagnosed with learning disabilities and shared the same academic class. The group entirely consisted of boys from a diversity of ethnicities and social class backgrounds. This group also tended to associate with the Geeky Boys and they rarely interacted with the Cool Kids. Finally, there was a group of four less-privileged girls who shared an advisory and routinely hung out with each other at lunch, recess, and online. One identified as African American, one as African American and Puerto Rican, one as Puerto Rican, and one as a mix of Brazilian, Trinidadian, and Puerto Rican. This group was sometimes torn between the Cool Girls and the Goody Two Shoes but didn't fit in easily with either. As the year went on, the group began to fracture when its most privileged member began to eat lunch with the Goody Two Shoes. When I interviewed the remaining three girls one afternoon, I asked why their fourth friend wasn't present. Star replied, "Penny is starting to be a goody, she's real close to a Goody Two Shoe, she hangs out with them." She then continued, "She says mean things about you [pointing to her friend] and you [pointing to her other friend]," suggesting that Penny's departure for the Goody Two Shoes entailed passing judgment on her old friends. These girls were also reluctant to associate with the Cool Kids because of the latter's precocious reputation and practices, especially among the Cool Boys.

In addition to the students at the interstices of the dominant cliques, all of the main cliques except the Cool Boys had a few members who defied the normative demographics of the clique. About midway through the year, a pair of African American twins that qualified for free lunch became regular participants in the Goody Two Shoes' lunchtime table. These twins lived with their mother, who was college educated but unemployed, and their younger sister. The mother described herself to me as very strict and protective of her daughters. Both girls excelled in school and seemed to be accepted by the Goody Two Shoes partially on the basis of their academic success and obedient orientation towards educators. These twins not only identified with the Goody Two Shoes but in interviews they defined themselves in opposition to the Cool Kids, which they described as the "bad kids" and "the bad people." While they participated in the lunchtime and recess practices of the Goody Two Shoes, they did not participate in the diversity of after-school programming attended by many of the Goody Two Shoes, nor did they routinely go on the commercial outings that some Goody Two Shoes' parents planned.

A few less-privileged boys who identified as African American, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean American also regularly hung out with the Geeky Boys at lunch and played games with them online in the evenings. A mutual interest in video games, and especially the first-person-shooter game *Modern Warfare II*, seemed to facilitate their membership in this clique. One of the less-privileged boys was widely recognized as the best *Modern Warfare II* player in the school, and he often played online with more-privileged members of the Geeky Boys. While a shared interest in gaming facilitated their participation in the Geeky Boys, it was unclear if the mutual interest in gaming would sustain the clique as the boys grew older. Several of the less-privileged Geeky Boys struggled to keep up with their more-privileged friends academically, which could eventually lead to institutional segregation as they move into later grades; for example, the champion *Modern Warfare II* player was held back to repeat sixth grade. A few less-privileged Geeky Boys were also high academic achievers, and the school routinely featured these boys in their publicity efforts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the high academic achieving, but precocious, members of the Cool Boys were not featured in the

As noted before, two privileged girls, Jennifer and Jessica, routinely hung out with the Cool Girls. Both had recently relocated from Europe, perhaps suggesting less familiarity with American conventions of racial classification. As noted in chapter 2, Jessica also had an African American grandmother, yet I never heard her advertise this at school and instead she routinely referenced her “European” background.

Taken as a whole, these interstices and cases of crossing normative boundaries revealed more about the boundaries that separated the main cliques than they did about emergent formations that overcame inherited divisions. Many of the students who crossed into more-privileged social groups had the burden of adopting practices that were more-or-less taken for granted by the privileged majority, whereas those who crossed into less-privileged groups generally retained the respect of their privileged peers and could easily participate in the practices of their privileged peers, an option not readily available to their non-privileged friends. Indeed, by the end of the first year both Jessica and Jennifer had distanced themselves from Niki and the two privileged girls increasingly moved back and forth between the Goody Two Shoes and the Cool Girls. Further, while Nita successfully crossed social class and gender divisions by hanging out with the Lego Lovers and the Geeky Boys, in seventh and eighth grade she shifted towards the Goody Two Shoes and became more normatively feminine in the process. This move has allowed her to continue to participate in a social formation that is primarily composed of more privileged peers, but it has also led her to adopt a more normative gender identity that emphasizes heterosexual-relations in a binary gender formation (e.g. whereas she once posted “geeky” content to her Facebook account, including examples of media she had made, she now posts pictures of Justin Bieber).

### **6.3 Recognizing and Valuing Differences**

Over the course of the year, the cliques described above came to be recognized and evaluated in fairly similar ways by their peers, teachers, and many, primarily privileged, parents (chapter 7). In keeping with the themes of this chapter, much of this recognition referenced cultural forms and practices that were partially organized by students’ out-of-school lives. These increasingly solidified forms of collective recognition and valuation, in turn, shaped expectations for practice, which, in turn, often further reified collective recognition recursively over time. Individual students often had the identity of their clique ascribed to them, and students sometimes exited or distanced themselves from participating in cliques partially in order to avoid dominant ascriptions. This section describes the dominant identities that other students routinely ascribed to each clique, notes how clique members attempted to fulfill and resist such ascriptions, and calls attention to when those ascriptions referenced digital media artifacts and practices.

Students primarily recognized the Goody Two Shoes for their studious and obedient orientation towards school. Both outsiders and insiders often referred to them as the “good kids.” Many members of this group saw their orientation towards the school as both normal and superior. As Rosie, one of the group’s members whose parents were both doctors, noted about her friend, “Yee is a good example of someone who stays out of trouble... she’s an example of a high kid... We just stay out of trouble and stuff.” Her use of the word “high” illustrates the relational quality of clique identities, with “high” constituting her own clique identity as it constituted a category for the “low.”

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school’s publicity efforts.

For Rosie, this hierarchy amongst the cliques centered on differences in students' conformity to adult expectations, as she associated being "high" with those who "stayed out of trouble." Abi, another member of this group, emphasized the normative dimension of their self-image, "There's the regular, normal people," at which point her friend chimed in, "I consider myself part of that group." Geeky Boys also tended to see the Goody Two Shoes as normatively gendered, often referring to them simply as, "the girls." Less-privileged outsiders viewed the Goody Two Shoes' conformity towards school authorities less positively. For Elinore, who was only an occasional participant, the Goody Two Shoes were, "Nerdy, but like, good nerdy." Star, who rarely hung out with this group, described them more pejoratively as "Goody Two Shoes," and then went on to give the following example, "You know like the coupons," which were a reward for good behavior handed out by one of the teachers, "they're always in a rush to get them. And they're always the same people who win them" (see Figure 6.1). Importantly, nobody routinely referred to this group in media- or technology-specific terms, despite their significant engagement with media production for school assignments. As noted in chapter 3, none of these girls pursued deeper engagements with media production outside of school assignments. Instead they participated in private classes for dance, music, foreign language, swimming, ice-skating, tennis, snowboarding, and horseback riding. When asked to name their hobbies and interests in interviews, many noted a similar list of out-of-school activities; they also tended to feature those hobbies and interests on their social network profiles (once they got them) and they discussed them while hanging out at school.

In contrast with the Goody Two Shoes, both insiders and outsiders tended to recognize the Geeky Boys as especially interested in digital media, and particularly video games. Many non-members emphasized a media- and technology-centric identity for the Geeky Boys, and many of the Geeky Boys frequently displayed their affinity for gaming at school and on social network sites. The most committed of these players self-identified as, "the hardcore gamers." Many used images from masculine video games such as *Modern Warfare II* and *Assassins Creed* as their profile photos on social network sites like Facebook. Several uploaded images of characters from the games and then tagged the characters with the names of their friends (see Figure 6.2). At lunch, during recess, and online they would often discuss their game play and deliberate over the best games and gaming equipment. These connoisseurship practices helped constitute group membership and provided for status distinctions amongst the Geeky Boys.

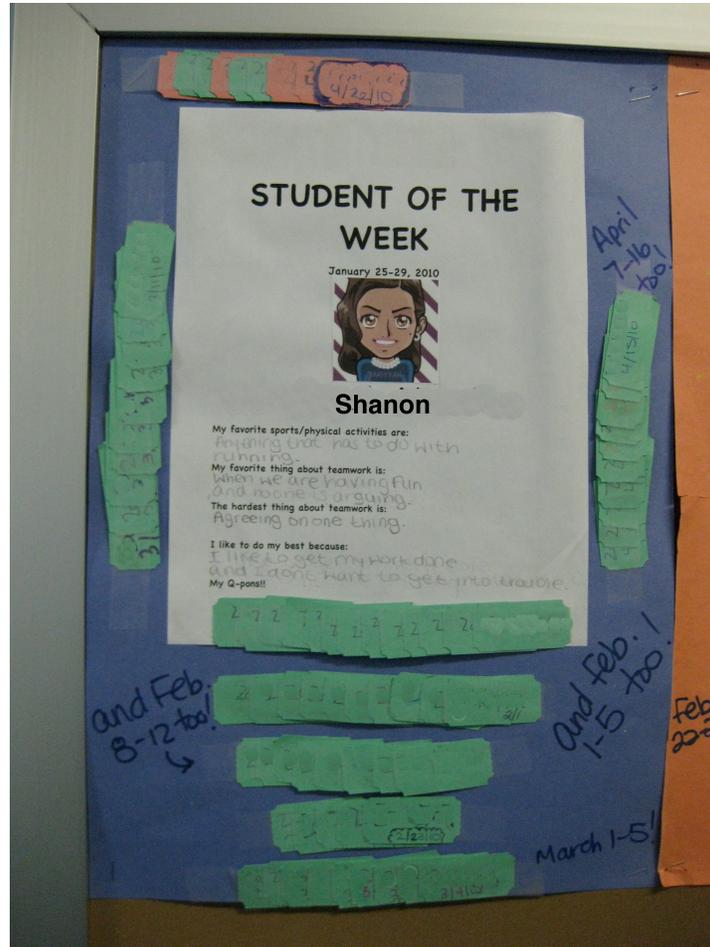


Figure 6.1 Student of the Week display featuring one of the Goody Two Shoe girls.

The student of the week award was displayed in the school's main hallway. One teacher ran this contest and students would compete by attempting to accumulate the most coupons in a given week. The teacher awarded coupons for good behavior. This student, like many of the others displayed on the wall, had won the award on numerous occasions. Most were regular members of the Goody Two Shoes.

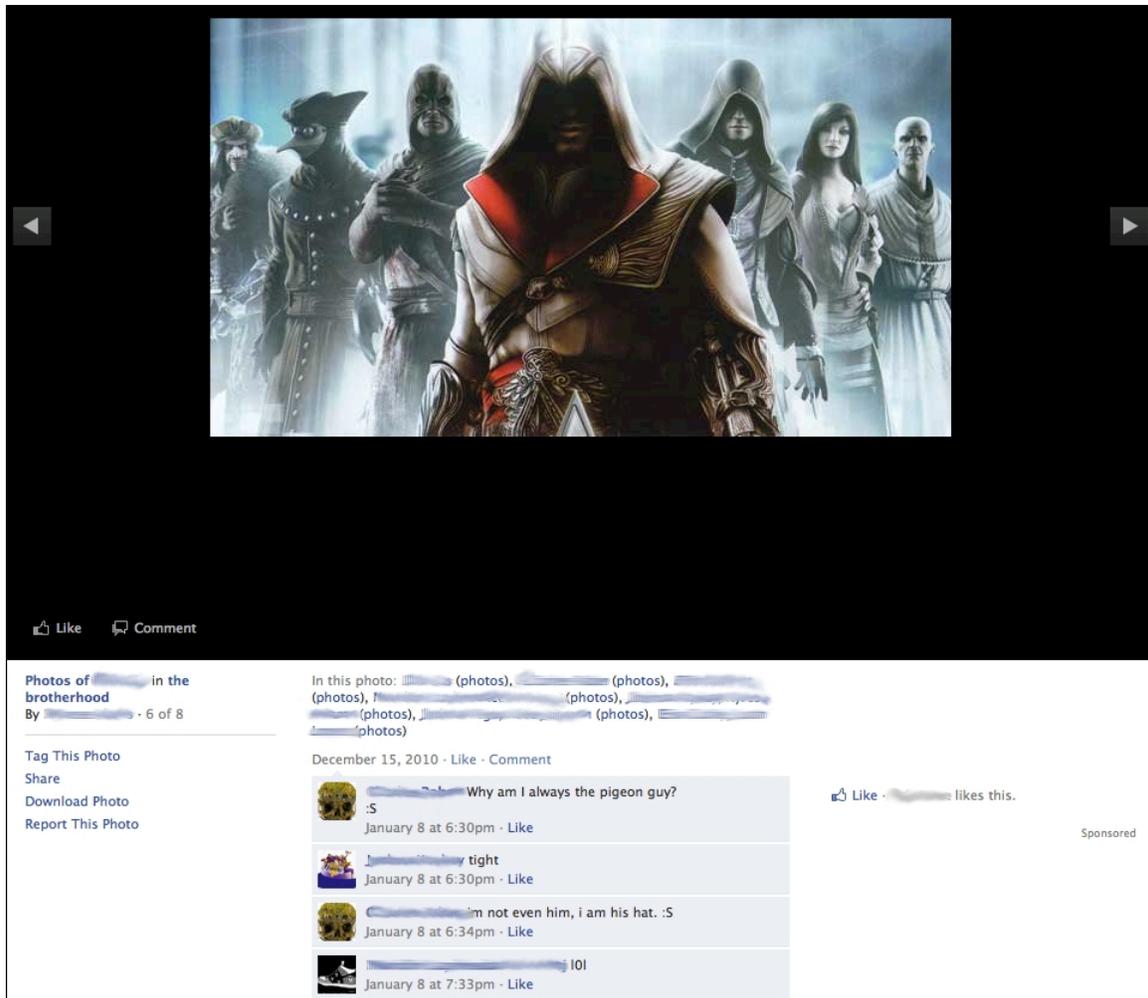


Figure 6.2 Photo from “Assassin’s Creed” uploaded to Facebook by one of the Geeky Boys.

The boy tagged the characters with the names of other Geeky Boys who played the game, several of whom have commented on the photo below. The photo album is called “The Brotherhood,” referencing both the subtitle of the game and a fraternal bond amongst the Geeky Boys who played the game. The boy tagged the one female character as Jennifer, who, as noted earlier, was one of two privileged Cool Girls and was uniquely admired by members of all the cliques.

On the other side of the social class and racial divide, the Cool Kids were primarily seen as uniquely caring about being known at the school, socializing and flirting, and challenging adult authority. At the beginning of the year, these challenges had the ambiguous character of a playful dance. Both the Cool Boys and the Cool Girls toyed with the boundaries of various school rules and adult directives, risking discipline but not fully rejecting their status as subordinates. As noted earlier, many members of both the Cool Boys and the Cool Girls cared deeply about their grades, and several scored at the top of their class on assignments and tests focused on canonical subject areas. Yet they did not conflate academic success with conformity to educators. They often reinterpreted or questioned educators’ directives, talked without being called on, and generally needled educators by failing to comply with the countless, and often tacit, ways they were supposed to behave. Additionally, the Cool Kids were the first students to participate in more “adult” practices, such as flirting, dating, going out with friends in the city without a chaperone, knowing how to use public

transportation, and cursing. Cursing in particular, was seen as a key practice that marked Cool Kids from non-cool kids. For example, when one of the Cool Boys who was also a high academic achiever told a story about “being bad” as a fifth grader, a non-cool girl suggested that she too had been “bad” in fifth grade. He responded, “When have you ever cursed?” to which the girl responded, “I cursed once last year.” Cool Kids also frequently displayed more “adult” knowledge to their peers. For example, one day three of the Cool Boys repeatedly asked their peers, “What is the capital of Thailand?” When one of the Geeky Boys replied, “Bangkok,” the Cool Boys replied, “Disgusting.” The Geeky Boy didn’t seem to catch the pun and replied, “But it is!” which led the Cool Boys to laugh.

At the beginning of the year, these precocious practices and acts of resistance to adult control helped the Cool Kids win a “cool” status amongst their peers. Several outsiders made bids for inclusion and many others dabbled in emulating some of their practices, such as throwing a note to a friend when the teacher had his back turned. While being a member of the “Cool Kids” remained an exclusive status throughout the year – for example, most outsiders could not walk up to the Cool Kids’ tables at lunch whereas the Cool Kids could join any table they liked – most Geeky Boys and Goody Two Shoe girls did not covet membership, especially once educators started ratcheted up discipline (chapter 7). As educators and privileged parents cracked down, many outsiders came to see the Cool Kids genre of coolness as antithetical to schooling. As William, a privileged Geeky Boy, said to me in an interview in the spring, “You know them like the back of your hand. But the thing with me is that I don’t care how popular I am, I’m just here to learn.” Many other outsiders came to see the Cool Kids as “troublemakers,” “bad kids,” “bullies,” or, at the very least, “disruptive” and “annoying.”

While being seen as “bad” was a tempting identity available to less-privileged students, resisting adult control was part of a larger appeal to alternative standards of dignity and status than those promoted and celebrated by the more-privileged families and many educators at the school. For the Cool Kids, being “cool” and “bad” was interwoven with a celebration of numerous other accomplishments and qualities, including high performance on tests, at sports, and in popular music. Many of the Cool Kids encouraged each other to get good grades on tests and several took pride in their grades. Similarly, many of the Cool Boys drew attention to their accomplishments in sports programs that were organized outside of the school, particularly basketball and football. Cool Boys often referenced their accomplishments and interests in sports on social network sites, through their clothing, and in conversations at school (see Figure 6.3). Sometimes Cool Boys framed their accomplishments and interests in sports in contrast with the interests and accomplishments that were celebrated by the Geeky Boys and the school’s designers. Here, for example, is how Jamal responded when I asked him if he did media production outside of school assignments, “I don’t really do stuff like that outside of school. Because, really, my family, like on my mom’s side and on my dad’s side, our talent is in sports. So usually I’m playing sports, or I’m playing sports games.”

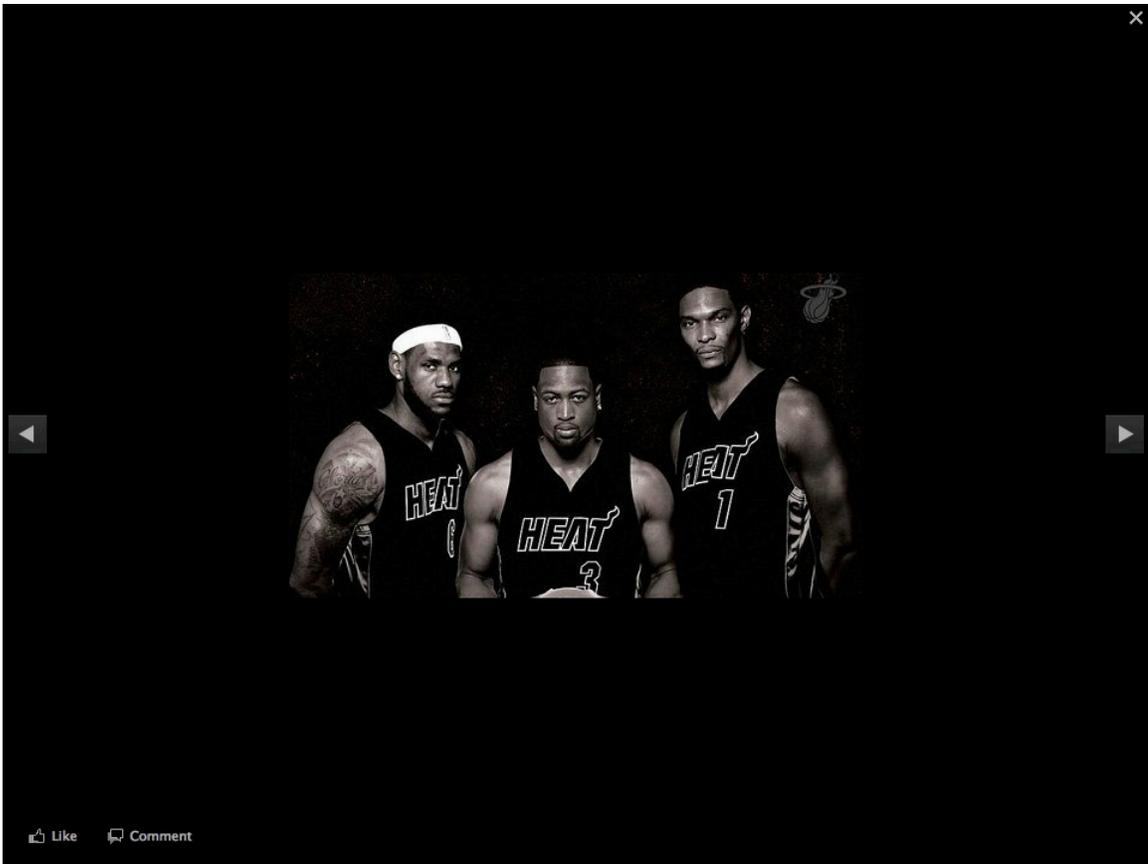


Figure 6.3: Facebook profile picture uploaded by one of the Cool Boys.

Much like the Geeky Boys' use of video game imagery, the image references the boy's affinity for an out-of-school practice.

In terms of digital media practices, the Cool Boys played video games quite a bit, but they were not fanatical about them like the Geeky Boys and none identified themselves primarily as a "gamer." Many of the cool boys also used social and communications media fairly extensively. Like the Geeky Boys, they expressed their out-of-school interests online, but these tended to center on sports and music rather than games and gadgets. They also used social and communications media to display a heteronormative identification and to flirt with girls, both of which the Geeky Boys avoided in sixth grade.

As noted in chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter, the Cool Girls were the least involved in organized after-school programs but they were the most advanced users of social and communications media. The Cool Girls were the earliest adopters and, in my opinion, the most skillful users of social and communications media. Many regularly used a combination of Facebook, AIM, MySpace, email, cell phones, and ooVoo for group video chat. Yet they were not widely recognized as tech-savvy by their peers, nor did they present themselves as such. From the perspective of more-privileged peers, the Cool Girls early adoption of these tools was subsumed in the ascription that the Cool Girls were overly concerned with being "popular" and doing age-inappropriate things, such as flirting with boys. Again, there was ambiguity in these views, especially at the beginning of the year, but after educators disciplined the Cool Kids for some of

their precocious practices, including mediated communications between Cool Boys and Cool Girls, the negative valuations became more pervasive.

### 6.3.1 Racialization

Outsiders' ascriptions of "coolness" to the Cool Kids often slipped into racialization practices, despite a general taboo against using racial identifiers. Here, for example, is how two privileged white members of the Geeky Boys, Eli and Corin, described the Cool Kids during an interview:

- Corin: [To Eli] What would you name Troy and that group of people? You know how there's the two columns... [indexing the area where the Cool Kids sat in the cafeteria during lunch.]
- Eli: Like Troy and all those girls...
- Corin: Yeah. Let's say, um...[rotating his hands one over the other in front of his body.]
- Eli: [Giggling] The cool kids? I don't know.
- Christo: The what kids?
- Corin: It's a hard thing to describe.
- Eli: I don't want to be racist or anything.
- Corin: [High pitched] No! Racist wouldn't be the... Um, uh, the um, the, people who prefer to be with more... [pause]
- Eli: Peoplish people.
- Corin: ...violent people. Or people who like...
- Eli: Well apparently they're kind of like the cool kids, I don't know.
- Corin: ...like gossipers.
- Eli: The quidnuncs!
- Corin: What?
- Eli: The quidnuncs.
- Christo: What's that?
- Eli: Quidnunc is a word that I learned. Quidnunc is a person who likes to hear and spread gossip and news. Isn't that a cool word? I learned it on my phone. I have this Cool Facts app.
- Corin: Oh, I have that too!

This quote simultaneously illustrates how white Geeky Boys wrestled with their racial readings of the less-privileged students' "coolness," as they promoted an alternative status-system, one based on familiarity with "cool" digital media. In keeping with a long history of white appropriations of "black culture" as "cool," these same boys made and posted a movie to the school's internal social network site called "Eric and the Gangsta," where they parodied stereotypes of African American dialects and interaction rituals. This ambiguous relation to minority "coolness" – at once desirable

and yet also seen as low and other – was fairly common amongst the privileged students. Here, for example, is how Elinore and Joanna, both white, described the social organization of the school's peer culture. Both were occasional participants in the practices of the Cool Girls and the Goody Two Shoes:

Elinore: [There's] the smart and nerdy [and then there's] the "cool." [Making air quotes].

Christo: You put that in air quotes?

Elinore: Yeah, quotation marks.

Christo: Why is that?

Joanna: Because they think they are so cool.

Elinore: But I am kind of in that group a little. So is Joanna, she hangs out with them.

Joanna: They are not all of the time.

Elinore: I am not trying to be racist, but most of them are black.

Joanna: Yeah. I'm not trying to be racist but –

Elinore: I am just saying like the color.

Christo: What makes them cool?

Joanna: They are not cool. They just think they are.

Elinore: They think they are tough. They think, because they curse, that they are awesome.

Joanna: Yeah.

Elinore: They think that since they are black – like black people are mostly – like in the movies you see, [makes voice much deeper] "Oh the big tough people are black." Just like the bullies and stuff.

Joanna: There is even a song that is called "White and Nerdy" and it's about black and white people.

Christo: Oh really?

Joanna: I have it on my iPod. Do you want to listen? It is just a stupid video but I like it.

In a related vein, Jennifer and Jessica, who, as a reminder where white members of the Cool Girls, benefited from the ascription of "coolness" while escaping the more deviant classifications that were ascribed to their less-privileged friends. Here, for example, is how Rosie, Megan, and Elinore, all of whom were white, responded when I asked them to describe the Cool Girls during an interview in the spring. Rosie was the most privileged and Elinore was the least privileged:

Elinore: They're the bad kids.

Rosie: Yeah, they're low.

Megan: Although Jessica and Jennifer sit with them.

Rosie: Yeah, Jessica and Jennifer are really good kids.

Elinore: But they sit with them.

As the Cool Kids' status as deviants became more reified as the year went on, many of the non-white and less-privileged Geeky Boys wrestled with the pressures of racialized identifications. For example, here is how Chris, an African American who routinely hung out with the Geeky Boys, described the Cool Kids:

There's like the "hood," air quotes around hood [he makes air quotes with his hands when he says, "hood."] They're like always bad. See, this is the problem I have. Most of all the guys in "the hood" are friends with me. I don't hang out with them because they're bad. They're getting suspended all the time... Because people in "the hood," air quotes around "the hood" [again makes air quotes when he says "the hood"], they're always wearing their pants low. But if you really know what that means you shouldn't be doing that. Because I know the real meaning of that and trust me, it's not good.

Chris' effort to differentiate himself from the Cool Boys involved stylistic choices, such as how to wear his pants, as well as whether to hang out with the Cool Kids at school. Charles, another less-privileged Geeky Boy whose parents emigrated from Granada, also used taste displays that differentiated himself from the Cool Boys and align himself with more-privileged white students. For example, when I asked him what type of music he liked, he replied, "I don't really like Rap, I like soft-rock and stuff like that." He also carried a monogrammed L.L. Bean backpack and advertised an interest in activities like tennis on his Facebook profile.

As ascriptions of race, coolness, and deviance became more consolidated, the less-privileged Cool Kids played with their reputations as "bad." Sometimes, being a deviant was celebrated amongst the Cool Kids. For example, when one of the Cool Girls had an in-school suspension, which meant she had to sit in the principal's office all day, she was swarmed and hugged by her Cool Girl friends when she was allowed to get a hot lunch from the cafeteria. But while the less-privileged Cool Kids played to their deviant reputations, they also often exhibited a reluctance to be fully identified as such. Here, for example, is an exchange that happened in a classroom after I asked Jamal about his friend Troy's recent suspension. Ali and Donny were not members of the Cool Boys:

Jamal: It's his fifth time.

Christo: It's his fifth time?

Jamal: It's his 20th time, the fifth time this year. I've been suspended four, no five times.

Ali: It sounds like you're competing.

Jamal: I'm not competing.

Donny: You could catch up easily.

Jamal: Yeah, I could easily. I could punch Ali, or someone else, then transfer to another school, punch some more. [Everyone is quiet for a moment.] I'm not competing.

In sum, from a social practice perspective the "in-school" racialization of "out of school" ethnic and economic differences was a collective effort that stemmed from competitions and tensions for recognition and status. It is well known that white Americans have a long stereotyped African Americans, and especially African American men, as dangerous, deviant, virile, and hypersexual. The stereotype is rooted in the racist colonial idea that Africans were less civilized, closer to nature,

and hence in need of being controlled or socially excluded even as they were treated as objects of fascination and desire. While these racist stereotypes are now taboo, there was ample evidence that they circulated and structured practices amongst students in a manner that Essed (1991) referred to as “everyday racism.” These stereotypes had bearing both on how the Cool Kids were identified by others as well as the avenues less-privileged students could pursue as they sought status and recognition. Playing to a these stereotypes was tempting for some less-privileged students, especially since alternative ways of gaining recognition and status depended on resources they did not possess. The irony, of course, was that while peers and adults were willing to grant Cool Kids recognition and a “cool” status, the identification fulfilled larger racist stereotypes that figured them as uncivilized, dangerous, and needing to be controlled and excluded. As such, playing to “coolness” allowed the Cool Kids to gain recognition within the school community and respect from each other as they were increasingly marginalized by the more-privileged and stigmatized by those in power. By disaggregating stereotypical aspects of the Cool Kids’ practices, the outsiders’ “cool” ascriptions tended to overlook the complex, multifaceted, and yet synthetic character of what it meant to participate legitimately and successfully as a member of the Cool Kids, including the value of peer belonging, the aspiration for academic success, and recognition for their talents and accomplishments in myriad out-of-school practices that were not highly valued by educators and the more-privileged students of the Downtown School. In the next chapter I discuss how some privileged parents and educators worked to exclude the Cool Kids from the school.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

In conclusion, while the school hoped to cross the school/world divide with digital media and a “game-like” curricula that downplayed cultural differences rooted in historical structures of privilege, the students routinely brought these cultural differences into the school as they negotiated belonging and difference in the school’s peer culture. In doing so, they mostly rebuilt within the school the structures of privilege that shaped their out-of-school lives. At the beginning of the year, this peer formation largely reproduced binary gender relations but inverted the hierarchy of out-of-school race and class relations. As I discuss in the next chapter, this inversion was not accepted by privileged parents who crossed the school/world divide in order to pressure educators to crack down on the Cool Kids’ practices and restore hegemonic order.

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### **Being Involved: Parents Crossing the School/World Divide**

At the end of every school day, the carefully managed world of the Downtown School momentarily came into direct contact with the “real world.” The process was highly routinized. Educators escorted their advisory groups in single file lines down three flights of stairs and through a door that exited onto the sidewalk on the north side of the building. As advisory groups approached the door educators’ control waned. The pace of descent quickened and the single file lines stretched and frayed. As students streamed onto the sidewalk the educators came to a stop just beyond the doorway.

Across the sidewalk, a handful of parents and chaperones stood facing the exit. Many of these waiting parents chatted with each other and often they crossed the sidewalk and struck up a casual conversation with one of the educators. On some days the principal also came outside and when she did she typically crossed the sidewalk to chat with the waiting parents. These parents were regulars and I got to know most of them quite well, in part by chatting on the sidewalk at the end of the school day. All were active in the PTA and showed up regularly for the school’s various public assemblies and showcases. Most were creative professionals with somewhat flexible work schedules.

As the students streamed out of the building they typically forked and pooled into inward facing clusters on the eastern and western sides of the exit. As these students waited for their friends and commute partners to spill out of the building, many took cell phones, music players, and portable gaming equipment out of their pockets and bags. Friends shared gossip about their day at school, resumed conversations that had been interrupted by classes, joked around, and occasionally participated in small games such as chase.

These forked clusters mostly matched the cliques that formed inside the school, as discussed in the last chapter. Most of the Geeky Boys and Goody Two Shoe girls clustered to the west of the exit. Some greeted their waiting parents or chaperones and eventually departed down the sidewalk to the west. Several parents chaperoned their children as well as a few of their children’s friends. In contrast with these students and families, almost all of the Cool Boys and Cool Girls clustered to the east of the exit. When they departed they headed east without chaperones in one or two large groups. Typically they headed to a pizza parlor or a bodega for a snack, and eventually most took various bus lines home or to after-school engagements.

I suggest that these clusters “mostly” matched the clique divisions that formed during the school

day because many of the students who routinely crossed historical social divisions at school restrained from doing so on the sidewalk. For example, while Jennifer and Jessica typically hung out with the Cool Girls and the Cool Boys at school, they usually clustered to the west of the exit after dismissal. Many of the waiting professional parents knew these girls and their parents, and I got the sense that Jennifer and Jessica wanted to keep some of their school friendships private from their parents. Occasionally members of the Cool Girls and Cool Boys called out to Jennifer and Jessica from down the sidewalk, which often elicited a blush from the more privileged girls and laughter from the Cool Kids. Similarly, many less-privileged students who avoided hanging out with the Cool Boys and Cool Girls during the school day nevertheless departed to the east after dismissal. As their more privileged friends headed off to ice-skating lessons and other private after-school activities, many of these students headed to a nearby library to wait for their parents to pick them up when they got off work. Others headed home.

As noted in chapters 4 and 5, the school hoped to cross the school/world divide by appropriating digital media and by creating fantasy “game-like” versions of what the “real world” was like. In the last chapter, I analyzed how students circulated alternative accounts of the “real world” by routinely pointing to experiences and cultural forms outside the school walls as they negotiated peer group membership inside the school. In this chapter, I examine a different breach of the school/world divide, namely how parents and guardians attempted to understand and shape what happened at school. Just as students routinely pointed beyond the school during the school day, many parents, and especially creative professional parents, routinely found ways to insinuate themselves and their perspectives into the school and its adult-managed practices. As I will show, these parents significantly influenced what cultural standards and values the school should promote, how those standards and values should be interpreted and applied, and what sorts of students the school should attract.

As discussed in the introduction, I see parents’ efforts to shape the Downtown School as an attempt to make practices of social grooming and social selection appear appropriate and morally just. The efforts of the most powerful parents clustered towards a techno-cosmopolitan cultural sensibility that threaded together multiple virtues that were often in tension with one another. I suggest that this sensibility entailed inherent tensions between: a) a virtue of individuation, as epitomized in the model of the authentic, creative, self-expressing, self-realizing child; b) a virtue of harmonious relations between singularized individuals, as epitomized by the ideal of tolerance and respect. Tensions between these poles generated controversies that required political work to produce temporary settlements that returned a sense of moral soundness to the collective grooming and sorting project. This political work was not often seen as such in part because of the rhetoric of “school choice,” which made social selection appear the product of individualized family preferences, or “cultural fit.”

In this chapter, I first describe the mechanisms by which some of the parents were able to insinuate themselves into positions where they could exert considerable pressure on teachers and school leaders. In doing so, I focus on the power asymmetries between parents. In the second half of the chapter, I review the major controversies that emerged during the first year, as well as how parents, educators, and students attempted to settle them. I end with my reflections on techno-cosmopolitanism as both a social condition and a normative project. I suggest that proponents of the latter often overlooked the former and, in so doing, legitimated authoritative discipline and practices of exclusion that paradoxically undermined their ideals. To restore a sense of moral

soundness to the grooming and sorting project, the most discomfiting of the less-privileged, those who resisted or did not fit into the techno-cosmopolitan sensibility, were “voluntarily” removed.

## **7.1 Parents Breaching the School/World Divide**

Parents engaged in various tactics for shaping and controlling legitimate practices within the enclaves where their children spent time outside the home. This was often a delicate endeavor since parents attempted to acknowledge the professional expertise and bureaucratic legitimacy of the educators as they nevertheless worked to influence them. Given my extensive participant observation at the Downtown School, I will primarily focus on how parents attempted to shape practices at the school. As I will show, the professional parents were able to shape the school much more substantially than their less-privileged counterparts. They were able to do so by engaging in quotidian interactions with educators; by using communications technologies to share information, form shared emotionally laden perspectives, and coordinate collective action with other (mostly professional) parents; by controlling the main institutionalized mechanisms for parent-school relations (especially the PTA); and, ultimately, by threatening to pull their children from the school if their demands were not met. As I will show, most less-privileged parents and guardians did not have access to these mechanisms and options and hence were much less able to shape the school.

### **7.1.1 Insinuating into the School**

As the vignette that opened this chapter helps illustrate, some parents had routine access to school officials, including the principal, through quotidian practices such as picking up their children after school. Some of these parents also occasionally dropped by the school during the day for seemingly innocuous purposes such as dropping off their children’s lunch. While these practices were often seen as harmless, they also provided these parents with regular access to school officials as well as unique perspectives on what was happening inside the school walls. Here is how one of these parents, a white professional mother, described the practice:

It’s pretty easy at the school to be in touch. [The principal] mentioned that tonight. I often can’t get their lunch together in the morning, so I have to go drop it off, then I stop in the classes. I feel like I have a sense of what’s going on in the school more than I did when they were in fifth grade. Just because it’s new and very open, and I’m pretty involved.

The parents who obtained quotidian access shared their observations of what was going on within the school with other parents. As I discussed in chapter 3, many of the school’s professional parents had met and established what I called a “networked coalition” before the school opened, and the parents with quotidian access played influential roles within the coalition. Their position as quasi-insiders made them valuable connectors between the school and other parents in the networked coalition, what some parents called “the grapevine.” Their frequent presence at school also helped them win positions of influence in the more institutionalized mechanisms for parent-school relations, such as the PTA and the “School Leadership Team” (SLT). As mentioned earlier, exercising power as a parent was a delicate act since parents did not want to come across as overbearing or as disrespectful of educator authority. Again, the same mother quoted above shares

her thoughts about the unique position she occupied between parents and the school:

I get a lot of emails... I'm generally referred to as the bridge, so I feel like a lot of people contact me from different factions... I get 100 emails a day from school parents. It's unbelievably labor-intensive. I'm on the PTA. I'm so not the PTA mom—I've never been involved. I turn my children over to the educators, I trust that the educators know something about education which I don't: take care of them, and I'll pick them up at the end of the day. And now that I'm on the PTA, people are writing to me all day long... I get a lot of phone calls. The PTA officers all get cc'd on everything that goes out to the parents in general.

For the most part, the parents who had quotidian access to the school were professional parents that had a fair degree of control over their work schedules. As the above quote suggests, acting as a “bridge” required a lot of unpaid work, which was difficult for less-privileged parents to offer. There was one less-privileged father who worked in construction and who stopped by the school when he was not employed on a project, and there was one unemployed single mother who regularly dropped in on the school. But neither of these parents occupied a “bridge” position in the networked coalition, and neither held leadership positions in the PTA.

In addition to picking up their children and dropping by the school, several parents accessed the school by acting as volunteers, typically for special events such as open houses for prospective families, Level Up, and end-of-the-trimester showcases and parties. These parents were also regular participants in the PTA and the SLT and several held leadership positions in each group. In general, volunteers were mothers, although some of the parents who picked up their children after school were fathers. Initially, all of the PTA leadership positions were held by mothers, although the leader of the SLT was a father and in the school's second year the PTA president was a father. Professional parents held all of the top leadership positions in both the PTA and the SLT.

Students were obviously the other bodies that routinely moved between the school and homes, and they would often share accounts of what happened at school with their families. Their stories were generally considered less reliable, but these stories gained validity as parents shared their children's stories with each other through emails and phone calls. As I will discuss shortly, this communication dynamic sometimes propagated rumors and generally led to an amplification of emotionally inflected concerns, especially when the stories appeared to fulfill parents' stereotypes about “the other” students at the school. When adults' with quotidian access offered accounts that confirmed these suspicions, the networked coalition would often mobilize and confront the school's leaders with a flood of emails and phone calls. They also used the PTA and the SLT to make forceful demands on the educators, the most salient of which I discuss in the next section.

In addition to facilitating relations among some of the parents, communications technologies mediated relations between parents and school officials. School officials encouraged parents to communicate with teachers and school leaders, and all the teachers answered emails as a routine part of their job. The school also had a homework website that students and parents could access, and the principal broadcasted a long weekly email with updates from each teacher. Additionally, educators and school leaders contacted parents by phone and email, typically, but not always, when their child had been disciplined. Teachers used the threat of calling or emailing a parent as part of their classroom management practices, and larger violations often required parents to come into the school to meet with the principal and sometimes teachers. In general, the students that were

regularly disciplined came from less-privileged families, and, as such, their parents and guardians primarily interacted with school officials under the stigma of behavioral issues, an interaction that I imagine could be embarrassing for parents since notifications of misbehavior implicitly positions the parents as complicit. By contrast, parents who initiated contact with the school to touch base and volunteer held a degree of power over educators since they were seen as fulfilling the normative image of a good “involved” parent and since their generosity could be revoked.

While the parents who participated in the networked coalition did not always succeed in getting their demands met, their collective efforts significantly altered the practices of educators. There were several ways these parents exercised influence. First, their communication network allowed them to share stories with each other and form common views about what was happening inside the school. As noted above, those who had quotidian access to the school were especially influential in the production of these accounts. These accounts were primarily focused on identifying problems that parents could pressure the school to fix. As I argue in the next section, these accounts often distorted and exaggerated what happened at school, especially when they seemed to fulfill stereotypes about less-privileged minority children. Second, educators had difficulty ignoring or deflecting their collective grievances. Third, the networked coalition controlled the PTA and SLT and thus advanced its agenda through institutionally legitimate channels for family-school relations. When they did so, they often presented their demands as if they represented “all the parents,” which they did not. Fourth, the complaints of privileged parents had teeth. Privileged parents had better “voice” and “exit” options (Hirschman 1970) than the less-privileged parents, and the two advantages reinforced each other. In terms of “voice,” many of the privileged parents held advanced graduate degrees, and several pointed to their professional credentials and expertise when advancing their interpretations of what was happening at the school. At one point during the year, a professional parent encouraged the school’s leaders to use one of her psychiatrist friends as an “independent” analyst of the “behavior issues” inside the school, but school leaders turned down her offer, and several teachers suggested to me that the parent was overstepping her position. In addition to credentials, these parents presented themselves with written, verbal, and body language that suggested they were “high” cultured, sophisticated, and hence worthy of being heard. And, as noted above, the privileged parents used the network coalition to amplify their “voice.” They also had better “exit” options than the less-privileged parents and threats to leave the school reinforced their “voice.” In each of the contentious episodes that I discuss below, a faction of professional parents threatened to pull their children from the school if educators did not make the changes they were demanding. Many of the privileged parents could make this threat because they lived in District Two and hence could access other quality public schools. Further, several could (begrudgingly) pay for private schools. In this sense, the privileged parents were empowered with the sort of “consumer sovereignty” celebrated by proponents of “school choice” in public school systems, and choice seems to have increased the power of their “voice” to influence the school. Less-privileged families, and especially less-privileged families living outside of District Two, had much more limited “exit” options and hence they did not enjoy the same power as consumers within the school choice system. Less-privileged families also did not tend to have the cultural capital to make their “voices” heard by educators and privileged families. Educators seemed to listen to less-privileged parents’ concerns but not to the same degree as privileged families. In general, I got the sense that less-privileged families felt less comfortable expressing their voices at public hearings. They would often sit towards the back of the auditorium and most would not speak. Privileged families tended to sit towards the front of the auditorium, some sat next to

educators, and they would often speak before and more often than less-privileged families. At PTA and SLT meetings, privileged parents ran the meetings. When less-privileged parents did speak, more privileged parents would sometimes trivialize their concerns, if not in public then in private conversations with me or with each other. For example, after one school-wide meeting, a professional mother told me, "If you want to interview someone truly insane you should interview [the mother of one of the less-privileged students]." She went on to tell me about a conversation where the less-privileged mother had referred to some of the verbal threats that students made to each other at school as, "Normal kid stuff." This assessment exasperated the professional mother who saw such taunts as totally unacceptable. The professional mother told me that she thought the less-privileged mother had a "severe mental illness," a claim she then attributed to another professional parent, a psychologist, who, the privileged mother claimed, had formed the diagnosis based on how the less-privileged mother had been smiling when she was talking. Finally, school officials had strong incentives to avoid an exodus of professional families during the first year since the privileged families donated money and resources to the school, volunteered at various events, helped raise the school's test scores, and helped attract prospective families that would be likely to understand and appreciate the school's unique approach. Moreover, a widespread exodus of privileged parents would be a significant embarrassment for school leaders, all the more so because the school was supported by major foundations and had been widely publicized as an exciting and hopeful new model of schooling for the twenty-first century.

In sum, privileged families were, in general, much better equipped than less-privileged families to influence the school. By being networked to each other, as well as to powerful people beyond the school community, these families were better able to share information, form consensual viewpoints, and mobilize collective action. They used these connections to help them win leadership positions on the PTA and SLT, and they wrote, spoke, and carried themselves in meetings in ways that signaled their cultural capital. Some used their flexible work schedules to routinely drop by the school and to volunteer at school events. Finally, their District Two residences, which were primarily mediated by economic capital, provided them with several educational alternatives, which could be used as leverage in negotiations with educators.

I now turn to the major conflicts that emerged during the first year. In doing so, I trace which parents and educators aligned with which positions and how educators and parents attempted to negotiate temporary settlements.

## **7.2 Contentious Local Practice**

There were two major contentions that erupted during the first year. The first centered on how the school should handle testing and grading. The second centered on "bullying." Both of these issues periodically resurfaced in subsequent years, suggesting that legitimate grooming and sorting practices grew out of working through fundamental underlying tensions in the techno-cosmopolitan sensibility, notably tensions between education as a form of care entailed in harmonious projects of self-realization and education as a form of control entailed in legitimized processes of social selection. Settling these tensions was a necessary condition for producing the sense that the school was a bounded and culturally neutral enclave, cut off from the "real world" and yet related to the "real world" through a culturally neutral incubation process called "learning."

### 7.2.1 Standards, Tests, and Grades

As noted in chapters 3 and 4, the school's founders designed the Downtown School as an alternative to conventional bureaucratic public schools. They saw canonical schooling as narrowly focused on standardized curriculum and outcomes, excessive competition between students, authoritative teachers, and passive, coerced learning. From this perspective, conventional schools attempted to *impose* an existing body of knowledge onto students. As I argued earlier, progressive educators and creative professional parents saw such an approach as limiting and even violating children's inherent curiosity and creativity. By contrast, the Downtown School planned to use "game-like" structures to promote active, hands-on learning that allowed students to be creative, engaged, whole persons. Instead of impressing a pre-existing order onto children, the Downtown School would *support* children along a trajectory towards self-fulfillment. The school would help children discover and advance their inherent interests and, as such, their pedagogic practices would reinforce the sacred qualities of individuals and especially children. If anything, the school would help children preserve their sacred childlike qualities as they moved into adulthood, hence helping to repair some of the more profane aspects of adult society in the process.

As I have noted earlier, some of the limitations of this hopeful vision revealed themselves once the school was considered as part of a larger, bureaucratic educational system that, amongst other things, performed and legitimated social selection. Reminders of the Downtown School's embeddedness in the educational system contentiously surfaced when the school hosted an "assessment night" for families a few months after opening. Educators planned and advertised the meeting as an opportunity for school officials to explain their unorthodox curriculum and grading system. The meeting, which was held in a large auditorium, was attended by the PTA regulars, but also by many other parents, including many of the less-privileged parents. The PTA regulars tended to sit near each other a few rows behind the educators. The rest of the parents were spread throughout the auditorium, with many of the less-privileged parents clustered towards the back, perhaps suggesting that they were less comfortable interacting with school officials.

The meeting began with different members of the school's leadership team presenting aspects of their new model. They presented the curriculum as a hybrid that blended state standards with "twenty-first century literacies." School leaders figured assessment as, "a way to support your kids," and as "feedback," not as a way to differentiate students. As noted in previous chapters, educators defined grades as five stages ranging from "pre-novice" to "masters," and broke each stage into three "levels": L1, L2, and L3. The speaker acknowledged a, "general numeric equivalency" for these labels, which he displayed at the bottom of the screen: "0-65 pre-novice; 65-69 novice; 70-84 apprentice; 85-95 senior; 96-100 master."

One of the professional parents, a professor, interrupted, "You're using the fancy words, but how does this relate to A, B, C, D?" In keeping with the symbolic transformations discussed in chapter 5, the official answered, "Language is important. We want to give the message that apprenticing is important... It means something different to us." The presenter then provided a translation, noting that, "An apprentice is equivalent to a C, but not really because it goes up to 84."

The same parent responded, "At the end of six years they'll go to college, how will these internal numbers translate to the external world?" The school leader responded that they would help colleges interpret the school's unique marks, and that the numeric equivalencies would help, but that lots of schools had to do this. At this point few creative professional parents chimed in, noting

that the unique grading system could be an advantage for their children in the college application process.

The presentation then turned to the curriculum. The school leadership noted that they promoted “twenty-first century competencies,” which centered on attempting to teach students to be able to, “look for the conditions of innovation, to be able to design things that will have impact.” The school leaders suggested that they also taught state-mandated “content,” but that those were really “nineteenth century standards.”

At this point, one of the less-privileged parents, a mother, spoke up, “How will all this translate into taking tests?”

One of the other school leaders answered that the “content” part of their curriculum addressed state-standards, and that, “we’re using the standards we’re required to use.” Shortly after the leader attempted to return to explaining the school’s plans for assessing “innovation,” a professional father, one of the few professional parents who did not work in the culture industries, interrupted the speaker, “In April we’ll know how they’re doing compared to other kids, as well as how they’re doing compared to last year.” He then asked if the school was, “setting benchmarks?”

The school leader assured the father that the school, “Hopes to compete with the best New York City schools,” but then another school leader chimed in with, “But we’re against teaching to the test.”

Several more parents from various social class backgrounds asked questions about how they were going to prepare students for the state tests. One of the school’s game designers suggested that they could, “Roll test-taking skills into the missions.”

At this point, one of the creative professional parents chimed in, “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to question some of the parents. Why are we here if we care so much about tests?” He went on to say that he thought parents were signing on for six years and that he wanted his son, “to be a master, to learn how to learn,” not to be good at taking tests. When he finishes there was applause, including a few quick claps by one of the school leaders who then caught herself revealing her allegiance and stopped.

The less-privileged mother who first asked about the tests retorted, “Because they have to take tests to get to the next level,” and a few of the less-privileged mothers sitting behind her added, “Uh-Huh.”

The professional father who had raised the question about benchmarks added, “We have to get into college too.”

The less-privileged mother who was sitting towards the back of the auditorium clarified her concern, “What happens if a child doesn’t pass the ELA tests but did well in the classroom. Will they get held over? That’s why the tests are important to us.”

At this point one of the school’s founders jumped in, noting that they, “want a holistic portrait of kids,” before adding:

Colleges are looking less and less at SAT scores... The information we have about kids is seven times richer than what’s measured on the tests... These are the kinds of things that the workforce cares about, that the academy cares about... It’s a plus system... We’re capturing snapshots all of the time... We’ll work on test-taking as

a skill, but in a way that's contextualized in the [game-like] curriculum.

After the meeting, the controversy over testing and standards continued online. In an email to all parents and educators, the father who had asked about benchmarking evoked the relationship between testing and their "rights" as consumers within the "choice system":

I certainly did not sign on for 6 years. As a matter of fact, I signed for 1 year with a completely new school which programs and philosophy I am still learning as I go. And I reserve the right to change my mind if for whatever reason I decided that the Downtown School was not for us. In that context, I expect my child to be prepared by his teachers to score at the highest level on the standardized State tests, just as a precaution. I don't like these tests more than anybody else. I actually pretty much despise them. But these are the rules made by the State. I don't make them. I just follow them.

The principal responded by acknowledging the parent's concern and ensuring him that the school would make sure students did well on the state tests. After another parent seconded the father's concern, one of the creative professional parents who was involved in the PTA and the SLT chimed in:

The reason many of us liked the Downtown School was that it didn't propose a slavish program that prepared kids to just pass tests. It proposes to teach the city and state required curriculum, plus so much more, and in a very engaging way. This is the important difference. As several people currently involved with college admissions declared last night, these test scores have lost most, if not all, of their significance for college acceptance... Working to pass standardized tests is like preparing androids for the factory. The world is constantly evolving, we and education must evolve too. The Downtown School is a brilliantly conceived program that reflects evolutionary thinking.

In a conversation on the sidewalk after the meeting, the creative professional father who had questioned why parents that cared about tests had chosen the Downtown School elaborated why he had chosen the school. He told me about his daughter from a previous marriage who went to "one of these fancy schools" where they stressed competition and lots of homework. He said that she became a nervous wreck, and that she still was even though she was now in college. He said he did not want that for his son who attended the Downtown School, he did not want him to become, "that type of kid."

As I discuss later in this chapter, school leaders temporarily settled this tension between education as self-fulfillment and education as a bureaucratic sorting system by figuring their approach as a "plus system." However this settlement was fragile. The debate over testing resurfaced after the first-year scores came in and the school scored below schools with similar populations, especially in math, which was seen as an embarrassment given the school's identification with STEM. As noted in chapter 5, the pressure to ensure that students had adequate test scores has led the school to gradually scale back on its less canonical offerings, such as project-based assignments and Level Up. The school's leaders and creative professional parents continue to attempt to protect these aspects of the curriculum, but they do so under recurring pressure to deliver test scores. As I will discuss later, the school continues to present itself as uniquely different even as its daily routines have become more canonical. I now turn to the other, and more contentious, struggle that erupted

during the first year: a moral panic that amplified concerns and fears over the Cool Kids' precocious practices until they were reified as "bullies" and other abject children.

### 7.2.2 Bullies, Sexual Harassers, and Other Abject Children

At just about any given moment over the past several decades, it seems that many parents, media outlets, policy makers, educators, and others charged to raise or look after children are in the grips of at least one moral panic (Cohen 2002 [1972]) about childhood. The perceived threat changes, but each panic tends to operate in a similar fashion. First, a threat to children, or more accurately a threat to romanticized views of "childhood," is identified. The threat is seen as a pollutant to the moral purity of children. Second, the threat is amplified to a scale far greater than evidence justifies, in large part thanks to the rapid circulation of stories about the threat through media. While cartoonish in its figuration, the threat is nevertheless felt as intensely real, urgent, and pervasive. Third, moral panics provide a powerful and deeply felt *moral legitimacy* to practices of protecting children. It thus offers a way to practice social grooming without seeing those acts as in tension with the virtue of promoting children's individualized self-expression and self-fulfillment.

At the time that I was conducting fieldwork for this project, the main moral panic that gripped many parents and educators was bullying. In the years leading up to the school's opening, several high-profile media stories linked teenage bullying practices with teenage suicides. Many of these incidents involved digital media, which introduced a new threat into the public sphere: cyber-bullying. Not only did digital media provide a new, and often anonymous, way for teens to bully each other, but digital media also provided adults with new opportunities for observing young people's peer relations. While children, like all people, are sometimes quite mean to each other, evidence of this behavior became much more visible to adults and this evidence clearly violated romantic views of childhood.<sup>1</sup>

While I knew that bullying was a hot topic before I started fieldwork, I had not anticipated the degree to which fears about bullying would grip many educators and parents. Almost immediately after the school opened, parents and educators introduced the specter of the bully as an existential threat to the school community. For example, on the second day of school the principal called an emergency early-morning meeting for all staff after a parent had called suggesting that her son had been "bullied" the day before (later, the boy's father suggested that perhaps the boy's mother had overreacted). When the school day began, the principal visited each of the advisory classes to address the bullying issue. The principal's speech began, "Did you notice the bags of garbage on the street in front of school today? Garbage is stinky and unsightly, right? Well we've been dealing with our own garbage this morning." After noting that they had received several complaints about bullying, the principal went on to offer another metaphor that compared the school to a house and emphasized how bullying threatened the very existence of the house, "You can always replace the roof, the walls, and the bathroom. But if the foundation goes the whole structure comes down." Bullying threatened the school's foundation, the principal suggested.

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<sup>1</sup> This isn't to suggest that digital media has not also offered children and young people new ways to be mean to each other. In particular, digital media allows for more anonymous attacks, wider and quicker proliferation of slanderous attacks, and records that are difficult, if not impossible, to erase. To me, the important point is not whether or not children's mean-spiritedness is a good thing, but about the nature and extent of adult reaction and the eventual consequence of that response for children and young people's independence.

Stories about bullying quickly spread amongst the parents, and especially the professional parents who had networked themselves to each other before the school opened. These anxieties about bullies were exacerbated by a more general anxiety about alterity. The Cool Kids, and especially the Cool Boys, became the main subjects to which the specter of the bully was ascribed. Stories of their precocious practices – their “cursing” and “fresh” or “obscene” or “shocking” language; their “disruptions in classrooms”; their “intimidation” and “sexual harassment” – circulated through the networked coalition of mostly professional parents throughout the fall. Students, and especially privileged girls, shared stories with their parents, and a few of the parents with quotidian access to the school offered verifying accounts, even though none had spent extensive time inside the school. By winter, the seeds of panic had grown into a crisis and numerous professional families threatened to pull their children from the school. Their demands were clear: the school had to quickly purify all forms of bullying from the school. Here, for example, is a snippet of an email that one of the creative professional parents sent to educators and parents; the subject line of the email was, “OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE: BULLYING”:

We as concerned parents and educators take these complaints with the greatest gravity, and will not abide by such behavior in any way, shape, or form. We all agreed that there should be zero tolerance for such behavior. Not one child at the Downtown School needs to suffer at the hands of another student. Not one child needs to worry about intimidation, sexual harassment, racism, or bullying in our school. Our school should be a safe haven, a sanctuary of learning and security for our children, and we all agreed to work toward this end... If you suspect your child is a bully, if you have had communication from the school that this might be the case, it might do well to sit him or her down and have a conversation to see where the frustration lies. The culture of television, rap music, the street, is not the culture of the classroom and does not belong inside the school walls.

I do not want to condone the precocious behavior that these parents found distasteful and threatening, but I do want to draw attention to the magnitude of their anxiety, the normative implications of their attempts to construct the school as a purified space of learning, and their framing of the threat as cultural alterity. Together, these features help illustrate how practices organized around snuffing out bullying were also about creating a culturally purified enclave that produced social divisions. Bullying, aggressive and awkward sexually-inflected practices, and peer intimidation are not new phenomena amongst middle school students, nor are they newly considered taboo. What seems new is that these transgressions were framed as existential threats to the school community, as illustrated earlier by the principal’s warning that bullying threatened to erode the foundation of the school and bring down the entire “house.” The very status of the enclave was threatened by the presence of these abject students. The parents called for the total eradication of transgression, for “zero tolerance,” and for the construction of a purified space, a “sanctuary,” where students learned and related to each other in harmony. Such a romanticized view marks a departure from views that condemned youthful antagonisms as they simultaneously recognized them as a common, if unfortunate, aspect of childhood.

These demands also implicated an abject alterity – “the culture of television, rap music, the street” – that was contaminating the “sanctuary of learning.” Racial and social class stereotypes were ascribed to the abject students. Deviant behaviors were linked to an “Other” culture, part popular culture and part urban minority culture, which came from and belonged to another space, “the

streets,” beyond the school walls. Sometimes alterity was figured as non-human, as when one wealthy professional mother said to school officials at an emergency meeting, “It’s not a zoo, it’s a school,” and as another creative professional parent wrote in an email, “potent cliques seem to have arisen and feed off the preying on others.” Importantly, these ascriptions were often presented to educators as if they were the consensual view of “all the parents,” when, in fact, the parents and guardians of those being figured as abject students were not present at the emergency meetings or consulted by the professional parents. Here, for example, is how one of the professional parents figured the abject children during an emergency SLT meeting:

It’s the same handful of kids that keep cursing, and threatening... They’re dangerous... It’s the same five to seven offenders, and there are no consequences. All the parents have conferred about it.

Not only had abject students infiltrated the enclave, but they threatened to “infect” the purity of the legitimate students. As one mother, a professor, said at a PTA meeting, “How do you deal with the infectious tendency of this behavior, that spreads horizontally, and infects others? It’s transmitted from generation to generation and from person to person.” Finally, and echoing cosmopolitan arguments from the public sphere almost verbatim, the professional parents tried to assert the universal values of “respect” and “tolerance” as they dissociated the significance of social class divisions, race relations, and other forms of cultural difference and conflict. As one creative professional parent wrote in an email to the principal, with members of the leadership team carbon copied:

After you left the PTA meeting last evening a good many parents expressed frustration, outrage, confusion, even despair about what is transpiring in the classrooms and hallways. Children are suffering at the hands of others and this cannot be allowed to go on. Please realize, allowing such out of control, blatant misconduct to persist endangers our whole school and everything you and everyone else involved has worked so hard for... We as caring parents and dedicated educators cannot let this go on. This kind of behavior has nothing to do with a certain disadvantaged segment of our population. It is not age-related. Nor hormone related. It is not economic bound. It has nothing to do with race. All members of our society, rich, poor, middle class, pink, blue, rainbow-colored, yellow, brown, black, red, white, must be respectful and tolerant of others... Zero tolerance should be our policy and real punishment must be our credo.

In other words, privileged parents considered authoritarian zero-tolerance policies and draconian discipline legitimate so long as they were carried out for the purpose of protecting the virtues of “respect” and “tolerance,” even if those showing disrespect were significantly less-privileged and routinely subjected to disrespect, intolerance, and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977) by the dominant culture.<sup>2</sup> In fact, doing so was an act of parental “care” and professional “dedication.”

Initially, many educators resisted the professional parents’ rhetoric, and several condemned it as racist, but they did not, as far as I know, attempt to bring the concerned families together with the families of the children who were being figured as bullies and abject students. By January, the

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<sup>2</sup> The basis of symbolic violence is that the cultural standards of the dominant are imposed on the dominated. To be considered legitimate, the cultural standards of the dominant need to appear as universal, or culturally neutral. At the same time, the culture of the dominated is routinely treated as problematic and in need of repair. See chapter 2.

educators finally gave into the parents' demands and rapidly introduced a slew of new disciplinary and classroom management techniques, many of which were discussed in chapter 5. This tipping point occurred shortly after Jamal and Corey, the widely recognized leaders of the Cool Boys, were suspended for "sexually harassing" two of the Cool Girls, Jennifer, who was white and had creative professional parents, and Tamika, who was black and qualified for free lunch. For months, the four students had been featured players in their cliques' courtship dramas. At one point Jamal and Tamika had "gone out" for less than a day, and as noted in the last chapter, Jennifer and Corey had been featured as a potential couple for months. Members of the Cool Kids frequently discussed the possibility of Jennifer and Corey's courtship and the two hung out with each other at lunch, recess, online, and through text messages. While I do not know the full extent of the incident that led to the suspensions, I heard from students that one of the boys had, "Touched one of the girl's butts during a game of truth or dare at school." I also heard from parents that the boys had been sending lewd, aggressive, and inappropriate text messages to Jennifer.

While school officials, professional parents, and many students labeled the incidents as "sexual harassment," the students involved did not see them as such. When the incident came up in conversations amongst peers at school, one of the suspended boys appealed, "I didn't harass her!" Additionally, while the girls involved initially put distance between themselves and the boys, especially at school, they remained friends with the boys, as evidenced in interviews and in comments on each other's Facebook accounts. However, from the standpoint of many of the educators, parents, and students, the reputations of many of the Cool Kids had become reified and essentialized as abject students that threatened the school.

### **7.3 Getting to be Techno-Cosmopolitan**

This particular contamination crisis was eventually settled by the "voluntary" departure of many of the Cool Kids, and especially those who enjoyed high-status within their respective cliques. The three leaders of the Cool Boys eventually transferred to larger, less-resourced schools that had sports teams, more of a dating scene, and much smaller proportions of children from cosmopolitan professional families. They did so after months of repeated suspensions, pervasive surveillance by educators, toting around behavior cards, and the other disciplinary measures discussed in previous chapters. As one teacher told me after the suspensions, "We're finally starting to crack the whip. We're breaking them down."<sup>3</sup> While I was not at the school much during the school's second year, I heard from several parents that girls were primarily figured as the bullies and troublemakers in the school's second year. By the end of the second year, several of the most influential Cool Girls had also left the school. By contrast, nearly all of the Geeky Boys and most of the Goody Two Shoe girls remained enrolled in the school's second and third year. Several now have younger siblings at the school, and many of their parents, and especially the creative professional parents, endorse the school enthusiastically.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Most of the school's educators condemned such language, especially as spoken by a white male about disciplining less-privileged black and Latino students. That said, there was broad consensus amongst educators about the need to be more "strict," a view that was also voiced again and again by many parents.

4 After giving a presentation on my work at a recent workshop, I was approached by a creative professional mother who lives in Manhattan. She told me, "Everyone I know wants their kids to go to that school," and that some families were moving just so their kids could have a chance to attend. When I asked why, she said, "It's like a

These controversies help reveal inherent tensions amongst the various virtues that the school's version of techno-cosmopolitanism attempted to pull together into a single model of legitimate social grooming for the twenty-first century. In particular, they illuminate an uneasy fit between the school's celebration of individuated creative self-expression and self-realization, an ethic of tolerance and respect for alterity, and the tendency to underestimate, rather than overcome, the continuing significance of social class divisions, race relations, cultural identifications, and bureaucratic institutions, including state institutions. Another way of saying this is that there were familiar tensions within the school's techno-cosmopolitanism about how persons and the social world were and should be related to each other, which were also manifest in questions about how the school and the social world were and should be related to each other.

In the short term, school leaders and creative professional parents found ways to temporarily settle these tensions and preserve their sense that the school's contributions to social grooming and social sorting were in keeping with a morally just techno-cosmopolitan sensibility. But they did so by interpreting and emphasizing different techno-cosmopolitan virtues as they have attempted to work through different controversies. In the initial testing controversy, they appealed to the individualizing virtues of children's self-expression and self-fulfillment. By offering a "plus system," they temporarily settled some parents' anxieties about how the student-centered aspects of the curriculum would prepare families for navigating the more bureaucratic aspects of schooling systems, such as delivering test scores. Such an approach downplayed the roles that parents and institutions, including national educational agendas, played in shaping children's pathways through life and appeared to honor the intrinsic creativeness and potential for each child to self-realize. By contrast, when concerns about classroom management and students' behavior came to the fore, educators and concerned parents shifted priorities, emphasizing the virtues of "tolerance" and "respect" over the virtue of children's creativity, self-expression, and self-realization. By appealing to the universal virtues of "tolerance" and "respect," educators and parents were able to legitimate the assertion of educator authority and power. Even though calls for "zero tolerance" and rigid classroom management practices undermined the school's commitments to student-centered learning, the assertion of adult power was not widely seen as compromising the school's unique ethos. Perhaps sensing this tension, one of the creative professional parents told educators at an emergency meeting, "We're all behind you cracking down, cracking the whip, showing that it's not tolerated. [Beat] It's not fun, and it's not about learning, but it affects learning." Discipline was a precondition of useful fun (chapter 5).

The important point here is that these deeper tensions required ongoing interpretation and negotiation, and that this work of interpreting and negotiating was inherently political. As I hope I have shown, professional families – often working together but sometimes in conflict – were able to significantly influence which virtues would and should be given priority at any given moment, and, by consequence, they were able to significantly shape what sorts of practices and persons would and should be treated as legitimate within the enclave. While this work was inherently political, the professional parents did not tend to see their efforts as such, and none suggested that perhaps their own efforts betrayed the principles of "tolerance" and "respect." I see several reasons for this apparent blindness.

First, the rhetoric of "school choice" suggested that individual preferences, rather than institutional

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public Montessori school but with technology."

arrangements or the distribution of capital, produced social sorting between enclaves. Even though institutional arrangements, like school district borders, and the distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital significantly shaped different families “choices,” the rhetoric of “choice” made it easy to overlook these more structural aspects of inequality. Instead, when many parents and educators discussed social selection, they tended to talk in terms of what I’ll call “cultural fit.” The ways various educators and parents described the departure of members of the Cool Kids helps illustrate this concept. While several educators expressed disappointment over the students leaving, many educators and parents from various class backgrounds suggested that the students had been a “bad match” for the school’s unique approach. Similarly, the parents whose children left the school also pointed to cultural fit. Here, for example, is how Troy’s mother described his departure for an older, more “traditional” school:

Troy is supposed to have homework and [at the Downtown School] he didn’t have any homework, which I couldn’t understand. But that is their model of things. And as you can see, I am trying to get him used to what’s going to happen when you go to college, which is, you have to do homework, you have to research, you have to write. That is why I am kind of glad that he is out of there. So there is homework, there is research, there is reading and math. [His new school] is a more traditional school, which works for this kind of kid. The Downtown School could work for some other kid, but it just wasn’t working for Troy.

Another mother of one of the departing students noted that she too was looking for a more “traditional” school, with high-standards, good test scores, sports teams, a debate team, “and all that good stuff.”

Even though the pedagogic practices of the Downtown School were more similar than different from “traditional” models, the school’s unique features as well its presentations of itself as “totally different” had powerful consequences. Namely, it signaled that the school was a good cultural fit for some families but not for others. Such sorting practices appeared to go against the school’s original claim that it was a new model of schooling for “kids these days.” And, indeed, as discipline was ratcheted up, school leaders and many of the regular PTA parents changed how they talked about inclusion. Instead of saying that the school was for “kids these days” they started saying things like, “We’ll take anybody, but we want to make sure they get what we’re about.” In addition to legitimizing the students’ departures, the “cultural fit” frame legitimized new efforts to police the borders of the enclave. As one of the professional parents noted:

They can’t do the unscreened thing anymore...Our selection criterion, our only selection criterion is “informed choice.” And what we think would make sense, the parents who’ve been involved in the discussions about this, is that you define “informed” in a particular way, so that you’re getting kids who are a good fit with the school. I did all these open houses, and at every open house I said to people, “Just think about whether this is a good fit for your child. It’s game-based learning, these are not your mother’s jeans, this is a totally different way of being in school. You need to feel comfortable with it.”

As the quote above helps illustrate, the involved parents stressed the school’s alterity from other public schools, a message that was reinforced in the school’s publicity materials and presentations. As noted above, as well as in chapter 3, being “totally different” and “progressive” primarily

appealed to other professional families, and especially families with parents who worked in culture industries. The school's educators have kept up their efforts to recruit less-privileged students, but they do so while also promoting an image of the school that primarily resonates with creative professional parents and their children.

These examples help surface the familiar modernist dilemmas about "progress" within techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities. On the one hand, proponents of techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities tended to present their orientation towards the world as a universal, an ethical stance that should be propagated. On the other hand, they routinely emphasized their own difference and specialness. There was thus a slippage between normative and descriptive accounts. This slippage stemmed from a lack of reflexivity about the social conditions within which their techno-cosmopolitan experiences and sensibilities had been produced. As Calhoun (2008) observed, "Cosmopolitanism may be a cultural orientation, but it is never the absence of culture. It is produced and reinforced by belonging to transnational networks and to a community of fellow-cosmopolitans," both of which depend on the distribution of capital and institutions.

As I hope I've shown, practicing a techno-cosmopolitan sensibility depended on everyday practices that had been significantly structured by the distribution of capital (economic, social, and cultural), racialized divisions, and relations to institutions. Amongst adults, these practices included: going to certain colleges and graduate schools; living in certain neighborhoods; working in specific industries; sending their children to certain elementary schools and after-school programs; traveling fluidly around the country and the world; living abroad for work; consuming food, media, fashion, and cultural forms with origins and histories from around the world; buying the latest computers and gadgets, and so on. To cultivate this techno-cosmopolitan sensibility in their children, many professional parents guided their children's movements through the world along pathways that traversed socially and culturally bounded enclaves, many of which were institutionalized, and some of which were supported by the state. These enclaves tended to be tailored towards the cultural sensibilities of families who, despite their differences, lived similarly classed lives and, hence, had developed similarly classed cosmopolitan sensibilities. Belonging to cosmopolitan networks and communities, in turn, facilitated a shared sense that their relations to the world were moral, in universal terms. Yet in cases where others resisted going along with their projects, those in positions of privilege asserted their power, policed the enclave's borders, identified abject Others, and called for strict discipline and expulsions. Despite the virtue of tolerance and respect, those Other 11- and 12-year-old children were figured as "dangerous," "obscene," "bullies" and "sexual harassers" who "fed off of the preying on others" and acted as if school were a "zoo" as they brought elements of "the street," "rap music," and "television" into the school, and so on. All of this passed under the frame of a legitimate moral project, as an effort to make the Downtown School a "sanctuary of learning and security," a place for nurturing sacralized and singularized social beings, carefully divided from the rest of the world, and yet purportedly of the world, working on the inside of a state institution, and yet ostensibly transcending the "androids" of bureaucracy.

## 7.4 Conclusion

Those who fought for a techno-cosmopolitan sensibility also tended to be those who (for the most part) were doing quite well within globalizing political economic relations. Yet their positions of relative privilege were tenuous, and their ability to pass along a similar position to their children

was by no means guaranteed. Most did not have large sums of economic capital to bequeath to their children, nor could most buy their children into elite private schools. Many noted how much more competitive schooling was compared to when they went through school, the “insanity” of having to apply to middle school as if it were college, the eventual rat race of getting into a good college, the further uncertainty of what sorts of meaningful occupations would exist on the other side of college, or on the other side of graduate school, or... who knew?

For many of these parents, the Downtown School was an appealing alternative to what were seen as hypercompetitive “traditional” schools that seemed to put all children on a single track, racing towards medical school. By contrast, the Downtown School would allow their children to discover and develop their inherent interests and passions, to exercise and preserve their intrinsic creativity, to become adults that were more fully formed and capable versions of their childhood selves, that is, to self-realize. But it would do so by offering an alternative, rather than an orthogonal, path into adulthood, one that continued to navigate large bureaucratic institutions, including institutions of the state.

As Bourdieu (1984) observed, professional cultural producers have to stay constantly abreast of the latest cultural trends in order to remain paid and respected in their fields. Further, their “refined” sensibility for cultural forms has to be reproduced anew in their children. At the time this study was conducted, many of these high-status cultural trends moved through transnational circuits of persons and media that passed through selective New York City professional fields and youth enclaves. Being “on the cutting edge” of seemingly global changes in design, media, and technology was one way creative professional families could claim and sustain cultural relevance, especially in the eyes of those who believed the world was headed in the direction these families were helping to pioneer. Cultivating a techno-cosmopolitan sensibility in their children took a lot of grooming, even though parents were reluctant to acknowledge a heavy hand. By attaching grooming practices to children’s inherent “creativity” and “interests,” professional parents were able to work out a temporary compromise between the inherent tensions of instrumental grooming and sacralized children. As Cook (2004) persuasively argued, children’s consumer culture, including the consumption of different schools, is one of the main sites where these tensions are temporarily worked out.

There’s much to admire about techno-cosmopolitan sensibilities. Even when this sensibility is primarily realized through practices of consumption, these practices hold the potential for easing many of the ethnic, national, religious, and parochial conflicts that have led to so much historical violence and tragedy. It is hard to argue with a universal ethic of tolerance and respect for others, even when there are good reasons to disdain others who hold power over you. And there are good reasons to celebrate attempts to escape the seemingly arbitrary strictures of bureaucratic institutions, which tend to treat persons in alienating, stereotyped, and confining terms.

The main problem with techno-cosmopolitanism is that its proponents do not fully account for the social conditions that make the sensibility something that can be learned and practiced. In other words, techno-cosmopolitan communities tend to suffer from the same paradox that I have argued shows up in the school/world divide and the person/world divide. In all cases, the division is seemingly overcome by appealing to a universal that denies the historical, social, and cultural situatedness of its existence. I suspect that the main reason proponents don’t fully account for the social conditions of their universal ethic is because they are techno-cosmopolitans themselves, and, as such, they take for granted just what it takes to perform techno-cosmopolitanism artfully. The

conditions of their moral sensibilities slips their awareness because the sensibilities were acquired by way of participating in everyday life with other cosmopolitans, and, as such, it was constituted in the tacit background knowledge that underwrote their practices. Equally, their cossetting practices were partially invisible to them and their children since they belonged to cosmopolitan communities where such practices were par for the course. Failing to fully address the social conditions of learning and practicing techno-cosmopolitanism led to easy slippage between techno-cosmopolitanism as a normative agenda and techno-cosmopolitanism as a social phenomenon. The gap between the two matters because failing to understand the conditions of the latter tends to lead to a belief that the former can be brought about with relative ease. This leads to unrealistic, even utopian, beliefs and projects, including the belief that schools, or technology, or schools and technology, can provide all children with access to the global cosmopolitan networks and communities that are benefitting from globalization, if only children were willing to be disciplined and work hard. From such a perspective, changing people's minds can heal global injustices; a difficult task, perhaps, but one schools, design, media, and information and communications technologies may be hoped to solve. Enter the countless didactic directives and slogans that adorn school walls and infuse pedagogic interventions: "be polite to everyone," "speak nicely to each other," "make a bridge of kindness," "be the best that you can be so that you can do EVERYTHING you want to do."

The problem with such a vision is not just that it is overly optimistic; it is also potentially harmful, albeit often unintentionally so. By overlooking the social conditions that underwrite techno-cosmopolitanism as a social phenomenon, it is far too easy to misattribute responsibility when techno-cosmopolitanism as a normative agenda fails to be realized. Enter the countless attempts to blame schools, or teachers, or biology, or the moral shortcomings of other persons and cultures for the continuing existence of social conflicts and inequalities. At its extreme, the ethic of techno-cosmopolitanism could be used to legitimate authoritarian rule and practices of exclusion. On the one hand, it extols the power of schools and information technologies to solve complex problems but then condemns "problem" children as irredeemable. Such a perspective casts schools as efficacious and ineffective simultaneously, a tension that is often resolved by removing the "irredeemable" from the social formation. As I discussed previously, at the Downtown School the ethic of tolerance and respect legitimated the exercise of authoritarian adult power, despite the school's commitments to "student-centered learning." Within the grips of a moral panic, the defense of the principles of tolerance and respect for one's own legitimated the use of disrespectful and bigoted rhetoric about others (e.g. "crack the whip").

There were more hopeful moments that offered a provisional perspective on alternative, and in my opinion more just, ways forward. In the school's second year, one of the creative professional parents who had been gripped by the moral panic during the previous year found himself at the center of a new moral panic, this one centered on "girl bullies." In part thanks his eloquent email condemning bullying in the school's first year, parents elected him to one of the leadership position in the PTA. When the new panic over bullying broke out, he decided to check out the situation for himself and spent several days sitting in on classes and moving along with students throughout their days, much as I had. When we later discussed his ethnographic forays into the school, he told me that he had changed his perspective on the bullying frenzy. "Sure some students act out," he said, "but they're just kids," reversing his previous framing of bullies as abject students and taking a position much like the one taken by the less-privileged mother that other professional parents had condemned as "insane." The father added that the professional parents had a tendency to gossip

with each other, get worked up, and then overreact.

While this sort of parental ethnography produced a hopeful personal transformation, I do not want to suggest that such an approach could easily solve the problems I have been addressing. For one, most parents and guardians cannot spend a significant amount of time inside of schools and other enclaves. As noted in chapter 3, one of the reasons children spend much of their day-to-day lives in enclaves is because parents and guardians (in aggregate) dedicate much of their daily lives to paid work. Further, market “choices” for enclaves offer families, and especially privileged families, options that allow them to avoid dealing with thorny issues of privilege and cultural difference. Finally, once removed from direct participation (a consequence of enclave/world divisions), the negative feedback amplification of networks can produce hysteria that is difficult to dislodge. Towards the end of his year as the PTA president, I asked the parental ethnographer how things had gone “being involved.” “I hate it,” he said, noting privileged parents recurring hysteria, “there’s a lot of neurotic parents.”

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### Conclusion: Making Privilege in the New Millennium

I began this dissertation wanting to better understand if and how supposedly transformative new technologies held the potential to bring about a more equitable and democratic society. I became interested in these questions around 2005, a time when economic inequality in America was at historic levels, economic mobility rates had fallen behind those of other wealthy countries, and yet theorizing about social reproduction was largely out of favor in the American academy (Collins 2009).<sup>1</sup> I centered my fieldwork on a school since proponents of institutionalized schooling have long promoted schooling as one of the key mechanism for bringing about a more just and democratic world. Yet decades of rising inequality and shrinking opportunity made it clear that schooling was not fulfilling its promise. For many experts, the question was whether schooling could be “fixed” or, if not, what other mechanisms would offer Americans the possibility of realizing the American Dream.

For decades, instrumentalist state-driven reforms have dominated attempts to “fix” schooling. Rightly decrying the injustices of various “achievement gaps,” and warning of the threats of international competition, state-driven reforms have promoted a market-like model of education where all students and schools compete to outperform each another in a few standardized, and hence easily comparable, areas. The basic model is set up like a compulsory race.<sup>2</sup> Students, families, and schools compete against each other in pursuit of the same goals. This competition is thought to lead to higher individual and aggregate performance. So long as all racers begin at the same starting line, then the results justly reflect merit. While such a race inevitably produces many “losers,” proponents of this model suggest that competition benefits everyone since running faster is assumed to be a universal good.

As discussed in chapter 4, “progressive” pedagogic reformers have long criticized these instrumentalist approaches to education. Like the state-driven reformers, the progressive tradition also laments various educational and social inequities, and also subscribes to the idea that education can and should be a main mechanism for realizing an equitable society. But progressive pedagogic reformers offer a contrasting vision of how schooling should be organized to realize these ends. Rather than attempting to optimize the production of predefined outcomes, progressive pedagogic

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1 See also chapters 1 and 2.

2 Indeed, Obama’s main educational initiative is titled “Race to the top.”

reformers champion starting with “student-centered” approaches that attempt to break down barriers between schooling and students’ out-of-school lives. They emphasize centering schooling on students’ inherent interests, on promoting students’ creative agency, and on supporting students in their processes of self-realization. Given the predominance of instrumentalist reforms, the progressive pedagogic tradition has been mostly marginalized in recent reform movements.

In the face of such marginalization, “digital media” offered new hope to progressive reformers like the founders of the Downtown School. The mid-2000s was a time when “digital media” was one of the few bright spots in the American economy. In the 1990s and 2000s, many analysts and commentators argued that radical technological change, especially in computing or “digital media,” was fundamentally transforming society, and especially children and young people, in a homogeneous “flattening” of historical hierarchies and divisions (e.g. Tapscott 1998; Prensky 2001; Palfrey and Glasser 2008; Freidman 2005). From these techno-centric perspectives, technological changes made contemporary children and young people inherently different from the children and young people of previous generations. Further, from these perspectives the salient differences amongst contemporary children were defined in terms of differences in children’s access to and relationships with digital media (e.g. Jenkins et al. 2006).

By designing a “school for digital kids,” the founders of the Downtown School believed they could make a new version of school that was tailored to fit the unique interests and sensibilities of contemporary children and young people. By embracing enthusiastic ideas about the transformative power of digital media and especially games, the founders of the Downtown School attempted to graft the long tradition of “progressive” pedagogic reform onto the STEM education agendas that the state and influential foundations were pushing. Games, in particular, were a central organizing metaphor. In the spirit of expanding excitement over “gamification,” the designers of the Downtown School felt that games held the key to increasing student’s engagement, productivity, and creative problem solving abilities.<sup>3</sup> The school’s founders thought the problems of schooling being disconnected from students’ everyday lives could be overcome by offering students “game-like” versions of the world (chapters 4 and 5). They imagined that “game-like” schooling would “recruit,” rather than coerce, students’ engagement in schooling, resulting in a sort of useful fun. By packaging mandated curricula into game-like scenarios and by weaving digital media throughout, educators would allow students to be active, creative, problem solvers, rather than passive recipients of knowledge transmitted from authority figures. Games would allow students to fluidly “take on” the identities of scientists, geographers, designers, code breakers, and other empowered real world practitioners. In these game-like scenarios, students would relate to each other and to educators congenially and respectfully. New digital tools would allow students to be producers, rather than consumers, of media and technology. Further, the school would promote a social justice agenda by providing less-privileged students with access to the tools and “twenty-first century” skills they needed to participate in a technology-laden global economy and public sphere. Throughout this dissertation I have referred to this optimistic vision of grooming children for the new millennium as “techno-cosmopolitanism.”

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<sup>3</sup> Education reform is just one of many areas where “gamification” has taken hold. Workplace reformers are turning to games in an effort to increase worker productivity, social reformers and consumer services are using games in an attempt to motivate various “pro-social” behaviors, and many organizations are experimenting with games as a way to elicit “free labor” (Terranova 2000). For a review of “gamification” and its perceived benefits and limitations see Anderson and Rainie (2012).

How did this hopeful vision fare?

As detailed throughout this dissertation, the school's hopeful vision mostly led educators to underestimate, rather than overcome, the school's contributions to the making and remaking of privilege. Creative professional families, and especially creative professional families with sons, embraced the school's mission most enthusiastically. While successful in their careers, these families could not easily afford New York City's private progressive schools and they saw the Downtown School as offering a similar style of education within the public system (chapter 3).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Downtown School seemed hip to the technological changes that many of these parents observed firsthand in their professional and leisure lives. Like the founders of the Downtown School, these parents participated in techno-cosmopolitan networks and communities. Their work was increasingly international, their colleagues and friends were culturally, but not economically, diverse, they traveled frequently around the world for work and play, digital media seemed to be transforming their industries, and they had technology-rich households. Similarly, their children had grown up with the latest digital media gadgets, including educational computer games, and many had been encouraged by their parents and elementary school teachers to use digital media for their own creative productions.

While these techno-cosmopolitan parents felt the school was an exciting opportunity for their own children, their vision did not encompass the effects of dissimilar children and their parents on the school. Other students and families oriented to the school's unique mission less enthusiastically, and some students actively resisted it. Contradicting the digital generation stereotype, most of the Downtown School's students were primarily interested in participating in practices that were only tangentially related to digital media or games (chapter 6). Only one clique of boys embraced the school's intervention in ways similar to the imaginings of the school's planners. They were the only group to routinely sign up for the school's after school programs focused on design and technology, and they were the only clique that enthusiastically made games independent of assignments issued by teachers. The school continues to struggle to enroll girls. Further, many less-privileged students and their parents wished the school offered more diverse activities, including sports teams, music and performing arts classes, and other "old" forms of school-supported extra-curricular activities. While all students were "digital" in their out-of-school lives, many of their digital practices were not permitted at school and the ones that were allowed at school were by no means culturally neutral. "Remix" was in but one of its main historical antecedents, hip-hop, was out. Similarly, while less-privileged students, and especially less-privileged girls, were the earliest adopters and most sophisticated users of various social and communications media, these practices were either missing from the curriculum or the focus of fearful lessons about online security and civility (chapter 6). While educators endlessly policed what sorts of cultural forms from the world could cross into the school, students routinely permeated the school/world divide as they constructed diverse, and often competing, status systems with each other. While the school hoped their "game-like" scenarios would lead students to "take on" the identities of various worldly practitioners, students drew on their out-of-school lives to negotiate belonging and differences with their peers.

Educators' efforts to construct school as a carefully bounded "game-like" version of the world also led educators to underestimate the degree to which privileged parents would cross the school/world

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<sup>4</sup> As one professional mother said at a PTA meeting, "All my friends with kids in private schools are insanely jealous."

divide and exert power over the school. Educators spent much of the first year trying to manage these parents, and privileged parents succeeded in shaping the school's pedagogic practices in significant ways. As I show in chapter 7, privileged parents had significantly better voice and exit options than less-privileged parents and they used their differential power to pressure educators to accommodate their interests. The school's "game-like" model did not anticipate these forces and it provided few resources for handling them once they surfaced.

In addition to obscuring the historically structured social divisions that shaped families out-of-school lives, the school's focus on digital media and games made it easier for educators to imagine that the Downtown School was more different than similar from conventional schools. By emphasizing digital media and games, the school's publicity efforts portrayed the school as if it were at the cutting edge of education reform, and numerous popular media outlets reproduced and amplified similar characterizations of the school.<sup>5</sup> This exaggerated sense of difference initially encouraged educators to underestimate the Downtown School's embeddedness in a system that legitimated the sorting of students into highly differentiated positions of employment and influence in adult society. While the school's daily routines mostly resembled canonical models of schooling, and while the school became *more* canonical over time (chapter 5), many educators, parents, and students routinely emphasized the school's digitally inflected uniqueness. In a related vein, the Downtown School's sanctioned counter-practices allowed many privileged students (and especially privileged boys) and their parents to overlook their own privilege and even to see themselves as superciliously counter-dominant.

In the school's first year, each of these oversights was dramatically, and often contentiously, revealed. While the school initially tried to downplay its contributions to processes of social selection, parents forced educators to acknowledge them. As discussed in chapter 7, less-privileged parents pressed educators to translate their unconventional grading terminology into conventional rubrics so that their children could demonstrate their accomplishments to future schools. Similarly, while educators initially downplayed "test prep," parents from various class backgrounds reminded educators that their children's mobility in the schooling system depended on test scores. When the school's test scores failed to meet expectations, the school replaced some of its "student-centered" activities, including one trimester's Level Up session, with more canonical pedagogic practices (chapter 7).

Similarly, the sense that the Downtown School was unlike traditional schools initially allowed educators and privileged parents to overlook the fact that students' participation in schooling was compulsory and that teachers were mandated to enforce students' participation in the school's version of fun. While the Downtown School's planners hoped that "game-like" schooling would "recruit," rather than coerce, participation, many students, and especially less-privileged students, resisted participation and made bids for greater autonomy from adult control. In these cases, educators did not commend these students for their independent spirit and willingness to "hack" the system – traits championed in the school's vision of twenty-first century literacies. Instead, educators asserted their authority and made school routines more controlled and rigid (chapter 5). Moreover, when some of the less-privileged students drew on their out-of-school lives to construct a status system that challenged dominant hierarchies, privileged parents whipped each other into a panic, drew on various stereotypes about abject "others," and stormed the school (chapter 7). In

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<sup>5</sup> See the vignette that opened this dissertation.

response, educators retreated from their “student-centered” and egalitarian ideals by instituting rigid, even martial, discipline that eventually led many of the school’s most discomfiting dissidents to leave the enclave (chapter 7).

How might things have gone differently?

Given what I have argued throughout, I do not want to suggest that there are easy solutions to the perpetuation, and recent exacerbation, of privilege. From my perspective, the founders of the Downtown School turned to wishful thinking about digital media and games in large part because education is expected to produce a version of society that it does not have the power to make. Institutionalized education has never been able to deliver on its laudable promise to produce an equitable society and there is no good reason to believe that it will finally be able to do so after a few more rounds of reform. Faith in education as a mechanism for fixing social problems is so deeply entrenched in American society (see Tyack and Cuban 1995) that it can be difficult for many to accept evidence suggesting that schooling plays a key role in perpetuating inequalities. Yet as social reproduction theorists have argued since the 1960s, wealthy societies such as the United States, Great Britain, and France have not become systematically more equitable and democratic despite an expansion of education into the daily lives and life spans of children and young people, and despite over a century of ambitious educational reforms (cf. Bowles and Gintis 1976, 2002; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Willis 1977; Eckert 1989; Tyack and Cuban 1995; Varenne and McDermott 1999; Lareau 2003).<sup>6</sup> Further, there are numerous domestic and international examples where highly educated persons cannot find well-paid and meaningful employment.

In my view, educational reformers rightly point out that the current system is not a real meritocracy but in advocating for further reforms they misdiagnose symptoms for causes. The work of the social reproduction theorists cited above suggests that the availability of meaningful work and positions of influence in adult society is only partially and indirectly shaped by educational institutions. From this perspective, institutionalized education contributes to the production of privilege by holding up an ideal meritocratic model, one that legitimates the sorting of children into differentiated positions of power and influence in adult society while nonetheless favoring those who are already privileged. Educational training and credentials are one powerful way to “beat the crowd,” but they do not create the division of labor in a society by themselves. So long as the positions in adult society are dramatically differentiated with respect to economic rewards and influence, and so long as persons and families face labor markets and political institutions on their own, educational institutions will continue to play a significant role in reproducing a social order that is antithetical to the equitable and democratic virtues educational reformers espouse. Any meritocratic system depends on standardized selection criteria, and yet there are no selection criteria that are culturally neutral, despite educators’ efforts to construct schooling as a sacralized space of pure learning. As I have shown in this dissertation, schools are intimately tied to the wider world of which they are a part. Students bring diverse, historically

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<sup>6</sup> While the demographic composition of “winners” and “losers” has changed – especially with respect to gender and ethnicity – the gap between those at the top and bottom of American society has grown considerably. The privatization of educational offerings, broadly defined, has undoubtedly played a role, as access to educational opportunities has been increasingly mapped onto a family’s ability to pay (chapter 3). Public provisioning of “concerted cultivation” activities (Lareau, 2003) has not been able to keep up with private provisioning. While attempts to expand public provisioning are worthwhile I caution against the hope that public provisioning can ever allow less-privileged students to “catch up” en masse with their more privileged peers.

structured, knowledge, skills, and experiences into schools (chapters 5 and 6), educators evaluate individual children according to normative understanding of what constitutes a properly “educated” person, and parents with differential power understandably attempt to unfairly pass their advantages on to their children (chapter 7).

While these views may seem pessimistic, I also want to caution against a “nothing can be done” response. While education cannot solve the problems of privilege, there are better and worse ways to handle them and, in that sense, my dissertation may be of some help to those attempting to use education to intervene on behalf of less-privileged groups. For one, educators can be more forthcoming with students, families, and themselves about how canonical models of schooling contribute to social reproduction. Such an approach is preferable to the dominant approach that pretends that all students can make it if only they give it their best shot. In a system that guarantees the production of “losers,” this mantra is simply not true and it lays the blame for failure at the feet of students and their families, many of whom were significantly disadvantaged from the outset.

Second, educators and reformers can resist the allure of mythic ideas that promise quick-fixes, whether these mythic ideas are centered on digital media, “gamification,” idealized notions of markets, or some other simple formula for social change. As I have tried to show throughout, these mythic ideas blind reformers to the nature and extent of the forces that produce privilege and perpetuate inequities. Mythic ideas are understandably appealing because they offer a way to simplify complexity, recruit support, and sharpen the focus of collective undertakings, but they also produce severely narrowed perspectives. As I have shown, the school’s enthusiasm for digital media and games led educators to significantly underestimate the power that students, the state, and privileged families would exert on the school. Moreover, it led educators to downplay their mandate to enforce compulsory participation in a system that legitimates social selection.

Educators could also attempt to do more to counter the competitive and individualistic pressures of canonical schooling. At the Downtown School, Level Up, some “quests,” and various episodes of “useless fun” (chapter 5) showed glimpses of an alternative approach. While educators have no choice but to produce higher standardized test scores, they can attempt to implement, preserve, and reinforce practices that promote group achievement and participation organized around common, rather than individuated, purposes. They can also encourage and support the proliferation, recognition, and positive valuation of diverse forms of mastery, beyond those mandated by the state or valued by middle-class families. They can fight for the educational legitimacy of cultural forms and practices that dominant perspectives overlook or stigmatize.

In addition to these changes by educators, I hope privileged parents can be encouraged to resist the collective hysteria that tends to form around schooling and appropriate child rearing more broadly. Many of the privileged parents at the Downtown School identified with progressive ideas about equality and diversity, and yet they quickly abandoned those commitments when faced with “otherness” up close. One can hope that well-intentioned privileged parents can guard against obsessive parenting by being more reflexive about how their own cultural sensibilities are structured by their class circumstances, more sympathetic to the conditions of less-privileged families, and more respectful and even appreciative of the ways different less-privileged persons live their lives. I do not want to suggest that privileged families will welcomingly heed this call, especially when they feel that their children’s futures are at stake, but the call, so old in its origins, still needs to be made.

No science or self-interest will ever enable people to share their property and their

rights amongst themselves without offense. Each will always think his share too small, and they will keep murmuring, they will envy and destroy one another... Everywhere now the human mind has begun laughably not to understand that a [person's] true security lies not in his [or her] own solitary effort, but in the general wholeness of humanity. But there must needs come a term to this horrible isolation... But until then we must keep hold of the banner, and every once in a while, if only individually, a [person] must suddenly set an example, and draw the soul from its isolation for an act of [human] communion, though it be with the rank of holy fool. So that the great thought does not die.

*The Brothers Karamazov* (1990 [1880], 303-4)  
[Gendered terminology revised.]

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