

annette laureau

# unequal childhoods

CLASS, RACE, AND FAMILY LIFE



"This provocative and often disturbing book will shape debates on the U.S. class system for decades to come."

# Concerted Cultivation and the Accomplishment of Natural Growth

Laughing and yelling, a white fourth-grader named Garrett Tallinger splashes around in the swimming pool in the backyard of his four-bedroom home in the suburbs on a late spring afternoon. As on most evenings, after a quick dinner his father drives him to soccer practice. This is only one of Garrett's many activities. His brother has a baseball game at a different location. There are evenings when the boys' parents relax, sipping a glass of wine. Tonight is not one of them. As they rush to change out of their work clothes and get the children ready for practice, Mr. and Mrs. Tallinger are harried.

Only ten minutes away, a Black fourth-grader, Alexander Williams, is riding home from a school open house.<sup>1</sup> His mother is driving their beige, leather-upholstered Lexus. It is 9:00 P.M. on a Wednesday evening. Ms. Williams is tired from work and has a long Thursday ahead of her. She will get up at 4:45 A.M. to go out of town on business and will not return before 9:00 P.M. On Saturday morning, she will chauffeur Alexander to a private piano lesson at 8:15 A.M., which will be followed by a choir rehearsal and then a soccer game. As they ride in the dark, Alexander's mother, in a quiet voice, talks with her son, asking him questions and eliciting his opinions.

Discussions between parents and children are a hallmark of middle-class child rearing. Like many middle-class parents, Ms. Williams and her husband see themselves as "developing" Alexander to cultivate his talents in a concerted fashion. Organized activities, established and con-

trolled by mothers and fathers, dominate the lives of middle-class children such as Garrett and Alexander. By making certain their children have these and other experiences, middle-class parents engage in a process of *concerted cultivation*. From this, a robust sense of entitlement takes root in the children. This sense of entitlement plays an especially important role in institutional settings, where middle-class children learn to question adults and address them as relative equals.

Only twenty minutes away, in blue-collar neighborhoods, and slightly farther away, in public housing projects, childhood looks different. Mr. Yanelli, a white working-class father, picks up his son Little Billy, a fourth-grader, from an after-school program. They come home and Mr. Yanelli drinks a beer while Little Billy first watches television, then rides his bike and plays in the street. Other nights, he and his Dad sit on the sidewalk outside their house and play cards. At about 5:30 P.M. Billy's mother gets home from her job as a house cleaner. She fixes dinner and the entire family sits down to eat together. Extended family are a prominent part of their lives. Ms. Yanelli touches base with her "entire family every day" by phone. Many nights Little Billy's uncle stops by, sometimes bringing Little Billy's youngest cousin. In the spring, Little Billy plays baseball on a local team. Unlike for Garrett and Alexander, who have at least four activities a week, for Little Billy, baseball is his only organized activity outside of school during the entire year. Down the road, a white working-class girl, Wendy Driver, also spends the evening with her girl cousins, as they watch a video and eat popcorn, crowded together on the living room floor.

Farther away, a Black fourth-grade boy, Harold McAllister, plays outside on a summer evening in the public housing project in which he lives. His two male cousins are there that night, as they often are. After an afternoon spent unsuccessfully searching for a ball so they could play basketball, the boys had resorted to watching sports on television. Now they head outdoors for a twilight water balloon fight. Harold tries to get his neighbor, Miss Latifa, wet. People sit in white plastic lawn chairs outside the row of apartments. Music and television sounds waft through the open windows and doors.

The adults in the lives of Billy, Wendy, and Harold want the best for them. Formidable economic constraints make it a major life task for these parents to put food on the table, arrange for housing, negotiate unsafe neighborhoods, take children to the doctor (often waiting for city buses that do not come), clean children's clothes, and get children to bed and have them ready for school the next morning. But unlike middle-

class parents, these adults do not consider the concerted development of children, particularly through organized leisure activities, an essential aspect of good parenting. Unlike the Tallingers and Williamses, these mothers and fathers do not focus on concerted cultivation. For them, the crucial responsibilities of parenthood do not lie in eliciting their children's feelings, opinions, and thoughts. Rather, they see a clear boundary between adults and children. Parents tend to use directives: they tell their children what to do rather than persuading them with reasoning. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, who have a steady diet of adult organized activities, the working-class and poor children have more control over the character of their leisure activities. Most children are free to go out and play with friends and relatives who typically live close by. Their parents and guardians facilitate the *accomplishment of natural growth*.<sup>2</sup> Yet these children and their parents interact with central institutions in the society, such as schools, which firmly and decisively promote strategies of concerted cultivation in child rearing. For working-class and poor families, the cultural logic of child rearing at home is out of synch with the standards of institutions. As a result, while children whose parents adopt strategies of concerted cultivation appear to gain a sense of entitlement, children such as Billy Yanelli, Wendy Driver, and Harold McAllister appear to gain an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences.

America may be the land of opportunity, but it is also a land of inequality. This book identifies the largely invisible but powerful ways that parents' social class impacts children's life experiences. It shows, using in-depth observations and interviews with middle-class (including members of the upper-middle-class), working-class, and poor families, that inequality permeates the fabric of the culture. In the chapters that lie ahead, I report the results of intensive observational research for a total of twelve families when their children were nine and ten years old. I argue that key elements of family life cohere to form a cultural logic of child rearing.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the differences among families seem to cluster together in meaningful patterns. In this historical moment, middle-class parents tend to adopt a cultural logic of child rearing that stresses the concerted cultivation of children. Working-class and poor parents, by contrast, tend to undertake the accomplishment of natural growth. In the accomplishment of natural growth, children experience long stretches of leisure time, child-initiated play, clear boundaries between adults and children, and daily interactions with kin. Working-class and poor children, despite tremendous economic strain, often have

more "childlike" lives, with autonomy from adults and control over their extended leisure time. Although middle-class children miss out on kin relationships and leisure time, they appear to (at least potentially) gain important institutional advantages. From the experience of concerted cultivation, they acquire skills that could be valuable in the future when they enter the world of work. Middle-class white and Black children in my study did exhibit some key differences; yet the biggest gaps were not within social classes but, as I show, across them. It is these class differences and how they are enacted in family life and child rearing that shape the ways children view themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

#### CULTURAL REPERTOIRES

Professionals who work with children, such as teachers, doctors, and counselors, generally agree about how children should be raised. Of course, from time to time they may disagree on the ways standards should be enacted for an individual child or family. For example, teachers may disagree about whether or not parents should stop and correct a child who mispronounces a word while reading. Counselors may disagree over whether a mother is being too protective of her child. Still, there is little dispute among professionals on the broad principles for promoting educational development in children through proper parenting.<sup>4</sup> These standards include the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling. Similarly, parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation rather than with physical force. Because these guidelines are so generally accepted, and because they focus on a set of practices concerning how parents should raise children, they form a *dominant set of cultural repertoires* about how children should be raised. This widespread agreement among professionals about the broad principles for child rearing permeates our society. A small number of experts thus potentially shape the behavior of a large number of parents.

Professionals' advice regarding the best way to raise children has changed regularly over the last two centuries. From strong opinions about the merits of bottle feeding, being stern with children, and utilizing physical punishment (with dire warnings of problematic outcomes should parents indulge children), there have been shifts to equally strongly worded recommendations about the benefits of breast feeding, displaying emotional warmth toward children, and using reasoning and negotiation

as mechanisms of parental control. Middle-class parents appear to shift their behaviors in a variety of spheres more rapidly and more thoroughly than do working-class or poor parents.<sup>5</sup> As professionals have shifted their recommendations from bottle feeding to breast feeding, from stern approaches to warmth and empathy, and from spanking to time-outs, it is middle-class parents who have responded most promptly.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in recent decades, middle-class children in the United States have had to face the prospect of "declining fortunes."<sup>7</sup> Worried about how their children will get ahead, middle-class parents are increasingly determined to make sure that their children are not excluded from any opportunity that might eventually contribute to their advancement.

Middle-class parents who comply with current professional standards and engage in a pattern of concerted cultivation deliberately try to stimulate their children's development and foster their cognitive and social skills. The commitment among working-class and poor families to provide comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support requires ongoing effort, given economic challenges and the formidable demands of child rearing. But it stops short of the deliberate cultivation of children and their leisure activities that occurs in middle-class families. For working-class and poor families, sustaining children's natural growth is viewed as an accomplishment.<sup>8</sup>

What is the outcome of these different philosophies and approaches to child rearing? Quite simply, they appear to lead to the *transmission of differential advantages* to children. In this study, there was quite a bit more talking in middle-class homes than in working-class and poor homes, leading to the development of greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts. Importantly, children also developed skill differences in interacting with authority figures in institutions and at home. Middle-class children such as Garrett Tallinger and Alexander Williams learn, as young boys, to shake the hands of adults and look them in the eye. In studies of job interviews, investigators have found that potential employees have less than one minute to make a good impression. Researchers stress the importance of eye contact, firm handshakes, and displaying comfort with bosses during the interview. In poor families like Harold McAllister's, however, family members usually do not look each other in the eye when conversing. In addition, as Elijah Anderson points out, they live in neighborhoods where it can be dangerous to look people in the eye too long.<sup>9</sup> The types of social competence transmitted in the McAllister family are valuable, but they are potentially less valuable (in

employment interviews, for example) than those learned by Garrett Tallinger and Alexander Williams.

The white and Black middle-class children in this study also exhibited an emergent version of the *sense of entitlement* characteristic of the middle-class. They acted as though they had a right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings. They appeared comfortable in these settings; they were open to sharing information and asking for attention. Although some children were more outgoing than others, it was common practice among middle-class children to shift interactions to suit *their* preferences. Alexander Williams knew how to get the doctor to listen to his concerns (about the bumps under his arm from his new deodorant). His mother explicitly trained and encouraged him to speak up with the doctor. Similarly, a Black middle-class girl, Stacey Marshall, was taught by her mother to expect the gymnastics teacher to accommodate her individual learning style. Thus, middle-class children were trained in "the rules of the game" that govern interactions with institutional representatives. They were not conversant in other important social skills, however, such as organizing their time for hours on end during weekends and summers, spending long periods of time away from adults, or hanging out with adults in a nonobtrusive, subordinate fashion. Middle-class children also learned (by imitation and by direct training) how to make the rules work in their favor. Here, the enormous stress on reasoning and negotiation in the home also has a potential advantage for future institutional negotiations. Additionally, those in authority responded positively to such interactions. Even in fourth grade, middle-class children appeared to be acting on their own behalf to gain advantages. They made special requests of teachers and doctors to adjust procedures to accommodate their desires.

The working-class and poor children, by contrast, showed an emerging *sense of constraint* in their interactions in institutional settings. They were less likely to try to customize interactions to suit their own preferences. Like their parents, the children accepted the actions of persons in authority (although at times they also covertly resisted them). Working-class and poor parents sometimes were not as aware of their children's school situation (as when their children were not doing homework). Other times, they dismissed the school rules as unreasonable. For example, Wendy Driver's mother told her to "punch" a boy who was pestering her in class; Billy Yanelli's parents were proud of him when he "beat up" another boy on the playground, even though Billy was then suspended from school. Parents also had trouble getting "the school" to respond to

their concerns. When Ms. Yanelli complained that she "hates" the school, she gave her son a lesson in powerlessness and frustration in the face of an important institution. Middle-class children such as Stacey Marshall learned to make demands on professionals, and when they succeeded in making the rules work in their favor they augmented their "cultural capital" (i.e., skills individuals inherit that can then be translated into different forms of value as they move through various institutions) for the future.<sup>10</sup> When working-class and poor children confronted institutions, however, they generally were unable to make the rules work in their favor nor did they obtain capital for adulthood. Because of these patterns of legitimization, children raised according to the logic of concerted cultivation can gain advantages, in the form of an emerging sense of entitlement, while children raised according to the logic of natural growth tend to develop an emerging sense of constraint.<sup>11</sup>

#### SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND INDIVIDUALISM

Public discourse in America typically presents the life accomplishments of a person as the result of her or his individual qualities. Songs like "I Did It My Way," memoirs, television shows, and magazine articles, celebrate the individual. Typically, individual outcomes are connected to individual effort and talent, such as being a "type A" personality, being a hard worker, or showing leadership. These cultural beliefs provide a framework for Americans' views of inequality.

Indeed, Americans are much more comfortable recognizing the power of individual initiative than recognizing the power of social class. Studies show that Americans generally believe that responsibility for their accomplishments rests on their individual efforts. Less than one-fifth see "race, gender, religion, or class as very important for 'getting ahead in life.'"<sup>12</sup> Compared to Europeans, individuals in the United States are much more likely to believe they can improve their standard of living. Put differently, Americans believe in the American dream: "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one — if you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you."<sup>13</sup> This American ideology that each individual is responsible for his or her life outcomes is the expressed belief of the vast majority of Americans, rich and poor.

Yet there is no question that society is stratified. As I show in the next chapter, highly valued resources such as the possession of wealth; having an interesting, well-paying, and complex job; having a good education;

and owning a home, are not evenly distributed throughout the society. Moreover, these resources are transferred across generations: One of the best predictors of whether a child will one day graduate from college is whether his or her parents are college graduates. Of course, relations of this sort are not absolute: Perhaps two-thirds of the members of society ultimately reproduce their parents' level of educational attainment, while about one-third take a different path. Still, there is no question that we live in a society characterized by considerable gaps in resources or, put differently, by substantial *inequality*. As I explain in the next chapter, however, reasonable people have disagreed about how best to conceptualize such patterns. They also have disagreed about whether families in different economic positions "share distinct, life-defining experiences."<sup>14</sup> Many insist that there is not a clear, coherent, and sustained experiential pattern. In this book, I demonstrate the existence of a cultural logic of child rearing that tends to differ according to families' social class positions. I see these interweaving practices as coming together in a messy but still recognizable way. In contrast to many, I suggest that social class does have a powerful impact in shaping the daily rhythms of family life.

#### THE STUDY

It is a lot of work to get young children through the day, especially for their parents. When I embarked on this study, I was interested in understanding that labor process. In choosing to look at families, rather than just at children or parents, I hoped to capture some of the reciprocal effects of children and parents on each other. My approach also meant moving beyond the walls of the home to understand how parents and children negotiate with other adults in children's lives.

This book is based on intensive "naturalistic" observations of twelve families (six white, five Black, and one interracial) with children nine and ten years old. The twelve families are part of a larger study of eighty-eight children from the middle-class, working-class, and poor.<sup>15</sup> (For details of how the study was done, see Appendix A, Methodology.) I met most of these children when I visited their third-grade classrooms in an urban school, Lower Richmond, and a suburban school, Swan (both of which are described in the next chapter). With the help of white and Black research assistants, I carried out interviews first with the mothers and then with many of the fathers of these children. To better understand the expectations that professionals had of parents, I also interviewed the children's classroom teachers and other school personnel.

From this pool of children the research assistants and I selected twelve families for intensive observations.<sup>16</sup> We generally visited each family about twenty times in and around their home, usually in the space of one month. We followed children and parents as they went through their daily routines, as they took part in school activities, church services and events, organized play, kin visits, and medical appointments. Most visits lasted about three hours; sometimes, depending on the event (e.g., an out-of-town funeral, a special extended family event, or a long shopping trip), we stayed much longer. In most cases, we also arranged one overnight visit in each family's home. Often, especially after the families got used to us, we carried tape recorders.

When we introduced ourselves to each family, we said that, following a famous study, we wanted to be treated like "the family dog."<sup>17</sup> We wanted parents to step over and ignore us, but allow us to hang out with them. In reality, our presence had a more active character. Still, after some initial chatter, we often slipped into the background, letting the children and their parents set the pace. In the house, we sat on the floor with children and, as a rule, insisted on sitting in the backseat of cars when we rode along on family outings. Outside, we played ball with children or hung around while they played with their friends. Middle-class children, especially, spent quite a bit of time waiting for adults. We waited, too. As I explain in Appendix A, the rule of thumb was not to criticize and not to intervene unless a child was in imminent danger. We encouraged families not to worry about entertaining us, we told children to feel free to curse in front of us if they would do so normally, and we asked that other normal "guest" rules be dissolved.

Unquestionably, our presence changed the dynamics as we were sitting in living rooms watching television, riding along in the backseat of the car to a soccer game, watching children get into their pajamas, or sitting in church with them. Over time, however, we saw signs of adjustment (e.g., as families got used to us, yelling and cursing increased). Many families reported that, especially after the initial adjustment, their behavior changed only in modest ways, if at all.

The children found participating in the project enjoyable. They reported it made them feel "special." They were demonstrably happy to see the field-workers arrive and, at times, were reluctant to let them leave. Some parents also, at times, said they "had fun." Delight in the study was clearly stronger in the working-class and poor families, possibly because it was rare for these children to meet adults outside of their extended family, neighbors, and teachers. In middle-class families, chil-

book might reinforce negative stereotypes of certain groups. The results could be taken out of context and exploited by others, particularly political conservatives. Some early readers encouraged me *not to report* results that might be used to reinforce negative images of, for example, poor Black families. The fact that the manuscript includes portraits of poor white families as well as Black families did not completely assuage these concerns. A key problem is that most readers will be middle class or, as college students, on the road to becoming middle class, even if they had working-class or poor origins. As readers, they will have their own childhoods and their own lives as parents or future parents as a base for what they consider appropriate. This cultural and historical frame can become the basis for interpreting the discussion. Indeed, some (middle-class) readers of earlier drafts felt that a child's life that consists of watching television all day would be "boring" or "bad" for the child. This interpretation, though, is rooted in a particular vision of childhood — one involving development and concerted cultivation. The historical and cultural character of readers' beliefs often are thrown into relief only through sharp cross-cultural or historical comparisons.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the fear is that some readers will project their own cultural beliefs on the material. This pattern of projection makes it difficult to "see" alternative conceptions of child rearing as legitimate. As a result, although I make an assiduous effort to report the complexity of family life, at times I spend more time pointing out drawbacks of middle-class child rearing than I do drawbacks of working-class and poor families' approach. Still, it is in fact possible that the results of this study could be distorted or used to promote political positions that I find repugnant. But squelching results due to fears about how they could be interpreted (particularly worries that the examples could reinforce "deficit" theories of social life) seems wrong. Thus, although urged to do so, I have not omitted data on this criterion.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The next chapter describes the schools that most of the children in the study attended and where we visited during the year. It also briefly discusses different approaches to understanding why inequality exists. The book then proceeds by devoting a chapter per family to highlight three ways in which social class makes a difference in children's lives and family life: the organization of daily life, language use, and interactions between families and institutions. In Part I, I show that middle-class chil-

dren routinely interacted with nonfamilial adults outside of the home environment or school.

#### ENDURING DILEMMAS

In a seminar I attended recently, a Black anthropologist rebuffed another scholar's statement with the words, "Yes, but that is a white perspective." In this line of thought, membership in a particular racial or ethnic group crucially shapes a person's intellectual trajectory. Accordingly, there are those who believe that as a white woman, I should not have studied Black families. Conversely, they might object to having a Black research assistant visit a white middle-class family. They assert that it is more desirable, or even necessary, for gays to study gays or women to study women. Some worry that outsiders may get it wrong. Others assert that having white researchers in Black families is not a legitimate undertaking.

There are no easy answers to these contentious debates. In this study, the design grew out of the local context (see Appendix A for details). But more generally, I have a philosophical difference with the young woman in the seminar that evening. I question whether something called "a white perspective" exists.<sup>18</sup> To follow out the logic of her critique means that members of (dominant) racial and ethnic groups ought to refrain from studying social questions involving dominated groups. This does not strike me as the best approach for understanding complex social problems. (It also has the invidious effect of relegating every Black social scientist to studying Black Americans rather than whatever suits his or her fancy.) Moreover, the "groups" at hand are always diverse. What about members of the same ethnic group who are of a different gender: Are the walls blocking understanding equally high? In a series of ever-reflecting mirrors, does this tension mean that the only person you can truly "cross the divide" to study is yourself? This book takes the position that it is possible for outsiders of a group to study across boundaries. It reports findings from a study that used ethnographic methods to try to understand children in a wide variety of social locations: boys and girls, middle-class, working-class and poor families, and white and Black families. In addition, the research teams were racially and ethnically diverse (as well as diverse by social class background), which, as I show in Appendix A, influenced what we learned in our visits.

Some reviewers worried that given the contested character of race relations in the United States, the behavior patterns described in this



children had a hectic schedule of organized activities by looking at the white middle-class family of Garrett Tallinger (Chapter 3). Although the Tallinger family was wealthier than many, the same patterns appeared over and over again in other middle-class families. By contrast, children such as Tyrec Taylor (a Black working-class boy) spent time playing outside with friends (Chapter 4). Even then, as the case of a white poor girl, Katie Brindle, shows, mothers engaged in enormous labor to get children through the day (Chapter 5). Unlike children in the Tallinger family, both Tyrec Taylor and Katie Brindle played in a sphere separate from that of adults.

In Part II, I show how these differences in the organization of daily life are also interwoven with language use, with an emphasis on reasoning in middle-class families and directives in the working-class and poor families. I illustrate this with the case of Alexander Williams (Chapter 6), a boy from a Black middle-class home, and Harold McAllister (Chapter 7), a Black boy living in poverty.<sup>20</sup>

Part III demonstrates how parents differ in the ways they monitor and intervene in their children's schooling. The case of Stacey Marshall, a Black middle-class girl whose mother constantly scrutinized and interceded in her life outside the home, is the subject of Chapter 8. Another example of this behavior, albeit one where the behavior is much less effective, is found in the case of Melanie Handlon, a white middle-class girl (Chapter 9) whose mother's frequent interventions, particularly around homework, created unhappiness and conflict. In contrast to their middle-class counterparts, working-class and poor parents depended on the leadership of professionals. At times, since the educators expected parents to follow strategies of concerted cultivation, the results could be difficult, as with Wendy Driver, who was not reading in fourth grade (Chapter 10). Other times, working-class parents found themselves powerless and frustrated, as standards of behavior they felt were appropriate (such as self-defense on the playground or hitting a child for purposes of discipline) were denigrated and, indeed, seen as possible signs of child abuse. The case of Billy Yanelli (Chapter 11) shows these tensions.

In the conclusion, Chapter 12, I revisit the general question of the influence of social class on daily life. I point to important ways that social class did not appear to matter in shaping daily life in such areas as neatness, order, and sense of humor. Overall, however, I identify important ways that class shapes the logic of child rearing in the home and the value these strategies are accorded as children move into the rest of the

world. Appendix A provides an "insider" tale of the questions and dilemmas that emerged during the study.

In sum, I see it as a mistake to accept, *carte blanche*, the views of officials in dominant institutions (e.g., schools or social service agencies) regarding how children should be raised. Indeed, outside of institutional settings there are benefits and costs to both of these logics of child rearing. For example, concerted cultivation places intense labor demands on busy parents, exhausts children, and emphasizes the development of individualism, at times at the expense of the development of the notion of the family group. Middle-class children argue with their parents, complain about their parents' incompetence, and disparage parents' decisions. In other historical moments, a ten-year-old child who gave orders to a doctor would have been chastised for engaging in disrespectful and inappropriate behavior. Nor are the actions of children who display an emerging sense of entitlement intrinsically more valuable or desirable than those of children who display an emerging sense of constraint. In a society less dominated by individualism than the United States, with more of an emphasis on the group, the sense of constraint displayed by working-class and poor children might be interpreted as healthy and appropriate. But in this society, the strategies of the working-class and poor families are generally denigrated and seen as unhelpful or even harmful to children's life chances. The benefits that accrue to middle-class children can be significant, but they are often invisible to them and to others. In popular language, middle-class children can be said to have been "born on third base but believe they hit a triple." This book makes the invisible visible through a study of pleasures, opportunities, challenges, and conflicts in the daily lives of children and their families.



## CHAPTER 2

# Social Structure and Daily Life

The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his biography is enacted.

C. Wright Mills

The families described in this book created their lives within a specific social context. They did not build the roads they rode on, hire the teachers who taught in the schools their children attended, decree which parks would be well maintained, decide how rapidly the city would clear snow from the streets, establish the values of the homes on their street, or compose the racial, ethnic, or social class balance of their schools or neighborhoods. Nor did they determine the availability of high-paying jobs in the area, set the education and skills required to fill those jobs, pace the growth of the national economy, or guide the position of the United States in the world economy. Yet these elements impinged on the lives of these families, albeit on some more directly than on others. One way to conceive of this context is to say that individuals carry out their lives within a *social structure*.

There are many definitions of social structure, but they generally stress regular patterns of interaction, often in forms of social organization. The key building blocks are groups (or, in one common definition, "collections of people who interact on the basis of shared expectations regarding one another's behavior").<sup>1</sup> Individuals have a variety of socially defined positions, or statuses, within the group(s) to which they belong. The actions of individuals are guided by norms (rules or guidelines for specific situations). Over time, some of these rule systems — encoded in bureaucracies, legal proceedings, and bureaucratic regulations — coalesce into institutions.<sup>2</sup> Marriage, the family, the army, corporations, political

parties, and racial segregation are all examples of institutions. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills stresses the importance of institutions: "Much of human life consists of playing . . . roles within specific institutions. To understand the biography of an individual, we must understand the significance and meaning of the roles he has played and does play; to understand these roles we must understand the institutions of which they are a part."<sup>3</sup> Individuals' chances of interacting with any given kind of institution are not random: Families from elite backgrounds tend to participate in institutions serving the elite, and families in poverty tend to be involved with institutions serving the poor. Some institutional settings — zoos, parades, certain stores, and, sometimes, public transportation — are "great equalizers," drawing families of all kinds. This kind of mingling of rich and poor is relatively unusual, however.

In short, children grow up within a broad, highly stratified social system. In this chapter, I sketch key aspects of this social structural context for the children and families who participated in the study. I focus on the two target schools, Lower Richmond in the city and Swan in the suburbs, describing each institution and its surrounding community. I also discuss some of the ways social scientists and others explain the persistence of inequality in our society.

## LOWER RICHMOND SCHOOL AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

Lower Richmond School serves children from kindergarten through fifth grade. Located on a narrow street in a large northeastern city, the school looks forbidding: it is three stories tall and is surrounded by a high, gray chain-link fence. The building is old, with a dirty beige exterior and few windows. There are patches of paint splashed on the walls here and there to cover up the graffiti that appears regularly. To the side and back of the school are an asphalt playground and a small basketball court; in front, there are trees and a patch of grass, but the children may not play in this area during school hours. Kindergartners have a separate playground, also all asphalt, but the walls surrounding the play area display cheerful murals painted by the children. Just inside the entrance to the school, a security guard sits at a desk. Overall, Lower Richmond is "a very nice place," according to one teacher. She noted that, unlike other facilities in the district, where beer bottles and broken glass litter the school yard, "it's safe [here]. It's a pretty place when you walk in. There's some grass and trees, and there's a parking lot and the building is clean."

The residential neighborhoods surrounding Lower Richmond are racially segregated. Many of the students come by bus from a poor Black housing project about ten minutes away. The school itself is located in a mainly white working-class residential neighborhood dominated by small, inexpensive homes. (See Table C2, Appendix C for descriptive social and demographic data.) There are also apartment complexes, including some that rent to low-income families who qualify for government assistance ("Section 8"). These complexes are racially integrated. Lower Richmond enrolls about one-half Black students and one-half white students. Less than 5 percent of the students are Asian or Hispanic. Most of the educational staff members, including the principal, are white; but there are Black educators too, including the third-grade teacher whose classroom I observed, the school counselor, the reading resource teacher, and the music teacher. Most of the support staff members, such as the secretary, security guard, janitor, and bus driver, are African American. A majority of the student body qualifies for free lunches.

Only a few blocks from the school is a small shopping district with gas stations, a pizza shop, an ice cream shop (open only in warmer months), a 7-11 convenience store, and a hardware store. Unlike in some urban neighborhoods, in this area, commercial and residential rental properties are fully occupied; abandoned buildings are not a problem here. It is a solid, working-class neighborhood, with narrow streets, older two-story red brick buildings in good repair, and enough business customers and employees that parking is scarce. There are sufficient trees and flowers growing here and there to break the monotony of the concrete pavement and buildings and to mark changes in the seasons. Buildings are densely packed. Large stores are uncommon: Supermarkets are few and far between, and discount stores, such as Target and Wal-Mart, are not part of the neighborhood. Residents must drive to the suburbs to gain access to cheaply priced goods.

Traffic in the area around Lower Richmond is hectic. City buses roar up and down the street a few times per hour, and cars speed through intersections. Horn blasts are frequent. The high density of housing and the lack of garages bring neighbors into more contact with one another than might occur otherwise. Many auto-related activities, from washing or repairing cars to digging them free of snow, take place in the street. As in most urban centers nationwide, crime is a concern here, particularly graffiti, burglary, and petty theft. Armed robberies (on the street or in local stores) are relatively uncommon, but they happen often enough to undermine residents' sense of safety and security.

Lower Richmond School has been well regarded by parents, children, and educators for many years. Ms. Bernstein, a fourth-grade teacher, calls Lower Richmond a "cream puff" compared to other city schools. Institutionally, Lower Richmond provides students with a variety of valuable resources: There are a computer laboratory and a computer teacher, as well as specialty teachers for art, music, and gym. The school has a library and a science program specially funded to provide an emphasis on technology. School-sponsored extracurricular activities include a choir and a band; both perform at school, district, and local community events.<sup>4</sup> Lower Richmond also puts on a popular spring fair.

Still, the school has its share of problems, ranging from a shortage of teaching supplies, such as paper and art materials, to a shortage of teachers, to an unwieldy administrative structure that can shortchange students' education. Although teaching in city schools is widely viewed as more challenging than teaching in suburban schools, salaries (as well as expenditures per pupil) are less than in the suburbs. Qualified teachers are not always available. Some students at Lower Richmond experience this teacher shortage at a very personal level: one third-grade class, for example, had a series of different substitutes for their entire school year. District rules do not require classroom rosters to be finalized until several weeks into the school year. As late as mid-October, a child may be reassigned to a new teacher (the district sometimes reconstitutes classrooms in order to meet staffing and budgetary concerns). Other aspects of the district-imposed bureaucracy create difficulties as well. As a teacher explained, a seemingly simple request could require a cumbersome, time-consuming response:

The grandmother called and said that [an after-school program] needed information. And I'm not allowed to give out any written information on a student unless you have the written consent of the parents and something on letterhead [from the requesting organization]. And then the counselor and the principal has to sign it.<sup>5</sup>

Parents (and educators) often are bewildered and frustrated by district guidelines in academic matters, too. A referral to full-time special education, for example, requires two pre-referrals (each involving efforts to improve the situation without recourse to full-time intervention) before a child can be formally considered for special education. Since each stage takes at least 60 days, and the school year is only 180 days, an entire academic year can elapse without a decision having been made. As I show later in the book, this kind of bureaucratic infrastructure sometimes

results in children "slipping through the cracks" as major learning problems go untreated.

During the years of the study, local political figures openly criticized the district for doing a poor job educating children. At Lower Richmond, one of the district's more accomplished schools, about one-half of each class reads below grade level and about one-third of the fourth-grade cohort is at least two years below grade level. The district is under pressure to raise test scores, but the budget is very limited, and shortfalls occur annually. Unlike in the suburbs, inner-city schools do not have wealthy parent associations capable of supplementing individual site budgets. At Lower Richmond, few parents participate in the Parent-Teacher Association; meetings often have only three or four attendees (usually the officers). Social relations among the teachers are another potential cause for concern. Real tensions underlie a generally cordial atmosphere. Some of the Black teachers feel that white teachers treat certain Black children unfairly, as a Black third-grade teacher charged angrily:

There are some faculty members — some of the children aren't treated equally. Some Black children with certain reputations did certain things and . . . [got] kicked out to another school. Some white children would do serious things and they would get detention, call parents, or suspensions.

Although white administrators and teachers generally did not agree, other Black educators at the school echoed these concerns.

Relations among the children at Lower Richmond also are strained sometimes. Serious threats to safety are unusual.<sup>6</sup> But physical fights between children are common on the playground throughout the week. Teachers estimate that at least one-half of the children have serious life problems, often involving a parent who is absent or incapacitated. The school counselor works regularly with Child Protective Services to address the needs of students she feels are being neglected (e.g., those who come to school in winter without coats) or abused. In a single classroom, it is common to have several children who have "serious issues." In Mr. Tier's fourth grade, among the white students, there is Lisa, whose mother left her and who now "lives with her father, who likes to drink to excess"; Thomas, whose mother disappeared one day and, although she eventually returned, still has no contact with her son; and Shaun, whose father "does cocaine, . . . is paranoid, and was arrested twice this year." Among the Black students in the class, there is Tanisha, who lacks even the most basic school supplies (such as a school bag) teachers prefer students to have. Another student, Toya, is disruptive. She "gets in fights all the

time . . . but her mother . . . [instead of reprimanding her daughter, spends her time] explaining to me why it's not Toya's problem." Julius is from a home where "there is a whole history of drug abuse and violence." Teachers at Lower Richmond note that in addition to being emotionally upsetting, their students' life problems are academically disruptive. Uniformly, the teachers want their students to arrive at school each day "well groomed" and "prepared to learn." They also want parents to be involved in their children's education, to "sign homework, help with projects" and "be positive," in the words of one fourth-grade teacher.

These expectations are met by some. There are both Black and white children whose parents are steadily employed, as well as those whose parents are energetically striving to move up in the world. In Mr. Tier's class, there are three such Black children — Isaiah, whose mother is absent but whose father is devoted to him; Morrell, whose mother has "gone back to college to become an elementary school teacher," and Danielle, whose mother works at "Joe's Steaks." There are comparable white children, including those with parents Mr. Tier describes as "upwardly mobile types."

In sum, Lower Richmond is a school with many positive aspects, particularly in comparison to other schools in the district. Still, it shares with other urban schools core limitations, such as teacher shortages, lower teacher salaries, limited supplies, and a cumbersome bureaucracy. Parents are not a major force in the school, either financially or politically. Students are drawn from racially segregated neighborhoods where historical patterns of land use and market forces limit the availability of large stores. Homes are small and built close to one another, traffic is hectic, and crime is a common concern. Thus, when compared to a suburban school like Swan (described below), Lower Richmond ranks a very distant second on many criteria.

#### SWAN SCHOOL AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

Like Lower Richmond, Swan School serves children from kindergarten through fifth grade. It is located in one of the townships in the suburbs that ring the large northeastern city in which Lower Richmond School is located. Swan, like many other suburban schools, is a sprawling facility. It consists exclusively of one-story buildings that are spread out over the school grounds. The buildings have windows lining one entire wall of each classroom. Although all the windows open, in the fall and spring the classrooms can be sweltering (there is no air conditioning). Outside is

an expanse of grass on a gently sloping hill, large enough for multiple games to occur at the same time. Unlike at Lower Richmond, the school playground has an elaborate swing set and bars, with a red-hued mulch of shredded wood under the bars to protect children if they fall. There is no fence around Swan; the entire facility looks open and inviting.

The school is located in a quiet residential neighborhood of one-story, single-family, middle-class homes. Each is fronted by a large swath of green grass. The houses sell for twice the amount of houses in the Lower Richmond area (See Table C2 for detailed data).<sup>7</sup> Land seems plentiful and lots are larger than in the city; parking near the school is ample, except on nights when there is a scheduled event and parents swarm to the school. The school grounds and the surrounding neighborhoods are extensively landscaped. There are so many trees, flowering shrubs, and flowers that when the seasons shift, the presence of nature is almost overwhelming. In fall, burnt-orange-colored leaves carpet the ground; in spring, a sea of yellow daffodils appears, while overhead, white and pink dogwoods pop into bloom.

There are no stores within walking distance of Swan or the surrounding neighborhood. The local shopping district lies along a major road; the stores are huge and set back from the street, behind large parking lots. Shoppers may choose among many different retailers, including several discount stores. The selection of products is wider and more attractively priced than in the city. Because the stores are so large, families frequently drive between stores located only a few blocks from one another. Children also need to be driven to their various activities and usually need a ride in order to visit friends (some, however, are permitted to ride their bikes to friends' houses). Despite the reliance on cars in this suburb, traffic congestion usually is not a problem, and drivers tend to drive more sedately than is common in the city. The roads are in strikingly better condition than those in Lower Richmond's vicinity. There are fewer potholes on suburban streets and snow removal is prompt, often within twenty-four hours of a snowstorm. Thus, in January, when the parking lot at Lower Richmond School was dangerously icy for several days running, the lot at Swan School was completely clear of snow and ice.

During interviews, some adults mentioned how "dangerous" they considered the city and noted that they avoided it. Despite parents' anxiety about crime and their concern for the safety of their children, it is common for family members to leave valuable objects such as bikes, baseball mitts, or bats lying in their yards unattended. Burglary and petty theft occur rarely in the neighborhoods near Swan, and armed robberies

on residential streets are almost unheard of. Generally, there is less concern about crime than in urban areas.

The neighborhoods surrounding Swan School are predominantly white, but Black families are present as well and Black students constitute almost 10 percent of the school population (with less than 5 percent Asian and Hispanic students). A "multicultural" theme predominates, with quilts, posters, assemblies, and curricula devoted to the topic. Despite this close attention to multiculturalism, the emphasis on diversity is largely symbolic since, unlike at Lower Richmond, here nearly all students, educators, administrators, and service personnel are white.

Parents and district administrators are strongly positive in how they view the school and the district. At back-to-school night, the assistant superintendent stressed the "special feeling" apparent at Swan and underscored the district's interest in hearing from parents. He provided his telephone number and encouraged audience members to call. Teachers at Swan have access to more supplies than do their counterparts at Lower Richmond; there is a photocopier for their use and ample paper and art materials. Referrals to special education are less common and less bureaucratic. Parents must formally agree (by signing a permission form) to have their children tested for learning problems, but the paperwork generally takes weeks, not months, to be processed. At Swan, most children in the fourth grade, including the low achievers, perform at grade level; in reading, many of the students are two or three years above grade level. Although both Lower Richmond and Swan offer computer training, art, music, choir, and gym, the character of the coursework, supplies, and instruction at Swan is more elaborate. For example, at Lower Richmond, the students enjoyed making art projects out of Popsicle sticks. At Swan, the children used square pieces of white cloth and dark black ink to make banners with Japanese characters on them. The choir at Lower Richmond is open to whomever attends practices; the children perform at local nursing homes. The choir at Swan is "select"; children must audition for their positions. With the help of an extensive fund-raising effort, the choir traveled by bus to the Midwest to perform in a competition, and, as a result of arrangements made by the music teacher, the children also visited a recording studio during the school year. Finally, parent participation is far greater at Swan than at Lower Richmond. The two schools are comparably sized, but the Swan PTA meetings attract ten times more participants than those at Lower Richmond, and the suburban organization raises (and spends) significantly larger sums. For example, the Swan PTA spent around \$3,000 annually to provide

supplemental school assemblies. They sponsored "artists in residence" as well as puppet shows, plays, and other professional performances. They also helped out with the annual school fair, which is a much more elaborate event than Lower Richmond's.

Still, parents and educators at Swan complained of problems, albeit different ones from those that plagued Lower Richmond. Economic security generally is not an issue. Most children come from families where both parents are employed outside the home, often as professionals, such as lawyers, social workers, accountants, managers, teachers, and insurance executives. Many mothers work full time outside the home. Some teachers at the school worry that the children do not receive sufficient attention at home because their parents are "too busy." Ms. Nettles, noting that during the first few weeks of the school year ten of her twenty-six students did not do their homework, comments:

I have been here seven years, and it has been getting worse. There are changes in family life; more two parents working and single-parent families. Parents come home and for obvious reasons they don't want to deal with it [homework] to make sure it happens.

Parents also often have an exaggerated sense of their children's accomplishments. For instance, they describe their children as "being bored" with schoolwork when, from the teacher's perspective, these children have not mastered the material. In addition, parents can be quick to criticize teachers. As this third-grade teacher reports, the mother of a high-achieving student was outraged to learn that her daughter's grade had been read aloud:

She came in one day [to complain] because I had read Chloe's grade [aloud] as an eighty-six and Chloe was humiliated — because Chloe does not get eighty-sixes.

The teacher feels that the mother does not have an accurate view of her daughter's performance:

Chloe is very, very bright and in the addition and subtraction pretest she got a fifty-eight. Her mother was telling me how bored she was. "Chloe has done this and knows it so well." I showed her the fifty-eight. Well, she was absolutely shocked.

Parents watch teachers closely and do not hesitate to intervene on their children's behalf. As one third-grade teacher reported, "Mothers are influenced by the PTA. [The principal] himself has said that he thinks the PTA is trouble. You know, it's a close-knit little group." Parents' robust sense of entitlement is evident to the teachers, as this Swan teacher makes clear:

These parents, so many of them, are so self-centered, not all of them, but some, and it's being transmitted to their children. And it's almost like, "You owe me something. Now, what can you do for me?" . . . or, "You owe an explanation for what you're doing." You almost feel at times that you have to defend yourself in some cases.

Clashes between parents and teachers occur now and again. The choir teacher, for example, felt parents who chatted in the back of the room during choir performances were being rude. She included on the inside of the program a list of recommended behaviors for parents who attended the daytime performance, but after parents complained, the principal removed the guidelines. It is not unusual for parents whose children do not initially qualify for the gifted program (at Swan the cutoff is an IQ of 125) to have them tested privately; if the children then score high enough for entry, the parents will insist they be enrolled. To reduce problems, the principal (who parents feel is sometimes too supportive of teachers) engages in preemptive strikes, such as sending letters home to ask parents to respect educators' professional judgments in assigning children to specific classrooms for the next school year:

The principal did state in a letter to the parents that, you know, all factors are taken into consideration but to please respect his judgment and the teachers' as to placement for next year. Because it can get out of hand, the requests. It really can.

The level of involvement among Swan parents is strikingly higher than at Lower Richmond, but parents who are active at the school complain that it is a constant struggle to recruit enough volunteers for events such as "Donuts with Dad," the annual third-grade luncheon with mothers, the luncheon put on for teachers by the parents' group, and the all-school spring fair.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, daily life is not always smooth at Swan School. Parents complain about teachers; teachers complain about parents. Recruiting parent volunteers to staff the many school functions is arduous. Still, overall, this school enjoys many social structural resources not available at Lower Richmond. Salaries are higher, there is no teacher shortage, classroom supplies are ample, and the teachers can make photocopies of educational materials. Although the resources are already more than those available at Lower Richmond, they are further amplified by the robust contributions of the PTA. This organization raises thousands of dollars, enabling the school to offer a professional-quality arts and music program.

In sum, between the two target schools, there are important differences in key structural resources, including physical facilities, educational

supplies, teacher salaries, and supplemental financing and volunteer efforts contributed by parents.<sup>9</sup> If social class did not matter, these differences would be randomly distributed. They are not. Across the country, communities where the average social class position of parents is higher have vastly more favorable public school systems.<sup>10</sup>

#### ESTABLISHED PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONAL STANDARDS

While there were differences between the schools, there were also similarities. Elementary schools in America have many shared elements, including for example, the organization of the school day. Educators at Lower Richmond and Swan Schools also appeared to share similar visions of what constitutes appropriate and desirable childhood experiences. They agreed, in broad terms, on the proper role of families in promoting children's educational development. These premises were not simply expressions of the educators' personal beliefs. Instead they echoed a body of cultural practices that have gained widespread acceptance among professionals.<sup>11</sup>

The teachers in this study generally supported practices of concerted cultivation, with an emphasis on the development of the child through organized activities, development of vocabulary through reasoning and reading, and active parent involvement in schooling and other institutions outside of the home. Educators selectively praised children during the school day, expressed their approval and disapproval of parents in informal conversations with the research assistants and me during our classroom observations, and conformed to established school and district practices that encoded particular approaches to child rearing. Teachers also followed concerted cultivation in raising their own children. As I show next, within the confines of a limited sample, there is a striking level of agreement between educators at Lower Richmond and Swan schools.

#### THE VALUE OF CULTIVATING THE CHILD

Educators were quite supportive of parents' efforts to cultivate their children's talents and skills through out-of-school activities. In interviews, teachers at both schools reported viewing children's organized activities as helpful:

They all need some physical activity. I think the activities are good, because physical activity can stimulate the mind. The music lessons help with the concentration. I think that it is good to have outside activities.

There is an awful lot going on in the world. The wider variety you expose them to—you never know if you have a future playwright in the group or not. It is just something that they can enjoy and participate in, even if it is not their occupation. They just need to be aware and to talk about the different talents and occupations.

In their interactions with children, teachers also express approval, as in this fourth-grade classroom:

[The Monday following Thanksgiving, Ms. Nettles asked the children to describe what they did for Thanksgiving.] Garrett Tallinger volunteered, "My soccer team won a tournament." Ms. Nettles says, "Your soccer team won a tournament this weekend?" Garrett nods. Ms. Nettles says, "You must be very proud."

At both schools, children's out-of-school activities routinely spill into classroom life. In Ms. Nettles' classroom, students are required to keep a journal in class. Children's activities are a common theme, as field notes from October 11 show:

Five of the five boys talked about soccer games. One said that "after the game I am mad because we lose." Two of the four girls talked about playing soccer.

At Lower Richmond, Wendy Driver proudly describes her dance recital to her third-grade teacher, Ms. Green, as the children are getting ready to line up for recess. She also brought in her trophy to show Ms. Green and her classmates. Adults give organized events such as tournaments and dance recitals more weight than informal play by children, such as playing ball in the yard or watching television. When children volunteer to teachers that they watched particular television shows or that they played an informal game with cousins the previous day, teachers did not express the same level of interest or approval that they do when the children reveal their involvement in an organized activity.

Teachers also promote the concerted cultivation of their own children through a busy schedule of organized activities. Lower Richmond teacher Ms. Stanton had a daughter enrolled in a fourth-grade suburban school relatively close to Swan School. Her daughter's program of activities is similar to that of the other middle-class children in this study: art lessons, dance lessons, music lessons, Sunday school, youth church choir, and horseback riding were regular weekly events. Another third-grade teacher reported that she has all of her children enrolled in Catholic instruction (CCD), Scouts, Little League, piano lessons, and swim team.



scheduled on relatively short notice and without parents' input regarding their assigned time slot. In emphasizing parental intervention in education, these educators mirror practices common in the profession.<sup>13</sup> Still, educators are selective in the kind of parent involvement they prefer, as this Lower Richmond fourth-grade teacher indicates:

An unsupportive parent is one who is antagonistic with the teacher. I've had situations like that. And it makes the job virtually impossible. If you have a problem with the child, the parent is not supportive of you or the school's position. And [then] the child is at odds with you and they fight you tooth and nail and they basically say, "I don't have to listen to you; [I] don't have to do what you say."

A third-grade teacher from Swan School uses strikingly similar terms in expressing her concern:

[Parents have] gotten this attitude now where they question so much. The children see and hear this. Then they come to your classroom with an attitude. Not many, but you can sure pick it up right away. Some of them are very surly . . . I think a lot of it comes from home.

Although educators want parents to offer them positive and deferential support, they also feel strongly that parents should respond to their requests for educational assistance. Ms. Bernstein is frustrated by how few parents actually read to their children:

The [parents] want them to do well in school. They all say that they want their kids to do their homework. They always say that, but they don't know how to accomplish it in many situations . . . They want to . . . They want to. But do they ever sit down and read to their child? But they mean well.

Educators at both schools believe parents should take a leadership role in solving their children's educational problems. They complain about parents who do not take children's problems "seriously" enough to initiate contact with educators. In short, educators want contradictory behaviors from parents: deference and support, but also assertive leadership when children had educational problems.

Moreover, by law, educators are required to intervene if a family violates state standards for child rearing. Some child-rearing practices that were commonplace throughout society in earlier historical periods (e.g., vigorously beating children) are now condemned. Regardless of their personal opinion, educators are bound by the law to turn a child over to authorities if, for example, she shows up at school with red welts on her body from being disciplined. As I show in subsequent chapters, this legal requirement

Through their actions at home, teachers demonstrate their commitment to the logic of child rearing of concerted cultivation.

Still, teachers complain about children being overscheduled and about concerted cultivation diminishing children's school experience through exhaustion or absence. As a teacher at Swan complained:

Soccer will take precedence over homework, regularly . . . Sometimes they would go on weekend trips. They would play soccer, would be up late, and they would be tired. I like sports, but when it interferes with what the children need to do for their academics, I think it needs to be looked at again.

You can't fight City Hall. It's their child and they have a right to do it. Tommy Daniels was on three one-week vacations with his family this year. Then she [his mother] is concerned about his progress in math! Hey, keep him in school.

Teachers also support parents' efforts to develop their children's vocabulary. They all encourage parents to read to children, take children to the library, buy children books, and make sure that the children read at home. Ms. Bernstein, a fourth-grade teacher at Lower Richmond, gave her students a homework assignment of at least ten minutes of reading each night. When Ms. Stanton, who also teaches fourth grade, made a list of Christmas gifts that parents might give their children, she included books. At Swan, Ms. Nettles has a bulletin board where she lists the books that her students have read recently outside of class.

Teachers said relatively little to parents directly about the value of reasoning with children (as opposed to giving them directives). Still, there were numerous indications that educators at both Lower Richmond and Swan strongly prefer verbal interactions oriented to reasoning over directives. In their classroom interactions, these educators, like their counterparts nationwide, often use reasoning with the children, particularly in lessons. As teachers answer questions with questions<sup>12</sup> they seek to develop children's reasoning capacities in routine interactions. In addition, educators are generally (although not uniformly) supportive of parents' use of "time outs" as a form of discipline.

#### INTERVENTIONS IN INSTITUTIONS

Teachers want parent involvement in schooling, especially parental supervision of homework. At Swan School, children must have their parents sign their homework book daily. Teachers interpret a failure to show up for a parent-teacher conference as a sign that parents do not value schooling—even though at Lower Richmond the conferences were



Educational accomplishments are also lopsided. In the United States, just under one-quarter of all adults have completed a bachelor's degree; the figure is a bit higher for individuals in their twenties. More than 10 percent of high school students drop out.<sup>19</sup> Even among younger people, for whom college education is becoming increasingly common, a clear majority (from two-thirds to three-quarters) do not graduate.<sup>20</sup> Although some studies show that, after taking into account parents' social position, Black youth are *more* likely to pursue higher education than whites, overall levels of educational attainment are far lower for Black children.<sup>21</sup> Substantial stratification also exists within higher education, ranging from community colleges to elite universities. The more elite the school, the more richly graduates are rewarded.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, there has been a profound shift in the U.S. and world economies, with a decline in "good jobs" with high wages, pensions, health benefits, and stability, and a rise in "bad jobs" with relatively low wages, no benefits, little opportunity for career promotion, and lack of stability.<sup>23</sup> In the lives of most people, these separate threads — their educational attainment, what kind of job they get, and how much money they earn — are all tightly interwoven. Together, these factors constitute parents' social position or social structural location.

Many studies have demonstrated that parents' social structural location has profound implications for their children's life chances. Before kindergarten, for example, children of highly educated parents are much more likely to exhibit "educational readiness" skills, such as knowing their letters, identifying colors, counting up to twenty, and being able to write their first names.<sup>24</sup> Schooling helps, and during the school year the gap in children's performance narrows quite a bit (but widens again during the summer). Children of highly educated mothers continue to outperform children of less educated mothers throughout their school careers. By the time young people take the SAT examinations for admission to college, the gap is dramatic, averaging 150 points (relative to an average score of 500 points) between children of parents who are high school dropouts and those with parents who have a graduate degree.<sup>25</sup> There are also differences in other aspects of children's school performance according to their parents' social structural location.<sup>26</sup> Many studies demonstrate the crucial role of educational success in determining occupational success. Parents' social class position predicts children's school success and thus their ultimate life chances.<sup>27</sup>

put working-class and poor families in the study at risk for intervention by school officials in a way that middle-class families were not.

In sum, there is a paradox in the institutions that children and their families encounter. On the one hand, there are profound differences in the quality of services provided by institutions. On the other hand, institutions accept and promote the same standards regarding cultural repertoires. Thus, teachers placed a shared emphasis on the cultivation of children's talents through organized activities, the importance of parental development of children's vocabulary, and the importance of responsive and positive parental participation in schooling. As we shall see, these standards privileged the cultural practices of middle-class families over those of their working-class and poor counterparts. This pattern made it more comfortable, and easier at times, for middle-class children and their parents to achieve their wishes.

#### INEQUALITY

The differences in the quality of school life in Lower Richmond and Swan schools are part of a more general pattern of inequality in the broader society. A relatively small number of people, and institutions such as schools, in the population have considerably more assets than others. For example, across families, key resources are unequally distributed. Parents' income and wealth, educational accomplishments, and quality of work life all vary dramatically. If inequality were not a powerful force in the United States, then these coveted resources would be distributed in a much more equitable fashion.

In terms of income and wealth, the richest 10 percent of families in our society own almost 80 percent of all real estate (other than family homes), more than 90 percent of all securities (stocks and bonds) and about 60 percent of all the money in bank accounts.<sup>14</sup> One widely used indicator of inequality in income is the child poverty rate, a rate that is heavily dependent on social policy. (There are many more poor children in the United States than in most Western European countries.)<sup>15</sup> In the United States, one-fifth of all children live below the poverty level, and the figure is approximately twice as high for Black children.<sup>16</sup> The distribution of income and wealth became even more heavily concentrated in the hands of a few during the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Still, during the study period, one-seventh of Black Americans were making over fifty thousand dollars annually.<sup>18</sup>

TABLE I. TYPOLOGY OF DIFFERENCES IN CHILD REARING

	Child-Rearing Approach	
	<i>Concerted Cultivation</i>	<i>Accomplishment of Natural Growth</i>
Key Elements	Parent actively fosters and assesses child's talents, opinions, and skills	Parent cares for child and allows child to grow
Organization of Daily Life	Multiple child leisure activities orchestrated by adults	"Hanging out," particularly with kin, by child
Language Use	Reasoning/directives Child contestation of adult statements Extended negotiations between parents and child	Directives Rare questioning or challenging of adults by child General acceptance by child of directives
Interventions in Institutions	Criticisms and interventions on behalf of child Training of child to take on this role	Dependence on institutions Sense of powerlessness and frustration Conflict between child-rearing practices at home and at school
Consequences	Emerging sense of entitlement on the part of the child	Emerging sense of constraint on the part of the child

tic picture that accurately reflects both the permeability and impermeability of the home-to-class forces. And, such research needs to be conceptually guided but nonetheless open to the possibility of erring in its expectations.

In this study, the research assistants and I followed a small number of families around in an intensive fashion to get a sense of the rhythms of their everyday lives. On the basis of the data collected, I develop the claim that common economic position in the society, defined in terms of social class membership, is closely tied to differences in the cultural logic of child-rearing. Following a well-established Western European tradition, I provide a categorical analysis, grouping families into the social

UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITY

Many people in the United States hold the view that the society is, in fundamental ways, *open*. They believe that individuals carve out their life paths by drawing on their personal stores of hard work, effort, and talent. All children are seen as having approximately equal life chances. Or, if children's life chances appear to differ, this is seen as due to differences in raw talent, initiative, aspirations, and effort. This perspective directly rebuffs the thesis that the social structural location of the family systematically shapes children's life experiences and life outcomes. Rather, the outcomes individuals achieve over the course of their lifetime are seen as their own responsibility.

A second perspective, held by some social scientists, recognizes the existence of important forms of social inequality. Differences in parents' educational levels, occupational experiences, income, and other factors are all duly noted. Yet these social scientists, such as Paul Kingston, in his book *The Classless Society*, argue that inequalities of this sort are best understood as a series of disparate patterns. In other words, these scholars adopt a *gradational* approach. They see it as helpful to focus on differences within the society as a matter of degree. Put strongly, sharply defined categories of social class are useless in understanding "life-defining experiences" within the family. In addition, Kingston and others do not believe that these gradational differences cohere across spheres. Instead, they see haphazard patterns, results here and there, but no clear, definitive, overarching pattern.<sup>28</sup> Kingston is joined in this approach by those who stress the lack of "class consciousness" or "class identification" on the part of those who are similarly situated within the economic domain. Taking a historical perspective, these authors assert that "the communal aspects of class, class subcultures and milieu, have long since disappeared."<sup>29</sup> These social scientists are simply not persuaded that there are recognizable, categorical differences by social class.

One problem with these claims, however, is that the studies on which they draw have been fragmented and overly specialized, asking precise but small questions. In assessing the common linkages, researchers have drawn on multiple studies that they put together in an ill-fitting, jigsaw-puzzle form of explanation. What is needed is research that is less narrow. Specifically, studies are required that investigate wide swaths of social life in order to determine how social class makes a substantial difference in children's lives *and* also acknowledge those areas of life that may be largely immune to class influence. In short, we need a more holistic

categories of middle class, working class, and poor.<sup>30</sup> (See Table C1, Appendix C for details on how these categories were defined in this study.) I see this approach as more valuable than the gradational analysis often adopted by American scholars.<sup>31</sup> In addition, I demonstrate that class differences in family life cut across a number of different and distinct spheres, which are usually not analyzed together by social scientists.

In particular, I delineate a pattern of concerted cultivation in middle-class families and a pattern of the accomplishment of natural growth in working-class and poor families. Table 1 provides an overview of the main points of the book. It indicates that concerted cultivation entails an emphasis on children's structured activities, language development and reasoning in the home, and active intervention in schooling. By contrast, the accomplishment of natural growth describes a form of child rearing in which children "hang out" and play, often with relatives, are given clear directives from parents with limited negotiation, and are granted more autonomy to manage their own affairs in institutions outside of the home. These patterns help us unpack the mechanisms through which social class conveys an advantage in daily life. In addressing these important issues, I have been guided heavily by the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu (see Appendix B for a brief exposition of his theoretical ideas).<sup>32</sup>

Despite these differences in social structural experiences, some important aspects of children's lives are *not* differentiated by class, including watching favorite television shows, having meals at fast food restaurants such as McDonald's, taking an interest in specific dolls and action figures, and eagerly anticipating Halloween and important family holidays. As I show in subsequent chapters, all parents (regardless of social class) face the task of getting children up, dressed, fed, and transported to school, and getting them medical attention when sick. Thus, some experiences are threaded through the lives of all families. Nevertheless, social class differences influence the very pace and rhythm of daily life. The next chapter, which examines the life of Garrett Tallinger, shows how middle-class parents' efforts to develop their children's talents through organized leisure activities can create a frenetic family life.