Schooling and Social Identity

Learning to Act your Age in Contemporary Britain

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Contents

Introduction

Another Year Begins

It is early September, and after a particularly dour and rainy summer, students and staff are returning to begin another busy, chaotic, lively chapter in the life of Lakefield School, a secondary school in the south-east of England.[1] It is just past eight O'clock in the morning, and I have arrived with Sophie Leckford, the younger of the school's two female Drama teachers (she is 26), who has agreed to give me a lift each morning during the course of the year. Sophie likes to get to school early in time to prepare for the coming day, and at this hour there is little activity in the grey expanse of the playground between the school's two main buildings. A few students, dropped off early by parents on the way to work, or simply escaping from home early, stand solitary in the playground, looking exposed and expectant in the quiet of a space that is soon to be swelling with people. The staffroom, similarly, is quiet at this time, as most teachers are either still on their way through morning traffic or have retreated to departmental offices and classrooms to prepare for the days and weeks to come. This slightly unnerving tranquillity—the kind that can only be felt in places normally alive with noise and activity—begins

[1] All participants and locations mentioned in this book have been de-identified.

to slowly dissolve as the clock moves towards eight thirty. More and more students pile out of small family cars, students on bikes swerve into the site to fill the bike racks, and the local school buses, turning in slow, lazy arcs, come to a stop outside the front entrance. The staff car parks are now filled, and the school's numerous new teachers—among them several 20-something newly qualified teachers (NQTs)—have managed to park alongside the spaces already spoken-for by the more veteran members of staff. As shiny new *Clarks* school shoes clobber the grit and cement of the playground, and tea is poured into well-handled, coveted mugs in the staffroom, a din of people share the stories behind new hairstyles and summer suntans. At eight forty-five the bell rings for registration, and this final, liminal moment of end-of-summer is brought abruptly to an end. Another year begins.

For all students at Lakefield, this Autumn term, like every other Autumn term, will mark the beginning of a new stage in their progression through the structural hierarchy of the school. Regardless of their individual competencies and experiences, students entering into each new year group will face new academic expectations, new aspects of the assessment regime, and new institutional and social statuses as they make their way, involuntarily, up the school's rigid structure of age-grades. Now as Year 11, last year's Year 10 are currently at the top of the hierarchy of students in compulsory education at Lakefield, while new Year 12 students, only six weeks removed from the regimens of Year 11, are experiencing their first days in school out of uniform and in the markedly different setting of the sixth form. Year 7s, for their part, are new to the school's system of age classification and accordingly must readjust to their place at the bottom of the hierarchy, far removed as they now are from the primary school playgrounds where they recently held primacy. Among the staff, Lakefield's NQTs are beginning their professional lives as teachers, and must start to engage in the varying age-related interactions that shape relationships both with students in different year groups and with other teachers.

Each of these transitions involves learning to 'act' one's age through the mediation of what I term *age imaginaries*—the concept that I develop in this book in order to consider how young people and adults alike experience age as an aspect of social identity at school. The institutional

structure, ethos and formal practices of the school provide a certain uniformity to this process: they are part of the 'rigid age hierarchy' that carves up imaginings of age into a taxonomy that suggests order and predictability (Pilcher 1995: 33). But age-based transitions are also experienced and articulated by a multiplicity of actively engaged individuals, across a range of contexts, in a variety of different ways that do not always map neatly onto the dominant taxonomy of age categories. In the first week of term, in the midst of these transitions—some explicit, uniform and institutionalised; some more nuanced, contested, shifting and complex—I began to explore how imaginings of age are negotiated as part of everyday life at Lakefield School.

An Outline of the Book

This book provides a new and critical approach to contemporary debates about the nature of age as an aspect of social identity, and its relationship to experiences of schooling. This is also an ethnographic account that provides a window into real life at school in England. I investigate how age is negotiated as an aspect of social identity for students and staff at Lakefield, but the broader aim of this book is also to shine a critical light on the nature of age as an aspect of social identity in the context of contemporary British society. In so doing, I would also like to raise some important and potentially controversial questions for the future of formal schooling (its structure and ideological objectives) and also about changing intergenerational relations, the blurring of age boundaries and the democratisation of child-adult relations in twenty-first-century Britain. While these questions are specific to England, they have resonance for many other societies that have developed systems of mass education based, in various ways, on age-based structures of social organisation.

Age represents one of the most fundamentally taken-for-granted and paradoxical categories through which we give our lives structure and meaning. On one hand, we are complicit in the construction of rather rigid ideas about the qualities *ought to* make up an individual's identity relative to age—from physical, psychological and intellectual develop-

ment, through to social and sexual relations, to rights and responsibilities, through to consumption habits, dispositions and tastes. At the same time, we are also aware of the often chaotic, haphazard and uneven ways in which age is *experienced* relative to these ideal qualities. To complicate matters further, age remains a dynamic aspect of self-making: we are constantly ageing, and as a consequence, we are compelled to make sense of this process by *re-constituting* how we imagine age as an aspect of who we are, in relation to others and in the broader context of society. And if this wasn't complicated enough, the dynamic nature of age also means that what it *means* to be a certain age is also in flux: older generations might struggle to see themselves in the young, and the young may struggle to understand why older people don't understand them. This also speaks to the importance of age as an idiom that gives order not only to ideas of social structure but also to notions of how culture is transmitted or reproduced over time (Akinnaso 1992; Ingold 2017). Age is therefore profoundly social in its manifestation, and deeply personal in its experience. In the busy, ongoing reconciliation of our own ideals and lived experiences of age—of what it means to be a child, to grow up, to become an adult and to grow old—it is easy to overlook the very nature of the social processes through which this reconciliation takes place.

Adding to scholarly debate about how age is imagined socially is particularly important in a time when the lived experiences of age and social identity—the *changing* nature of what it means to be a child, to grow up, to become adult—are seemingly even more dynamic and open to reconfiguration than they have been in the past. In Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century, popular and political discourse reflects deep anxiety about the nature of age in flux. Recently, these fears have been evidenced in public outcry about everything from the 'troubling' youth at the centre of the London riots in 2011, through to the media clamour in 2013 over the transformation of child-icon-turned-sex-object, Miley Cyrus, through to concern that modern teenagers might actually be *too* well-behaved (Parker-Pope 2012), to more recent concerns about screen time (Greenfield 2014) and knife crime (Younge 2018), to the celebration and/or condemnation of youth climate activism (Nevett 2019). Since 2016, the much-derided term 'adulting' has been associated in popular discourse with Millennials struggling to get to grips with the

presumed demands and obligations of adult life. The volatility of age categories is an enduring popular concern: whatever the zeitgeist, falteringly we raise well-worn concerns about the sanctity of childhood, about the threat and precariousness of youth, about the illusory stability of adulthood, and about the looming crisis of an ageing population that refuses to conform to established definitions of being 'old'. In spite of these concerns, the concept of age often eludes detailed critique as a category of self-making and social organisation, even in contexts like schools where age is of primary social importance. In this book, I intend to go some way towards redressing this important and timely imbalance.

To do this, I raise questions about the interface between schooling and age in the complex process of constructing social identity. This involves exploring how age is imagined in the institutional structures of schooling and in the discourses that pervade mass state education, specifically in relation to notions of cognitive and psychological development, in the construction of ideas about young people as citizens and consumers, and in negotiating the (fading) ideology of unquestionable adult authority and control. I investigate these themes at the institutional level and at the level of discourse, and through vignettes from the ethnography that describe the everyday relationships between students and teachers at Lakefield School. I also consider the social relationships between young people in relation to age. Is it OK, for example, for a Year 11 boy to go out with a girl in Year 9? If not, why not? Should younger students naturally respect older students? How do students 'play' with age in virtual online spaces where they can perform any age they choose? Exploring these kinds of questions helps to reveal how age is figured as an aspect of social identity in the everyday lives of young people. The book then moves on to consider age in the lives of teachers—particularly, the experiences of chronologically younger teachers 'growing up' while simultaneously playing the role of adults in their lives at school. In each case, I use these descriptions to reflect on the changing nature of social interactions between adults and young people in contemporary British society. Each vignette adds to the narrative of what daily life is like in an English secondary school. This ethnography is not intended to be generalisable beyond its immediate research context, but

there are important aspects of the story of Lakefield that resonate with experiences of secondary schooling across the UK, and with wider discourses of age that permeate social life both inside and outside schools. Given the almost universal presence of hierarchical taxonomies of age in the English state education system (i.e. almost all state secondary schools in England at the time of writing are organised primarily according to age), it is not difficult to imagine the beginning-of-year scene described above taking place in many secondary schools across the country, for many thousands of students and teachers, term after term, and year after year, in the ongoing construction of a shared imagining about how age works as part of social identity.

The book intends, then, to make two contributions to our understanding of the relationship between schooling, social identity and age. Firstly, I provide an ethnographic account of social life in an English secondary school in which the primary focus is 'age' as an aspect of self-making for both students and staff. As we shall see in Chap. 1, the history of school ethnography is littered with examples of ethnographic narrative where age looms large, but when it comes to social analysis, age remains in the background in studies that focus on other important intersectional themes like gender, class, race, or ethnicity. Even in studies that ostensibly focus on age—those that explore childhood and youth—age often remains subsumed under other categories of analysis. Following Thorne (2004), I argue that foregrounding age as the focus of analysis offers a new way to consider its significance in relation to schooling, social identity, and modernity. Secondly, in terms of theory, I put forward the idea of *age imaginaries* as a new framework for conceptualising 'age'. Age imaginaries is the term that I use to describe the multiple discourses, practices and processes of meaning-making that combine to shape notions of individual and collective age-based identity. Within the idea of age imaginaries, I incorporate notions of *narrative*, *performance* and *negotiation* as a means of creating a meaningful language for talking about age as an aspect of social life at Lakefield.

It is important to note that this account might be described as an ethnography of the recent past: the ethnography took place in 2007–2008 and documents life as it was for young people in this moment. What is valuable about this kind of approach is that it reveals, in retrospect, what

is enduring about the experience of age in schools, and what has changed. Each chapter includes a section dedicated to reflecting on recent change: clearly, there have been some significant technological, economic, geopolitical and sociological shifts in the years since 2008 which have important implications for young people. Principle among these changes are the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath; and the mass popularisation of social media and smartphone technologies. And yet in spite of these shifts, many qualities of the experience of being socialised into age-based identities at school endure as they have for more than a century—a fact which on its own is worthy of close interrogation. While each chapter presents its own set of findings, there are common themes running through the study: these are synthesised in the conclusion. The central argument of the book, as the reader may have ascertained by now, is that 'age' is a vitally important aspect of self-making in English secondary education and in the broader context of contemporary British society. This on its own is a finding that represents something of a cliché about social science research: it is an observation borne from careful investigation that also confirms what we know from common sense: *of course* age is important in schools. However, it is the seemingly self-evident nature of this 'fact' of social life that is in need of disentanglement. At Lakefield, age imaginaries are shifting and contested, and students and staff negotiate multiple, concurrent and sometimes contradictory imaginings of age within (and at times beyond) the constraints imposed by dominant taxonomies of known age imaginaries. This is achieved through the relational negotiation of age imaginaries, often framed in terms of ideas about respect, trust, responsibility, discipline, authority and control. Gender and class (and consumption-based proxies for class) emerge as key aspects of how age is negotiated. I argue that the concept of age imaginaries is a valuable starting point for understanding age as a complex aspect of social identity in school because it highlights the simultaneous and corroborative nature of structural forces and individual agency in the self-making processes taking place. It highlights the concurrent, occasionally discordant, but not necessarily mutually exclusive nature of the multiple age imaginaries that individuals construct together through self-making at school.

In order to consider the different aspects of age imaginaries as they are negotiated within the context of Lakefield School, this book is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 of the book provides a review of relevant literature and a brief history of ideas that serve to organise contemporary notions of age. The first part of Chap. 1 outlines the various different traditions of research into age, socialisation and social identity. This includes a discussion of how age is framed in chronological and developmental terms, and in relation to cognition and physiology. I then move on to consider sociological and psychological reckonings of age before exploring how formal state education has influenced the social construction of age. I highlight class, gender and consumption as key factors influencing how age is constructed as an aspect of social identity within the context of education. The main aim of Chap. 1 is to suggest that age remains an organising concept at the heart of the modern project, reified, reproduced, and occasionally resisted through experiences of mass schooling.

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework of age imaginaries in response to the arguments put forward in Chap. 1. The remainder of the book is divided into narrative chapters of ethnography. In the first part of each chapter, I begin by presenting the broader topic in question, drawing on a range of examples from across the literature and from popular discourse in order to set the stage. I then ground the discussion by referring to specific ethnographic vignettes that describe relevant aspects of social life at Lakefield School. In this way, Chap. 3 begins by looking at how age is constructed in the structure and discourse of secondary education as a whole. I then go on to explore age imaginaries as they emerge in the institutional structure and ethos at Lakefield, looking particularly at tension between traditional understandings of adult authority and more recent child-centred notions of agency and the democratisation of child-adult relations. Chapter 4 considers how age is constructed both in approaches to curriculum and in classroom practice. This includes a discussion of discipline and adult authority, as well as the discursive and embodied negotiation of age imaginaries through the content and delivery of school curricula. I then go on to consider how age imaginaries are physically embodied in the classroom at Lakefield, before moving on to consider students' and teachers' narratives about age as an aspect of their daily interactions in lessons. Chapter 4 also explores discourses of age as they emerge (and are

contested) in the content and delivery of the curriculum, focusing on Year 7 and Year 11 (pupils aged approximately 11–16). The latter part of the chapter explores the question of why 'school sucks' (as one Lakefield student put it) for so many young people—why many young people dislike going to school, and how this relates to issues of authority, discipline, age, class and gender. In Chap. 5, I explore the social significance of age in the informal interactions between students in schools. In so doing, I explore broader questions about 'generationing' (Alanen and Mayall 2001) and the long-term impact of experiences of school on how individuals perceive their social relations with others in relation to age (their contemporaries and those younger and older than them), and on their perceptions of progression through the life course. In the context of Lakefield, I analyse how age is negotiated in the informal social relations between students, both across and within different year groups. Again, class, media consumption and gender emerge as sub-themes in this chapter. Chapter 6 moves on to consider age imaginaries in the lives of adults, exploring the changing nature of transitions into adulthood, the production and consumption of 'youth' culture among adults, and the changing nature of intergenerational social relations. I focus specifically on how questions of age impact the lives of younger teachers in relation to notions of professional identity and their relations with students and other staff. I consider the case of 'younger teachers' at Lakefield, focusing on how they negotiate age both with students and with other members of staff as well.

I conclude by reiterating the central argument of the book: experiences of formal education have a significant and enduring impact on how individuals construct notions of age as an aspect of social identity. Crucially, however, the lived experience of negotiating age through schooling is not as linear or straightforward as it appears in the structure of the education system and in the rest of society. On the contrary, age imaginaries are shifting and contested, and students and staff negotiate multiple, concurrent and sometimes contradictory imaginings of age on a daily basis. This is achieved through the relational negotiation of age imaginaries, often framed in terms of ideas about respect, trust, responsibility, authority and control. Gender and class emerge as key aspects of how age is negotiated in this way, and consumption often serves as a vehicle for articulating issues of age and identity. I argue that

the concept of age imaginaries is a valuable starting point for understanding 'age' as a complex aspect of social identity because it highlights the simultaneity of structural forces and social agency in the self-making processes taking place. In so doing, this concept also offers a critique of 'agency' as an aspect of the experiences of young people and adults at school. In this way, age imaginaries allow for a critical exploration of the relational negotiation of age between students and staff in school contexts while also giving due attention to the material, virtual, spatial, nonhuman components in this process (Hadfield-Hill and Christensen 2019). The ultimate point of this book is to argue that a linear imagining of age endures as an often-unchallenged 'grand narrative' of modernity and as an organising concept of profound importance for modern society. A linear, developmental imagining of age underpins the very notions of learning and transmission that we use to organise our thinking about how culture itself is produced and reproduced. Nowhere is this more evident that in the dominant framing of mass education through schooling as described in this book. Given current conditions of uncertainty and change, and taking into consideration the recent lived experiences of young people, I argue that we need to rethink our approach to conceptualising age within the context of education and, indeed, in wider society as well. This leads us to questions about the structure and content of formal education. In a complex social world where age categories are increasingly in flux, what is the future of an education system, and a model of cultural transmission, based on fixed ideas of age hierarchy, where one generation lives in the shadow of the last? Free from a rigid taxonomy of age hierarchy, what alternative mode of education might flourish in schools? These are questions of sum importance for educators and pupils alike.

An Overview of the Research Process and an Introduction to Lakefield School

Before unravelling the various intellectual threads that have influenced current thinking about age, identity and schooling, it will be worth saying a few words about the nature of the research project that this book

draws upon. In brief, my ethnography of Lakefield School involved research conducted over the course of one academic year. I spent most of my time following a reduced version of the normal schedule for a teaching assistant, which was equivalent to four lessons a day out of five. In lessons I therefore acted, occasionally, as an informal helper, providing academic support to students when necessary, but avoiding involvement in the enforcement of any of the disciplinary rules of the school. In most lessons, this afforded me ample time to sit at the back of the classroom and observe the social interactions taking place around me. Most of my time in lessons was spent with two Year 7 classes, one Year 9 class, two Year 10 classes and two Year 11 classes. Time outside of lessons was divided between the staffroom, other staff areas and communal social spaces for students, where I particularly spent time with Year 12 and 13 students (pupils aged roughly 16–18). As the year progressed, I also participated in a range of extra-curricular activities (particularly the school's guitar club), a number of school trips and other social events outside of the confines of the normal school day.

Negotiating Age Imaginaries in School Ethnography

> Patrick: Is age an important thing that defines who you are?
> Keisha: Yeah, I mean in a way, like even in this project, like even only last year I would have needed parental consent, whereas now I'm considered mature enough to make my own decisions about whether or not I take part and sign the form myself.

As the quote from Keisha (a Lakefield student in Year 13) suggests, the ways in which imagined notions of age are given social, legal and ethical meaning are important aspects of how ethnography is figured, particularly in social contexts like schools where age plays an important role in social status. Spindler and Spindler are right in asserting that the ethnography of schooling is in essence the same as ethnography anywhere else, in so much as it is about understanding the cultural and social worlds of a particular community of people (2000: 248). But at

the same time, school contexts present a number of particular issues for ethnographers. School ethnography is complicated because it must take into consideration not only issues of power and authority in the structure of everyday school life, but in the relationship between researchers and students as well—even when (or, perhaps, particularly when) the underlying aim of the research is to advocate for the rights of marginalised children or young people (Yon 2003: 413). Whether researchers are in a position of power, in subordinate positions in relation to participants or in the frequent and uncomfortable position betwixt and between (embodying the high social status of 'adult' and the low social status of fumbling ethnographer), questions about notions of age in school are inextricably tied in this way to questions about how researchers attempt to 'bridge the gap' between the adult world of staff and the world of students by inhabiting an unusual position between these categories (Pollard 1987). An ethnographic study of age imaginaries in a school would therefore be incomplete without exploring the ways in which imaginings of age are negotiated in the research process itself. The theoretical questions of the ethnography are in important ways entangled with the practice of conducting the research. As such, questions of methodology—in particular, questions of the significance of age in the positioning of the researcher—also play a part in framing the findings that emerge in the different chapters that follow.

Lakefield School

Let us now turn our attention to the site of the ethnography. The activities described in this book took place between 2007 and 2008 at Lakefield School, a comprehensive (state) secondary school located in a small market town in the southeast of England. The school is home to approximately 1000 students aged 11 to 18 and roughly 60 members of staff. Lakefield is located on one site just outside of the town, tucked in between areas of both significant affluence and marked social disadvantage. As a result, the students represent a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds and experiences. Many students come from families that have remained

in the area of the school for generations, with parents and sometimes grandparents having attended Lakefield as well. Other students, often living further a-field and from more affluent families, have less established histories with the area. Families at a nearby military base and families from local traveller communities also send their children to the school, adding further to the mix. In terms of ethnicity, the school is predominantly white British, with only a small number of Black British, Black African and Asian students in attendance. The staff is also predominantly white.

As a school, Lakefield prides itself on a sense of community and mutual respect, crystallised in the school's vision statement:

> *At Lakefield students will find an ordered community that treats them with respect, where bullying is not tolerated and where they will grow in confidence and be trusted with more responsibility as they become young adults. Young adults equipped to succeed making a real and positive difference in a demanding and changing world.*

It is possible from this statement to see how ideas of age are deeply engrained in the school's image of itself, but the institutional significance of age can also be seen in the mundane details of how the school is organised, as I describe in Chap. 2. Lakefield is organised formally into age-classes of Year Groups (Years 7 to 13), pastoral tutor groups (of up to 30 students, but diminishing in size as one moves up the school) and according to the Key Stages of the English National Curriculum. This is divided into Key Stage 3 for Years 7–9; Key Stage 4, focused mainly on General Certificate of Secondary Education (or GCSE) qualifications for Years 10–11; and Key Stage 5 (focused mainly on A-Levels), or, latterly, 'sixth form'. Students are streamed loosely according to ability at Key Stage 3, and academic classes in Years 10–11 are also organised according to ability. There are no classes or tutor groups that incorporate students from different year groups.

School uniform is worn by students in Years 7 to 11, while students in Years 12 and 13 are permitted to wear their own clothes. Break and lesson times are the same for all students in Years 7–13; the sixth form, however, is part of a consortium that includes another local school and the local sixth form college, meaning that sixth form students have lessons on a

number of different sites in the area and accordingly have greater independence to organise their own schedules. In terms of student involvement in the running of the school, Lakefield encourages a system of 'Student Voice' whereby students can actively put forward opinions and suggestions to the staff (see Chap. 3). This commitment to student participation is balanced against a rigid and systematically enforced discipline structure known officially as the 'Ladder of Consequences'.

It would not be accurate to suggest that class was a discrete or easily recognisable marker of identity for many of the students in the school—not least because social class was frequently articulated by proxy through practices of consumption and through discourses about different kinds of 'youths' (see, in particular, Chaps. 4, 5 and 6). However, class nevertheless had an important role to play in terms of the discourses of age in which students were willing, able or expected to acquiesce. There is of course a long tradition of research related to social class and educational failure (in which imaginings of age, I argue, are an implicit factor) in English secondary schools (Dolby et al. 2004). Age imaginaries and social class are certainly inter-related aspects of life at Lakefield School, but they are often acted out in shifting and unpredictable ways. The class divide is not discrete (teachers are not always 'posh', but the school can be; students are not always 'common', but sometimes they are seen to be), but there is nevertheless a connection between the kinds of activities and attitudes that are considered 'appropriate' behaviour for certain students and an awareness of the kinds of age imaginaries that are associated with classed identities (being 'posh' or 'common', or both). While I explore this in more detail in Chaps. 4 and 5, and in the concluding remarks of the book, for the time being it will be enough to recognise that class is a significant aspect of the lives of students at Lakefield, but one that is particularly difficult to pin down.

The staff at Lakefield, while predominantly white British and from what we might loosely term 'middle-class' backgrounds, represent a broad range of chronological ages. Some of the oldest teachers in the staff, now reaching retirement age (known to some as the 'almost-retireds'), have taught at the school since the late 1970s. A large proportion of the teachers in positions of power within the management team hail from a

younger generation (in their mid- to late-40s at the time of the ethnography) who began teaching at Lakefield in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Another generation of teachers, several of whom began teaching at the school as NQTs in the middle of the 2000s (and known to some as the 'younger teachers') represent the younger end of the chronological age spectrum. The majority of teaching staff are aged between 35 and 55, but the youngest full-time member of staff, Sara, celebrated her 23rd birthday during the research. A number of the PGCE interns (trainee teachers studying for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education) in the school were younger still at 21 and 22. We will return to these differences in more detail in Chap. 6.

The school itself has been around in various forms since the 1820s and has existed on its current site since the 1950s. The site consists primarily of a number of functional one- and two-storey buildings which surround a central tarmac playground. A large grassy field, used for Physical Education (PE) (and for socialising during break time in the summer terms), marks the boundary of the school site to the left of the main entrance. Outside of the rough quadrangle made by the main school buildings lies another L-shaped building that houses the Maths and Science departments, the school hall and the cafeteria. The other buildings of the school include the gym, the newer music blocks and *Stepping Stones*—the latter a more secluded group of temporary 'terrapin' portacabin buildings set aside for a small number of students with 'behavioural difficulties'. The main buildings are functional brickwork, corrugated iron, yawning metal framed windows and bleached linoleum. Aged, faded green curtains limp next to pockets of late-arriving innovation—DVD players, interactive whiteboards and colourful, well-presented displays of students' work. Some classrooms reflect the dedication of individual teachers, students and/or departments and are organised, colourful and welcoming; others are testament to years of institutional neglect. The desks are pen-scarred, but clean, and chips in the freshly painted brown classroom doors reveal the long history of industrial-shade colour-schemes that the school has endured. The rubber banisters on the stairs are shiny and palm-worn. Behind the science block, next to the bright new music rooms, there is a thick carpet of long-dead cigarette ends. The visible signs of wear and tear, juxtaposed with the brand-new facilities, speak of the multitude of lives that have passed through the

space of the school during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, on their way into the present and off into the future. Like all schools of its kind, Lakefield is steeped in temporality.

Before we enter Lakefield and explore this temporality in the lives of its inhabitants, however, let us return to the literature in order to better situate age as the focus of inquiry.

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1

Age in Society: Framing Social Structure

Introduction: Blurred Lines

What does the pop star Miley Cyrus have in common with William Shakespeare? This is only sort of a joke. Picture, if you will, a young, peroxide-blonde pop starlet, onstage in front of millions of children and young people, dressed in skimpy hot pants and surrounded by giant teddy bears, tongue hanging out, twerking[1] up against a man almost two decades her senior, singing a song with explicit, misogynist sexual content, entitled *Blurred Lines*. This is the iconic scene from American singer Miley Cyrus's 2013 Video Music Awards performance alongside singer Robin Thicke, the content of which sent the global media into paroxysms of salacious anxiety about the declining moral values of modern children and youth, and the sexualisation of young women. Cyrus' performance was particularly scandalous because she had formerly portrayed the quintessentially innocent children's TV character Hannah Montana and was seen as a role model for pre-teen girls worldwide. Her 2013 performance and subsequent sexualised reincarnations as an adult pop icon

[1] A particular kind of suggestive dance popular among young people in 2013 and originally associated with 'bounce' hip hop from the Southern United States.

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have wrecked this image of innocence, arousing much popular outcry and hand-wringing, not least among the parents of her current and former fans. Now picture Jacques, wistfully lamenting in *As You Like It* that 'all the world's a stage' upon which we transition from 'infant' to 'schoolboy', 'lover', 'soldier', 'justice', 'pantaloon' and finally to 'second childishness… and oblivion' in our journeys through life. Each of these rather incongruous texts have served as weathervanes for popular anxiety about age. The latter has invited centuries of readers to ponder the cruel inevitability of the linear ageing process. While the former is now already gathering dust in the public consciousness, the case of Miley Cyrus more recently provoked millions, in contrast, because of what it suggests about the precariousness and changing significance of age categories. Specifically, Cyrus and Thicke laid bare the 'troubled' sanctity of childhood and the implications that this has for the increasingly blurred lines of contemporary adulthood. The yawning centuries between these texts are littered with examples from popular discourse of our preoccupation either with the inevitable nature of the life course, or the prospect that age categories—and particularly childhood and youth—are inevitably not what they 'used to be'. This is evidenced as much in the popular impact of the writings of Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Durkheim, Piaget, Erisken, Hall, and Freud as it is public and political outcry about delinquent child criminals on the streets of Victorian London, 'penny dreadful' magazines, mods and rockers of 1960s Britain (Cohen 1972), 1990s gangsta rap (Springhall 1998), 'hoodies', paedophilia, the negative impact of new digital technologies on contemporary children's brains (Greenfield 2014) or the more recent moral panic about knife crime. The tension between inevitable structure and the inevitable decay of structure is of profound importance to recent social constructions of age as an aspect of the human condition.

Shakespeare's *Seven Ages of Man* is an all-too-common starting point for historical reflections on the seemingly eternal nature of age and the life course, experienced through discrete stages (see, e.g. James 2004). Whatever the veracity of the ages that Shakespeare presents, we are broadly familiar with contemplating our social, intellectual, moral, spiritual and psychic development alongside the growth and decay of our bodies in this kind of way. It seems reasonable to presume that a temporal reckoning of the person, alongside the institution of some system of

organisation that makes this temporal reckoning socially meaningful, is a relatively common (if not necessarily universal) human practice. Age, in its many manifestations, can be related to shifting social status and shifts in standing and power within a society, often enacted through ritual activity and performance, and crystallised in relation to age grades, age sets and generations (Van Gennep 1960; Mannheim 1952 [1923]). Reproducing these transitions through age-related statuses provides a framework for other forms of social and cultural reproduction. Indeed, conceptions of age underpin in a profound way how we make sense of how culture 'works' over time—how it is transmitted, produced and reproduced from one generation to the next. As Ingold has suggested (2017), a 'genealogical' model pervades how we think about learning as the process through which culture is inscribed, and culture is in this sense inherently 'aged' because age categories often shape how one's education into culture is enacted. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools. In a genealogical framing, knowledge is in its essence a matter of transferring skills, values, beliefs, morality, rights and obligations from one older group to a younger one. However, it is not the case that all people everywhere imagine and make sense of age (or culture, or time, or how knowledge 'transfers', for that matter) in the same genealogical terms—even if many Western scientists and social scientists have done so for more than a century. On the contrary, cross-cultural comparisons highlight a rich diversity of ways to configure age (and, therefore, culture), each the product of making human existence meaningful within a given social and cultural context. The fact that culture, as a process, remains dynamic and prone to change also means that the categories used to define age are also likely to shift *within* cultural contexts (Anderson-Levitt 2012). And yet, as in the case with Miley Cyrus' and Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines* performance, the troubling of age categories can in turn lead to widespread social outcry because, somewhat ironically, this inevitable process of shift also implies the decay of seemingly foundational and unshakeable social structures.[2]

[2] Cyrus was formerly an icon of ideal childhood in her guise as innocent US TV character *Hanna Montana*, and in part, this highly sexualized performance caused consternation because viewers felt that she had 'desecrated' their memories of childhood and blurred the line between her childhood and adult public personas.

It is the aim of this book to better understand the above tension as it relates to schooling in contemporary British society. With this in mind, it is important to begin this chapter by interrogating the recent origins of Western ideas about age, beginning with a few big questions: Why is it that we think about and make sense of age and the ageing process in the way that we do? What are the recent historical, philosophical and sociological premises for the way that we think about age in Western societies? How might we start to think about age differently? In Part I, I begin to explore these questions by untangling a few of the intellectual threads that combine to give structure to contemporary Western notions of 'age' as an aspect of human social life, starting with the proposition that age acts as an organising concept of sum importance to the project of modernity. I briefly examine how different scientific, political, sociological, psychological and philosophical traditions coalesced during the twentieth century to cement a particularly linear notion of how age figures as an aspect of the human condition. This narrative is linked to changing social constructions of the concept of childhood in Western society; to patterns of mass consumption; and, crucially, to the encroachment of the modern nation-state and its disciplinary institutions (Foucault 1977) into the lives of children and young people. An important part of this encroachment—mass education—is given its own due in the following chapter. In Part II, I continue by reviewing sociological and anthropological thinking about age, with particular reference to childhood, youth and education. This review sets the scene for the concept of age imaginaries that I elaborate in Chap. 2.

Part I: The Modern Age

Defining 'Age' as a Term of Analysis

It is important to start by noting that 'age' is a sphere of social inquiry claimed by diverse and sometimes disparate traditions across the social sciences, not to mention its various interpretations across medicine, the biological sciences, experimental psychology—and the list goes on. As a result, age has been understood from a range of epistemological and

theoretical perspectives. What each has in common, however, is the notion that our present linear, chronological framing of age is an *inevitable* feature of human life, as much in our biology as in our forms of social organisation. The current dominant notion of linear age is, I argue, the grandest of all narratives: it serves as the trellis against which to train the many vines of human life that flourish under the guise of modernity. Taking age as an *a priori* starting point for inquiry across diverse disciplines has helped to cement the normality of the age categories against which modern society is organised—from physical and cognitive development, to moral and intellectual growth, to civic responsibility and legal culpability. Age is at the heart of modern personhood, literally from the moment of conception.

It is the very centrality of age to the project of modernity that makes its interrogation as an organising concept for social life seem unnecessary, or even facile. Within the social sciences, age is employed in multiple ways, often by proxy, as a backdrop for making sense of other aspects of social life. The quiet ubiquity of age as a backdrop in social science research in this sense means that it is particularly difficult to pin down as a discrete field of study. Indeed, it is perhaps better to see 'age' currently existing at the crossroads of multiple fields of inquiry, rather than as a field in its own right. This is made even more apparent by the fact that studies dealing with 'age' frequently focus on one particular stage or time of life, in terms of childhood, youth, adolescence, adulthood, old age and so on, rather than dealing with 'age' more broadly defined. More often than not, purported studies of age are in fact studies of ageing. This also means that there exist fewer theoretical accounts that present a coherent and critical picture of age as a broader continuum, particularly in terms of its significance as a marker of identity or self-making (Hockey and James 2003; Pilcher 1995; Thorne 2004). As Pilcher suggests, 'theorizing on age…is underdeveloped and limited, in that there is no one overarching theory. Rather, there is a somewhat heterogeneous bundle of theories, each with a variety of concerns, strengths and weaknesses' (1995: 16). More recently, renewed interest in age as a broad field of inquiry has signalled a shift towards more holistic considerations of how age 'works' in society (Cote 2000; Furlong 2009; Thorne 2004). However, there remains scant research that takes as its focus age broadly defined. This is