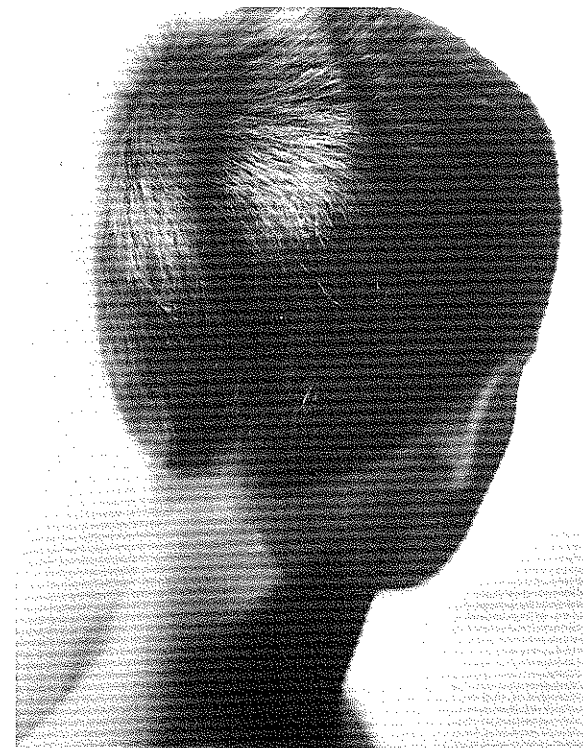


annette lareau

# 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."

*For Samuel, for the many ways  
in which he enriches my life,  
and in memory of George McClure,  
who offered me, and many other young  
scholars, criticism, care, and confidence*

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## Acknowledgments

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# Concerted Cultivation Gone Awry: Melanie Handlon

"I just figure, if kids didn't have homework, life would be easy." (Ms. Handlon)

In the middle class, children's activities outside of the home often penetrate deeply into the heart of family life and in so doing create opportunities for conflict. For the Handlons, it is homework that poses the most consistent threat to household harmony. Homework conflicts occur, or are mentioned, during virtually every visit field-workers make to the Handlon home. Ms. Handlon's observation that "life would be easy" if it weren't for homework sums up the enormous impact the issue has on this family.

Like the Tallingers, Marshalls, and Williamses, the Handlons have important forms of social, economic, and cultural capital. They are well positioned to intervene in their children's institutional lives. Some of the strategies Mr. and Ms. Handlon pursue are familiar components of concerted cultivation. For example, much like Ms. Marshall, Ms. Handlon tries to ensure the academic success of her daughter, Melanie, by tailoring Melanie's classroom experiences. Unlike Ms. Marshall, though, Ms. Handlon makes only intermittent contact with school staff and is only partly successful in achieving the accommodations she seeks. What is most striking about the Handlons' approach to child rearing is the emphasis they put on activating their resources *inside* the home. Ms. Handlon makes sustained, intense efforts in the area of homework. She expends large quantities of time and energy each weekday afternoon, trying to help Melanie complete her assignments. Ironically, this strategy yields few positive results. It pits mother against daughter, emotionally exhausting both, yet seems to yield few institutional profits.

## THE HANDLON FAMILY

June Handlon, a thin, middle-aged woman with wavy red hair, has a relaxed way about her. Her husband, Harold, is a tall, friendly man with a boyish grin. Although he is an enthusiastic golfer, Mr. Handlon nevertheless is about fifty pounds overweight. He has an M.A. in credit and financial management and works as a credit manager in a major corporation. Ms. Handlon completed two years of junior college and is employed as a secretary by the Sylvan Presbyterian Church. She works thirty hours per week.

The Handlons have three children: Harry, an eighth-grader; Tommy, a sixth-grader at the nearby middle school; and Melanie, the focal child, a fourth-grader at the neighborhood elementary school. Harry is tall and thin, with longish brown hair that is mostly hidden under a nearly ever-present baseball cap (worn backward); he loves country music, street hockey, and, most of all, auto racing. Tommy, by contrast, prefers theater and plays to sports. Melanie resembles neither of her brothers. Field notes from the first visit to the Handlon home describe Melanie this way:

Melanie answers the door with a shy smile. She is young and maybe 4' 4" tall. Her hair is long and blond. . . . She has a thin white plastic headband on her head, which pulls her hair back from her face. Her face is pudgy; she has chubby cheeks, which make her eyes seem very small and squinted. She wears a purple turtleneck and matching purple knit pants. The clothes fit her tightly and reveal that she has a young potbelly.

At school, Melanie is more often tentative than assertive. Although she is not especially popular, neither is she a social isolate. She misses school frequently for minor illnesses such as sore throat, sore foot, or cold (but in an interview, Melanie confesses to a field-worker that sometimes she feigns illness deliberately to avoid having to go to school). One teacher worries about her being in the "shadow" of her older brothers. Certainly at meals, where both her brothers jabber nonstop, she has little opportunity to talk.

Still, at times, she can be outgoing and engagingly uninhibited. For example, one day at school she learns how to sing the song "Happy Birthday" in Spanish. That afternoon, pleased with her new accomplishment, Melanie sings the song over and over and over. She sings in the car and while doing her homework. She sings at dinner. In fact, she sings all through the evening. The lack of an appreciative audience for her newest skill does not seem to diminish Melanie's enthusiasm. She also enjoys playful interactions with her father, including pitching a paper airplane at

his belly. Thus, while accurately described as shy, Melanie can and does change her behavior as she moves from context to context.

In the Handlon family, most household tasks, as well as scheduling and coordinating family members' activities and providing transportation to and from events and appointments are Ms. Handlon's responsibility. Despite the regularity of Mr. Handlon's work routine (he leaves the house each weekday at 7:30 A.M. and returns home at 6:00 P.M.), he does very little child-related labor. Instead, he handles such matters as videotaping the church pageant and putting up the family's Christmas tree lights.

#### THE HANDLONS' WORLD

The Handlons, and Melanie in particular, live in a white world. Among the sixty or so children in the two fourth grades at Melanie's elementary school, only five are nonwhite. Similarly, both Melanie's Girl Scout troop and her family's church congregation are overwhelmingly white. The Handlons' nearly all white social world is coupled with a physical environment that is, if anything, even less integrated. The family's four-bedroom home (a two-story, red brick house built in the late 1940s and worth about \$245,000) is located in a homogenous suburban neighborhood.

With a family income of between \$85,000 and \$95,000 per year, the Handlons are solidly middle class and appear to take many elements of middle-class status for granted. They own an array of electronics (TVs, stereo, VCR, electronic keyboard) and each adult has a car. All three children participate in at least some activities organized by adults. The cost of these activities is dismissed as "minimal" and inconsequential. There is no indication that the Handlons feel the need to "pinch pennies." They live in cluttered comfort. On our first visit, Ms. Handlon remarks apologetically and with some embarrassment that "housework isn't my strong suit." Indeed, the dining room table is piled with all sorts of items — coupons, socks, used cups, a laundry basket of clean but unfolded clothes, and piles of papers. In the kitchen, dirty dishes sometimes pile up in the sink and are left unheeded on the table. In the living room, several half-opened boxes of Christmas ornaments rest on the couch for over a week while the Christmas tree is being decorated. This level of untidiness is not common among middle-class families, but it does not appear to cause trouble for the Handlons.

Unlike most middle-class families, the Handlons have many relatives who live close by. Melanie's parents describe themselves as feeling emotionally close to these members of their extended family. They report see-

ing their relatives about once a week and note that they also spend major holidays with them, including Thanksgiving, at which time they had twenty people at the house. The Handlons' interactions with kin are much more frequent than is typical among the middle class, but they do not approach the kinds of connections that are common among working-class and poor families. Among these groups, as previous chapters have shown, informal play and visits with cousins are not restricted to once a week or special occasions. Instead, they dominate everyday family life.

#### COMPETING VALUES: THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZED ACTIVITIES AND UNSTRUCTURED TIME

Compared to other middle-class children, Melanie does not have a "heavy" schedule of organized activities. She is by no means idle outside of school, however. During December, she juggles several regularly scheduled commitments with assorted holiday events. Every Sunday includes an early church service, Sunday school, and youth choir practice. Mondays she has a piano lesson; Thursdays she goes to Girl Scouts. In addition to these standing events, Melanie also takes part in a special Girl Scouts "cookies for the homeless" holiday event on a Monday night and a school holiday musical performance on a Tuesday night. In between her two orthodontist appointments and five special rehearsals for the Christmas pageant at her church, she manages to Christmas shop.

Melanie does not complain about her schedule, nor do her parents seem to consider her activities overly taxing. In fact, Ms. Handlon perceives all three of her children as spending less time in organized activities than other children in the neighborhood. Both Mr. and Ms. Handlon believe that children should have free, unstructured time. Mr. Handlon explicitly criticizes the tendency of parents to "overschedule" children. Nevertheless, both Handlons hope Melanie will take on another commitment — they want her to join a swim team in the spring. When tryouts took place the previous year, Melanie had declined to participate. Her parents continue to bring the topic up from time to time, including around Christmastime. Mr. and Ms. Handlon's belief that Melanie's involvement in swimming would be an objectively good thing for her apparently trumps their resistance to the "overscheduling" of children. It can be a difficult trade-off. Middle-class parents (especially mothers) worry that if their children do not enroll in organized activities, they will have no one to play with after school and/or during spring and summer breaks. This kind of concern is clearly present with the Handlons. In

addition to their desire to see Melanie enroll in swimming, they would like her to give softball a try. One winter evening, as the family is sitting around watching television, Melanie's mother mentions softball three times. Although on each occasion she frames the decision to play softball as Melanie's, Ms. Handlon urges the activity upon her daughter and explicitly mentions her concern that Melanie not be "left out." Eventually, Melanie says, "Okay, I'll play," and the subject is dropped.

One striking though unintended result of Mr. and Ms. Handlon's tendency to actively encourage Melanie to take activities she does not seek out herself is the speed and frequency with which she will complain, "Mom, I'm bored!" Ironically, although we observed this same pattern of self-proclaimed boredom among other seemingly very busy middle-class children in the study, we did not find it among the comparatively "underscheduled" working-class and poor children.

#### CULTIVATING ACADEMIC SUCCESS: INTERVENING AT SCHOOL

Like other middle-class mothers, Ms. Handlon plays an active role in monitoring, criticizing, and intervening in Melanie's schooling. She tries to work closely with Melanie's teachers. At the beginning of the school year, for example, she brings Melanie, who is sick, to school for a brief visit so that her daughter can meet her teacher. Once Melanie is feeling better, Ms. Handlon inquires about the work missed, queries the teacher about items she did not understand, and works to facilitate her daughter's transition into fourth grade.

She kind of felt lost because kids had already gone over a lot of the things and Melanie didn't understand what was going on. So I went in, basically, every morning and talked with the teacher and asked questions.<sup>1</sup>

Melanie's minor illnesses persist and so too do her mother's interventions. Hoping to keep Melanie from falling behind, Ms. Handlon requests that the teacher send home spelling lists in advance. She photocopies each new list when it arrives and then cuts it up to make flashcards, gluing each word to an index card. She brings the cards along when she and Melanie go out on errands; as they drive around in the car, they practice spelling the words. Melanie consistently ranks at the bottom of her class academically. The Handlons have hired a private tutor for Melanie, but Ms. Handlon worries that her daughter is "intimidated" and that school is a "negative" experience for her. She believes that Melanie lacks self-

confidence and that "she needs something that [gives] her a positive feeling." She makes these opinions very clear to Melanie's teacher during a conference. In a parent-teacher conference with Ms. Nettles, Ms. Handlon makes a pointed comment that Melanie's social study teacher has placed too much emphasis on the negative in grading a test:

With the social studies test that she brought home with the big N (Needs Improvement — this is the lowest grade possible) on the top of the paper. I looked at it and I counted all the ones she got right. I said, "Melanie, compared to the last social studies test, you got like eighteen right on this one." I said, "That's a lot more than you got right on the last test so you have improved." Now, looking at the paper she couldn't see that. It was just a negative, an N . . . So, I'm trying to get her to start recognizing her positives.

Ms. Handlon's comments during the parent-teacher conference demonstrate her belief that she is *entitled* to point out what she sees as the teacher's failings with respect to the conduct of Melanie's education. This is a perspective widely shared by middle-class parents, including the many mothers with whom Ms. Handlon interacts when she brings Melanie to and from school or other events. Ms. Handlon's role as the local Girl Scout leader also provides her with informal opportunities to exchange information about routine and unusual happenings at the elementary school.<sup>2</sup> Ms. Handlon knows that many mothers have complaints of one kind or another and that many are engaged in specialized pursuits for their children.

Being embedded in a social network of middle-class mothers shapes Ms. Handlon's sense of her rights and her responsibilities with regard to Melanie's education.<sup>3</sup> She and the other mothers seem comfortable passing judgment on all aspects of their children's schooling, critiquing everything from teachers' pedagogical style to the content of their classroom bulletin boards.

Mr. Ickes (Melanie's fourth-grade social studies teacher). I had a negative opinion [about him] from parents. They don't like his teaching methods. They don't like his gruffness. People didn't like Ms. Hortense (Melanie's third-grade teacher) a lot because she was very old-school and had not changed or adapted her teaching. Her classroom was very boring. There was nothing bright or exciting. Her bulletin boards were not exciting and not conducive to exciting kids about education. At the beginning of the year, I wasn't one [of the parents who disliked Ms. Hortense] but Melanie would get a lot right on the paper, and the only thing acknowledged was what was wrong.

Ms. Handlon's network also provides her with information about what steps other parents are taking as they try to resolve school-related



problems, such as how to ensure that homework gets done correctly and on time. Her conversations with other mothers help her develop strategies for interacting with educators.

[Some of us mothers] were talking about the conferences that are coming up, and what points are going to be brought up, and what we are going to talk about. And the biggest concern I hear from parents is the amount of homework. It's every night. It's on weekends. It's constant.

Despite her belief that Melanie's teacher assigns too much homework, and her awareness that other parents are concerned about this issue, Ms. Handlon does not raise the topic of homework directly with any of the educators or administrators at the school. Instead, as the rest of this chapter describes, she tries to help Melanie herself, going over her daughter's schoolwork with her at home, each afternoon.

#### CULTIVATING ACADEMIC SUCCESS: INTERVENING AT HOME

In separate interviews, Mr. and Ms. Handlon each define homework as a major problem within the family. Ms. Handlon is frank and succinct: "Our biggest conflict is homework," she tells the interviewer. Mr. Handlon focuses on the volume of homework the children face. He estimates that Melanie does "two to three hours [of homework] every night." He describes the family routine this way:

That's all we do with them at night is homework. They come home from school, get a snack, and they'll start working on homework. And they're still working on homework, and they're still working on it when I get home. It's entirely too much homework. I don't think I did that much homework in college.

Ms. Handlon voices similar concerns during her interview, and she returns to the topic informally with a field-worker one afternoon as they sit in the family minivan, waiting to pick up Melanie after school,

[Melanie] worked on her homework [Sunday] for four hours with her father. From three until seven. I can't believe that the teachers assign so much on the weekends. Don't they have a life?

Neither Mr. nor Ms. Handlon seems to believe that *all* homework is bad and both appear to accept the view widely held among middle-class parents that children must do homework in order to succeed academically. What the Handlons object to is the quantity of work, the amount of their *children's* time spent doing school assignments, the amount of *their* time

given over to their children's homework, and the useless nature of much of the work. These elements, alone and in combination, result in a further problem, namely the constant presence of tension and conflict in the home. Homework sets off painful, protracted battles. Ms. Handlon and Melanie appear to have different ideas about how much help with schoolwork Ms. Handlon should provide, in what areas, and in what ways.

Melanie contends that her homework often is too difficult for her to complete, even with help. Her mother seems to believe that Melanie needs to concentrate more. Especially in math, Ms. Handlon tries to help by taking Melanie step by step through each problem. Thus, even when the questions are not mentally challenging for Melanie, homework can be very time consuming for both mother and daughter. For assignments in which comprehension is also an issue, much more than time is at stake: a general sense of failure and frustration on both sides are regular hallmarks of these mother-daughter homework sessions.

Not surprisingly, neither Melanie nor her mother looks forward to doing homework. Melanie's first line of defense is to take the offense, as the following excerpt from a field note shows. Climbing into the family's minivan after school, Melanie immediately mentions — and simultaneously downplays — the fact that she has homework:

MS. HANDLON (in a cheery voice): How are you?

MELANIE: Okay. (pause) I only have math homework today.

MS. HANDLON: How many problems?

MELANIE: Ten. Well, maybe twenty.

MS. HANDLON: That's not too bad. Only math?

MELANIE: Yeah.

Her mother is not ready to drop the topic, however. Probing, she inquires about other subjects. Reluctantly, Melanie discloses the rest of her homework load. She is hesitant but truthful:

MS. HANDLON: You don't have any social studies?

MELANIE: Well, maybe a little.

MS. HANDLON: What about spelling?

MELANIE: Oh, yeah. I have a spelling test tomorrow.

Once home, Melanie takes time to snack and relax before beginning her homework. She asks permission to put on music. Gleefully, she

selects "The Nutcracker" and turns the volume up loud on the stereo. With mother and daughter sitting together at the dining room table, the homework session begins.

MELANIE: What do I do?

Melanie's mother reads the directions out loud and goes over the first problem with Melanie.

MS. HANDLON: See? You carry this remainder and put it in this box.

MELANIE: Oh.

As they move to the second problem, Ms. Handlon continues to help Melanie in a very hands-on fashion.

MS. HANDLON: Okay, what do we do here? How many times will seven go into fifty-two? Well, what's five times seven?

MELANIE: Thirty-five.

MS. HANDLON: Right. So, that's too small. So, what's seven times six? What's seven times seven?

MELANIE: Forty-two. Forty-nine.

MS. HANDLON: Right. So, where do you put that? And what's the remainder? You have to borrow. Right. And then put the remainder in the next box. And how do you do this problem?

On another problem, Melanie resists her mother's effort to make the task seem easier:

MS. HANDLON: This is an easy problem.

MELANIE: These are hard.

MS. HANDLON: It's five! You know your fives.

MELANIE: I know my ones, my fives, and my tens.

MS. HANDLON: So, count by fives. (Melanie counts.)

MS. HANDLON: Right. So what's the answer? (Melanie gives an answer.)

MS. HANDLON: Right. And where do you put that? (Melanie writes it down. Ms. Handlon takes the pencil and erases Melanie's entry.)

MS. HANDLON: Not there. (Melanie tries again.)

MS. HANDLON: Right. And where's the remainder? (Melanie says an answer.)

MS. HANDLON: No. What's the remainder? (Melanie gives another answer.)

MS. HANDLON: Right, and put that there. And then carry that to the next problem. Good.

Melanie and her mother proceed in this fashion for about fifteen minutes. Then the interaction starts to break down. From Melanie's perspective, the problems are hard and she thinks she can't do them. She wants to stop. Her interest flags and her answers are increasingly far off base. Ms. Handlon reacts quickly.

MELANIE: This is hard.

MS. HANDLON: Melanie, I think you're making this harder than it is. How did you do it in school?

MELANIE: We used cubes.

MS. HANDLON: How did you figure out the problems?

MELANIE: We worked as a group.

MS. HANDLON: Who was in your group?

MELANIE: Emily was. But we all worked together.

MS. HANDLON (suggesting a new strategy): Would it help if you used pennies?

When Melanie nods, her mother searches briefly in drawers and in her purse. She comes up with several stacks of pennies, which she puts on the table. Melanie starts lining the pennies up in two adjacent, horizontal lines. She stands up to do this and moves a little to the side of the table. Ms. Handlon comes over, stands next to her and asks, "What are you doing?" Without giving Melanie a chance to explain, Ms. Handlon moves the pennies out of the rows Melanie has organized. Melanie protests:

MELANIE: No! This is how we did it.

MS. HANDLON: Okay, show me how you did it. (Melanie lines up forty-two pennies in two adjacent, horizontal rows. She then takes the pennies and puts them in groups of four. Her mother again intervenes.)

MS. HANDLON: Melanie, explain to me what you are doing. (Melanie continues to move the pennies but says nothing. Then she stops moving the coins.)

MS. HANDLON: And?

MELANIE: And I count the groups.

MS. HANDLON: But you're supposed to divide by seven.

MELANIE: OOOH . . .

MS. HANDLON: That's why I didn't understand what you were doing. (Melanie

reorganizes the coins, putting the pennies in groups of seven. She solves the next two problems. When she tries to tackle a problem that requires dividing twenty-seven by six, her mother again becomes heavily involved. Ms. Handlon starts putting the pennies into groups of six for Melanie.)

MS. HANDLON: What's six times one?

MELANIE: Six.

MS. HANDLON (putting six more pennies down): What's six times two?

MELANIE: Twelve.

MS. HANDLON (putting six more pennies down): What's six times three?

MELANIE (counting the pennies): Eighteen.

MS. HANDLON (putting six more pennies down): What six times four?

MELANIE (again counting the pennies): Twenty-four.

MS. HANDLON: Right. So, what's the answer?

MELANIE: Twenty-four.

MS. HANDLON: No, that's what you get when you multiply the numbers.

That's not the answer.

MELANIE: Four.

MS. HANDLON: Right. And what's the remainder?

MELANIE: Three.

MS. HANDLON: Right.

As they slowly move from problem to problem, the tension between Melanie and her mother builds. Melanie becomes more and more agitated. Her face turns red, and although she is not crying, she appears to be on the verge of tears. More than forty-five minutes have elapsed since they began the math homework. Ms. Handlon suggests that they take a break and "put some ornaments on the Christmas tree." Melanie doesn't want a "break"; she wants to replace the homework session with cookie baking. Her mother repeats the suggestion of a break and Melanie repeats her desire to make cookies. Ms. Handlon resolves the stalemate by continuing to put down piles of pennies for Melanie and asking her leading questions to get the answers. After about five minutes, Melanie's mood seems to brighten a little. Ms. Handlon gets up for less than a minute, and Melanie continues working. The last two problems Melanie does on her own.

MS. HANDLON: See, you can do it. You just have to try.

MELANIE: This is hard.

The tensions and conflicts that arise as Ms. Handlon and Melanie try to work together to complete her homework assignments are exhausting and distressing. Moreover, because Melanie's mother accepts the principle that Melanie *must* do her homework and also perceives that some assignments, especially math, require assistance, the homework battles are repeated nearly every afternoon.<sup>4</sup> Ms. Handlon believes that in some cases she and Melanie struggle over problems that are caused by the teachers.

Some of the teachers are just not doing a good job. They can't explain things. I think some of them are setting the kids up for failure. Sometimes the kids will bring home questions and assignments and the teacher will write it in such a way that there are really two ways of reading into it. So, if I can't understand it, how can they expect the kids to?

According to Ms. Handlon, Melanie is unnecessarily burdened by her teachers' inability to supply adequate instructions for the assignments they send home. Not surprisingly, the teachers trace the causes of Melanie's ongoing academic difficulties to quite a different source.

#### THE PERILS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING

In the fall grading period, when Melanie receives the lowest grade possible in both math and social studies, her classroom teacher, Ms. Nettles, seems nearly as frustrated with this outcome as Ms. Handlon is. Ms. Nettles is consistently friendly and cheerful during her interactions with Melanie's mother. She cooperates willingly with Ms. Handlon's request for spelling lists, preparing five weeks of lists in advance and sending them home with Melanie. She seems untroubled that the lists might give Melanie an advantage over her classmates; neither does she complain of the extra work it takes for her to produce the lists for Ms. Handlon. Ms. Nettles is similarly accommodating in her response to Ms. Handlon's request that she supply Melanie's private tutor with sample math problems. In addition, when Melanie's illnesses cause her to miss days of school, Ms. Nettles makes up packets of materials to be worked on at home.

Given the efforts of Ms. Nettles and other teachers at school and Ms. Handlon's efforts at home, why does Melanie continue to flounder? The classroom and resource teachers firmly reject Ms. Handlon's contention that her daughter has too much homework and that Melanie's confidence is fatally undermined by the educators' tendency to emphasize her mistakes and shortcomings instead of praising her progress. Ms. Nettles estimates that the work she assigns the children to do at home can be

completed in thirty to forty-five minutes. Garrett Tallinger, who is in Melanie's class, routinely finishes the homework (without his parents' help) in less than this amount of time. Neither do the teachers see any indication that Melanie is "intimidated" or "overwhelmed" by her day-to-day classroom experiences. Ms. Nettles agrees that Melanie "struggles" and that she may have a learning disability, but she rejects Ms. Handlon's view that Melanie is miserable in the classroom:

The whole bit about her not having success in school . . . If you're not here to observe how she is — but I am. And [Melanie] seems content. She seems fine. It's almost like, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Melanie's teachers think her school experience could be much improved if, among other things, Ms. Handlon would comply more consistently with the universalistic, bureaucratic rules of school. Ms. Nettles, in particular, is annoyed by the fact that Melanie habitually arrives late to class. With unusual directness, she complains about this to Ms. Handlon during the parent-teacher conference:

She comes in very late. She usually is the last one here. I mean, I don't even mark her absent any more . . . But some kids are here as early as ten minutes to nine, so if she's coming at ten after they've already had a twenty-minute head start. So, maybe just getting [Melanie here and] started a little bit earlier would be helpful.

Similarly, Ms. Nettles is dismayed by Ms. Handlon's failure to follow up with the paperwork necessary to get Melanie tested for learning disabilities. She reveals her frustration in a comment to the researcher after the parent-teacher conference has concluded:

I mean, I really pushed and stressed to [Ms. Handlon] to have [Melanie] tested because I think she does have a lot of learning problems. And we must have had those forms home to her like a month ago, and the last time I asked they still weren't back.

The elementary school has an on-site reading specialist; she works with Melanie three times a week. It shocks Ms. Nettles that Ms. Handlon has never met this resource teacher.

Most people who have their child seeing a reading specialist will make it a point to set up conferences. I mean, Nita is doing as many conferences because she meets with many different grade levels — and it's like that never occurred to her. I mean, [Melanie's] been seeing her for two years. Don't you think you'd want some feedback?

Ms. Nettles is certain that Ms. Handlon knows Melanie sees the reading specialist each week; when Melanie's absences mount up, her mother explicitly inquires about the reading material her daughter needs to review. In Ms. Nettles's opinion, it is Melanie's mother's *duty* to arrange a meeting with the reading specialist. Moreover, she feels that it is Ms. Handlon, not the resource teacher, who should be responsible for taking the initiative to request such a meeting.

In addition to failing to meet the teachers' expectations in some areas, Ms. Handlon is not always successful in her efforts to forge a closer connection between family and school because the educators view her actions as misguided or pointless. For instance, Ms. Nettles dismisses as simply "odd" Ms. Handlon's special trip to school with Melanie for a brief visit on the first day so that her daughter could meet her new teacher. The teacher also questions the legitimacy of the illnesses that prompt Melanie's many absences.

Ms. Nettles describes Melanie's mother as "defensive" and preoccupied with things like whether or not past and present teachers have been sufficiently supportive of Melanie's self-esteem. These concerns, the teacher feels, prevent Ms. Handlon from paying attention to other, arguably more important, issues (such as having Melanie tested for learning disabilities). After the parent-teacher conference, Ms. Nettles remarks to the researcher, "I don't think she was really listening." Most of Melanie's problems, Ms. Nettles suggests, may be traced to Ms. Handlon's overprotective parenting style:

Mom has consistently been putting things off and making excuses for Melanie since day one. I mean, Melanie was sick over thirty days last year. I think it's a big step for her to be here. But, I think her mom is like, in denial. Melanie is having a very good year. Melanie is very happy, and I think a lot of Melanie's problem is her mother.

Finally, Melanie's teachers are not aware of either the amount or the frequency of Ms. Handlon's efforts to help her daughter do her homework. They have no knowledge of the dramas that unfold in the Handlons' dining room as Melanie and her mother tackle her assignments day after day.<sup>5</sup>

#### WHY ACTIVATING CAPITAL DOES NOT ALWAYS YIELD PROFITS

The Handlons, a family with a solid middle-class position, engaged in concerted cultivation. Mr. Handlon had a master's degree and had a

managerial position; his wife had attended junior college. All of the children participated in many organized activities. To be sure, there were moments when Ms. Handlon issued directives, especially when frustrated while helping with Melanie with homework. But, although parent-child interactions are not elaborated in this chapter, for most of them, both parents engaged in the kind of reasoning and negotiation that was carried out in Alexander Williams's home.<sup>6</sup> Similar to Ms. Marshall, Ms. Handlon was well informed about school dynamics. Ms. Handlon believed that she had the right to intervene in her daughter's experiences outside the home and, as we have seen, had many criticisms over school practices. Nonetheless, despite these resources, Ms. Handlon was unable to gain clear advantages for Melanie in the areas that were of greatest concern to her, namely, grading and homework. She did, however, succeed in customizing specific elements of Melanie's educational experience: Ms. Nettles agreed to supply the spelling lists, to prepare materials for Melanie's tutor to use, and to send home packets of exercises covering the curriculum Melanie missed during her frequent illness-related absences from school. But the benefits that she gained for her daughter were fewer than one might expect.<sup>7</sup>

As Pierre Bourdieu points out, the complex nature of social life means that multitudes of subtle skills are drawn on in the transmission of social class privilege. Accordingly, there are important variations in the effectiveness of parents' efforts to activate cultural capital. Factors such as the shrewdness of the intervention, the degree to which the parent frames the complaint in a fashion that compels a response from the person in power, and the nature of the child's difficulties each play a role. In the realm of education, there are at least three important reasons why the activation of cultural capital may fail. First, educators sometimes are not aware of middle-class mothers' strenuous efforts to comply with school policies. They cannot be expected to grant privileges in return for actions they know nothing about. The children, however, are not only aware of their parents' efforts but often feel oppressed by them. Despite being well-intentioned, parents' interventions can create acute discomfort in their children and may decrease rather than stimulate students' motivation to work hard in school. Thus, any advantages that *might* result in instances where educators do recognize parents' capital can be negated by the children themselves. Second, educators frequently adopt a relatively rigid definition of what constitutes helpful behavior; parents' actions that fall outside those bounds are ignored or discredited. Thus, parents who repeatedly fail to sign and promptly return to school the forms teachers

send home, for example, are considered seriously remiss, regardless of their social class standing. Third, even with similar levels of class resources, some parents may be able to activate the resources more effectively than others. Although Stacey's and Melanie's mothers were equally devoted to their daughters, Ms. Marshall seemed to be able to make more headway than Ms. Handlon.

Ms. Handlon was not alone in trying to be helpful with her children's schooling but not realizing the advantages she had hoped for. Working-class and poor parents often had that experience, as I show in the following chapters, beginning with the experience of Wendy Driver.