Concerted Cultivation and Accomplishment of Natural Growth: How Sports and the Neighborhood affect children according to Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods*.

Growing up, parents rear their children in different ways. In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Annette Lareau focuses on two different types of child upbringing: concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth. Many people throughout the world use these two different techniques and don’t even know them, let alone that they use them. Lareau defines concerted cultivation as a type of child upbringing when middle class parents have a greater presence in the lives of their children; mainly through organizing the child’s daily life. Middle-class families place great importance on scheduling and participating in a variety of extracurricular activities and sports. Concerted cultivation consists of a hectic lifestyle that requires a lot of dedication and discipline to stick to for both children and parents. Middle-class parents also encourage independence and for their children to ask questions. Concerted cultivation has the parents more involved in the lives of their children, where in natural growth “the neighborhood raising the child.” Lareau writes:

> 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 plays an especially important role in institutional settings, where middle-class children learn to question adults and address them as relative equals. (Lareau 2)

When it comes to concerted cultivation parents play a very active role in their children’s lives. The parents put their children in multiple leisure activities such as sports and learning to play instruments. Concerted cultivation mainly describes me throughout my life, especially from the ages 9 and 10. I’ve participated in many activities for as long as I can remember. My parents
Perez

put me into; baseball, basketball, bowling, tennis, and even a little football. Personally I learned
many things from these sports and they help me in my everyday life. I learned how to act as a
leader on and off the field/court. I also learned how to work as part of a team and contribute to
the team as a whole. Qualities such as these reveal themselves as useful now and made me much
more sociable among my peers. And I enjoyed every minute of it. Lareau argues about a sense
of entitlement, and how concerted cultivated children question adults and see them as their
relative equals. I see this in my everyday life, for example when an adult gives me a rule
(parents) I try to negotiate instead of just accepting it. This acted as a very useful skill as I grew
up in the institutional setting; I had a sense of entitlement and knew it. I strived to never take
“no” as an answer, even though sometimes in school you have to give in a little and know when
to pick you battles.

Products of concerted cultivation have many benefits. Products of concerted cultivation
also achieve many useful experiences that will benefit one later on in life in the institutional
setting and also in the workforce as children get older. Products of concerted cultivation with all
of its experiences, gives one a better work ethic. Concerted cultivated children also grow up
with a sense of entitlement. When a child feels they should receive special treatment they have a
sense of entitlement. All concerted cultivated children grow up with this feeling, as did I.
Annette Lareau explains this in her book, she writes:

By encouraging involvement in activities outside the home, middle class parents position
their children to receive more than an education in how to play soccer, baseball, or
piano. These young sports enthusiasts and budding musicians acquire skills and
dispositions that help them navigate in the institutional world. They learn to think of
themselves as special and as entitled to receive certain kinds of services from adults.
They also acquire a valuable set of white-collar work skills, including how to set 
priorities, manage an itinerary, shake hands with strangers, and work on a team. (39)

Around the age of 10 years old, as a product of concerted cultivation, I really didn’t see how all 
of these sports would affect me in the workforce. Looking at it now I can see that it really did 
help just like Lareau argues. At the age of 10 years old one really doesn’t see how sports and all 
these activities could help one with acquiring these skills; how to set priorities, manage an 
itinerary, shake hands with strangers, and work on a team. All of these skills really help one in 
the institutional setting as one grows up. They could also be very advantages later in life, 
especially n the institutional setting. I saw this in my life even at the age of 10, and it is still an 
ongoing advantage. I learned how to manage my time in between school, sports, practices, and 
homework. At 10 years old, when it comes to sports one just wants to get better and do good, 
one really doesn’t look at the advantages it sets up for the future. Growing up playing all of 
these different sports, many children including myself get really competitive, and this quality 
never leaves you. At 10 and even now I strive to do my best in everything you do and be better 
than all of your competition. Playing these sports throughout one’s life teaches them that no 
matter how good one plays their sport, somebody always plays a little better. One may see this 
as a negative aspect of these sports but it is the exact opposite. The thought of somebody being 
better, makes one strive to be the best at what one does. Whether sports or a career this as a very 
valuable quality to possess.

Lareau explains in her book that activities that the children take part in have great 
importance to the parents of that child. This happens in any concerted cultivated family. Since 
everything has great importance, this puts extra stress on the child to do well in everything 
he/she does. Lareau writes that:
In middle-class homes, adults treat children’s activities seriously. A request for help is not likely to be waved aside. Since parents in these homes often are preoccupied with their children’s lives, things that are important to children can easily become major events for their parents as well. This in turn increases the pressure on children to succeed. (Lareau 82)

Around the age of 10 years old my parents’ lives revolved around me, and this continued for a very long time, even now. Mainly because my parents always drove me and sometimes my friends to our sport games and some days we had more than one game in a day. My family would show up to every game that I had, a great example of what Lareau argues. Lareau writes about an increase of pressure on the child to succeed when the parents mainly focus on the children’s activities. In many children, including me this shows itself as the truth. When one’s parents show to every game the child participates in the child want to do the best for parent and this may get stressful, but then it also makes the child better. It may be disappointing to the child when they don’t do well but that makes them work harder time and time after. I’ve experienced this in my life and mostly all concerted cultivated children go through this. Many may perceive this as a bad thing which may cause too much stress, but personally I see it as a good thing.

Even though I consider myself mostly a product of concerted cultivation because of all the activities I took part in, I also consider myself a product of natural growth. While concerted cultivation deals with the middle class, the accomplishment of natural growth focuses on the working class. Lareau defines natural growth as a type of child upbringing when working class parents favor letting their children play freely unlike the middle class children who had lives scheduled around their extracurricular activities. Because of money problems and other issues surrounding the working-class parents have concerned themselves with providing basic needs
such as food and shelter. Family relatives have a greater presence in working class families and help to raise the children together. At home, parents speak to children with commands rather than discussions or requests. Lareau also show the good aspects of natural growth. She argues:

The cultural logic of the accomplishment of natural growth grants children an autonomous world, apart from adults, in which they are free to try out new experiences and develop important social competencies. Tyrec and other working-class and poor children learn how to be members of informal peer groups. They learn how to strategize. Children, especially boys, learn how to negotiate open conflict during play, including how to defend themselves physically. Boys are also given more latitude to play farther away from home than girls. (67)

Around the age of 10 years old I participated in a lot of activities, but when I didn’t have a game or a practice, basically any of my spare time, I played outside with friends from my block. These benefits that Lareau argued made me realize that I considered myself both concerted cultivation as well as the accomplishment of natural growth. Hanging out with friends from my block made me learn how to be in an informal peer group, I also learned how to negotiate open conflicts. Since the age of 10 years old I started getting into more fights and learned how to defend myself physically, an example of what Lareau explains. A reason the difference between natural growth and concerted cultivation show itself very clearly. When society makes borders between classes to separate them and when social class groups have unequal resources, its considered inequality and social stratification.

Concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth have many differences between them, but language has the greatest importance. They way that the middle-class uses language and the way working-class and poor use language differ. Middle-class families freely
share laughter, language, and affection. In middle-class families, the parents rarely use physical
punishment as an option in response to disobedience. They have meaningful conversations with
their children, and all of this often leads to a sense of entitlement within the child, unlike the
working and poor classes. These classes basically speak to their children in short and simple
sentences. Middle-class children negotiate more, while in working and poor class negotiation
occur less frequently. Working class and poor class families use physical punishment more
frequently than middle class families. Lareau writes:

Middle-class children, we found, often use their verbal skills to argue with their parents.
Rather than following parents’ directives silently, as children in the working-class and
poor homes generally do, middle-class children tend to bargain, using reasoning to secure
all small advantages. (127)

In my life I see this happen frequently, but I also see a part of natural growth in me. When my
parents give me an order to do something I do try to negotiate I try not to take “no” for an
answer, but nothing always goes as planned. When I try to do something when my parents do
not want me to I would do my best to get them to say “yes” instead of “no.” Around the ages of
9-10 years old, even throughout my whole life I would try to do this all the time, but more so, on
my mother. I would always “test the waters,” as she says. But as soon as she said “I’m going to
get your father,” I shut up and did what I had to do. The directives came from my father mostly
and the negotiations from my mother, even though now my dad is more on my side when it
comes me going out and similar subjects. As for physical violence my parents never hit me at
all. It never got to that point, I knew the “line,” and when I could or couldn’t cross it. The worst
that ever happens, has to be occasionally when my mother would take off the chancleta (slipper
or flip-flop) to throw but nothing worse than that. Again I consider myself mainly a product of concerted cultivation, but I did have some inkling of natural growth in me.

Although I my parents raised me mostly as concerted cultivation their parents raised them as natural growth. My father grew up in and Italian family in South Jamaica and my mother moved to queens when she was three years old from Puerto Rico. I interviewed my mother about her childhood and asked her how she felt her parents raised her, after I gave her the definition of natural growth and concerted cultivation. One thing she said stood out to me and informed me how her parents raised her. She stated:

I was the eldest child of four and I had a lot of responsibilities. I had to help my mother out with all the translations […] I was always home but it wasn’t like they put me into anything, I wasn’t involved in anything, any kind of clubs, sports, or any organized activities like that. My whole thing was basically rearing my younger brothers and sister.  

(Susan Perez)

This statement really stood out to me because it described the accomplishment of natural growth perfectly. She was the eldest child and didn’t play the role of a normal child; she played the role of more of a secondary mother. Her parents never involved her in any extracurricular activities or clubs like that. She had to take on more responsibilities than any child should have to. She had to raise her two younger brothers, and her younger sister. She was very involved in their lives because her mother didn’t speak English and my mother had to go to all the parent teacher conferences and anything else that my grandmother needed her for, basically taking away any she social life my mother had.

Perez, Susan and George Perez. Personal Interview. 21 October 2010.
Sample Interview with George and Susan Perez

George: So Mary, what are you doing in school these days? Anything interesting?

Mary: Yeah I have an essay due soon. It’s about the different child-rearing methods practiced by different social classes.

George: What are the different methods?

Mary: One is concerted cultivation and the other is natural growth. Concerted cultivation is when the parents sign their kids up for too many extra curricular activities, the parents talk to their kids rather than demand, the kids are comfortable with adults- no fear. Natural growth is when the kids have a lot of free time, they listen quickly to adults... stuff like that. Their parents don’t really ask for their opinion they just command their children to do things and their children listen.

George: Which one do you think you are?

Mary: Natural growth.

Susan: Relax. She’s pulling your leg.

George: No. She’s serious. Mary, what makes you think you’re natural growth

Mary: Well I only had one extracurricular activity at a time. I always had a lot of free time.

George: what about the fact that you have a double curriculum. Doesn’t the second half of the day count as extracurriculars?

Mary: maybe. I don’t think so.

Susan: You should know, one of my employees mentioned something interesting to me, that she noticed that Jewish mothers are ALWAYS talking to their babies. They talk to their babies all day long.

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