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Beyond bad behaviour? Towards a broader understanding of school student activism

Rhian Barrance and Esther Muddiman, *Cardiff University School of Social Sciences*

This paper explores UK school students' protest activism relating to their schools' policies and practices, drawing on two datasets: 1) a newspaper analysis of media reports relating to school protests between 2000 and 2021; 2) a survey of 800 secondary school pupils in Wales. Drawing on social movements literature and adapting concepts for the school environment, we present a framework for exploring children's protest repertoires that distinguishes between institutionalised, legitimated and disruptive forms of activism. Our analysis outlines trends in pupil protest activities and explores stated motivations for protesting. We find that pupils are using a broad range of protest actions, often in combination, to voice concerns about school-based issues. Our data also suggest that pupils link their grievances to wider themes of social justice, rights, fairness and solidarity. Using principles of critical pedagogy, our study challenges hegemonic and deficit-laden ideas about children's (mis)behaviour as potential mis-readings of activism.

Keywords: children's rights; activism; protest; social movement; school uniform; school behaviour

Introduction

Following a series of high-profile protests led by children in UK schools, in June 2021 England's Chief Education Inspector warned about the rising threat of 'militant activism' in England's schools (*The Independent*, June 24, 2021). The most prominent of these pupil protests were linked to global and international issues such as the climate crisis and the Israeli-Palestine conflict. However, there is also evidence of protest linked to school policies, practices and cultures. For example, protests against racial discrimination at the Pimlico Academy were widely reported in the national media, leading to a number of MPs writing in support of protesting schoolchildren who were at risk of exclusion, and the eventual resignation of the headteacher (*The Guardian*, May 18, 2021). In March 2021 there were also walkouts and demonstrations after pupils at a London school released an anonymous dossier recounting their experiences of the school's 'rape culture' (*BBC News*, March 25, 2021). These instances raise important questions about how and why children participate in protests or campaigns about their education. Despite the increased prominence of children's protesting school-based issues, it remains largely unresearched. One reason for this may be that existing frameworks used in social movement studies to understand the activism of adults and young people have not been widely applied to school-based issues.

In this paper we explore the character of children's school-based activism, drawing on theories from the social movements literature. Using a broad conceptualisation of activism, we include children's individual and small-scale acts of resistance as forms of political activism (Nolas et al. 2017; Rosen 2017; Nissen et al. 2020). Our newspaper analysis highlights trends in reported pupil protests and our Welsh survey data examines the types of protests children participate in and their stated reasons for doing so. We explore the shape and scope of children's school-based protest activities, to consider the ways in which they

combine different repertoires of action and frame their grievances in relation to certain rights and social justice issues. Rather than positioning protest as a form of misbehaviour, we seek to understand instances of school-based activism as a way in which children are demanding to have their views taken into account on matters that impact them directly. We conclude by sketching out some possible synergies between children's protest repertoires as potential mutual learning opportunities and the tenets of critical and engaged pedagogies.

Children's activism

Children are recognised as civil and political actors with protest rights under article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989. See also: Daly 2013). However, children's protest rights are not widely understood, and discussions about children's agency and involvement in decision-making tend to focus on participation rights rather than protest rights (Quennerstedt 2010; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2020). Consequently, much research on children's agency focusses on what adults can do to facilitate children's participation, through institutionalised means like school councils. There is less research that considers how children exercise their agency outside of processes and forums established or controlled by adults, although this research field is now growing (see Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2020 and Bessant, Mesina and Pickard, 2021). This nascent field highlights how children have been instigating and leading social movements, rather than just participating in them (Daly 2013). Indeed, though children do not always have access to public spheres, their attempts to influence their immediate environments, such as their homes or classrooms, can also be considered as activism (Pickard 2019). In this paper, we argue that the school context is an important site for research on children's activism, given the generally autocratic and hierarchical cultures of schooling that have been critiqued by scholars of critical pedagogy (Friere 2018, hooks 1994)

Conceptualisations of children's protest tend to draw upon broad definitions of what it means to be political. Watts (2021) draws on the work of Arendt (1958) and Isin (2009) to argue that considerations of political action must look beyond routinised and institutional form of engagement, and instead focus on 'ruptures' of routines and social norms. Research on children's social movements has highlighted the creative and innovative nature of children's protest (King et al. 2021; Pitti, 2018). Pickard (2019) has developed the concept of 'DIO' (Do-It-Ourselves) politics to describe the novel and creative ways in which children and young people are engaging in the 'political', facilitated by new social media platforms, which have enabled young people to mobilise and organise across far wider geographical regions (Earl, Maher and Elliott 2017; Pickard 2019; Bessant 2021). Seeking to avoid deficit approaches to children's activism as inferior to that of adults, researchers include a wide range of activities, including play, as potential forms of activism (Nolas et al. 2017; Rosen 2017). We focus here on children's protest activism rather than civic activism (which, in a school context includes things like volunteering and joining school groups). Protest activism entails activities aimed at making claims or demands of another actor (Pitti 2018), such as signing a petition, joining a boycott, demonstrating, joining an unofficial strike and occupying a building (Norris 2002).

Research has also considered how major theories of social movements can be applied to children's involvement in protest. New Social Movement (NSM) theory has received particular attention in discussions of children's activism (Rodgers 2020; Watts 2021). NSM was developed in response to the growth in social movements from the 1960s which organised around shared identities of historically disempowered groups, such as the feminist, civil rights and LGBTQ+ movements. These groups are concerned with human rights and democratic freedoms. Rodgers considers whether children's participation in social movements represents a NSM organised around childhood as a marginalised identity. She

notes that the focus on human rights, democracy and agency in much of children's activism coheres with key elements of NSMs, though highlights that the temporal nature of childhood means that organising around a 'child identity' is more problematic. She argues that a consideration of children's social movements necessitates an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991) which considers the multiplicity of childhood experiences and the ways in which child identities can intersect others, such as ethnicity, gender, disability and social class, to produce particular types of disadvantage. The research will thus consider the extent to which children are drawing on discourses of human and child rights in their protests and the extent to which they see themselves as members of other identities and participants in other social movements.

Children's activism at and about school

Existing research on children's activism has focused on protests around global and national issues, such as environmental issues, racism and war. In the UK, the most prominent examples of school-based protests are youth climate strikes (Pickard 2019; Collin and Matthews 2021; Bessant 2021) and Iraq war walkouts (Cunningham and Lavalette 2004). Although schools are the focal point for these actions, in most of these cases, protestors' grievances were with national governments and international bodies, not with their school's leadership. There has been less consideration of children protesting school policies and practices, particularly within the UK context. One notable exception is Cunningham and Lavalette's (2016) history of Britain's school strikes, illustrating how walkouts have been used over the last century by numerous schoolchildren to signal their grievances with authorities. The documented strikes relate to a broad range of issues, including the state of school buildings, the dismissal of teachers, corporal punishment, or changes to school days. Our research builds upon Cunningham and Lavalette's analysis by considering children's

participation in school strikes and walkouts alongside other forms of protest and activism. We develop an analytical framework drawing on concepts from the social movements literature to conceptualise such protest activism.

Social movements and children's school-based activism

As already noted, research on children's agency within schools tends to be framed in terms of participation rather than protest/activism. However, as we will show, children often frame their resistance to school policies and processes in terms of 'protest' and draw on common protest repertoires to do so. Recognising this, we situate our data within the social movements literature, and consider how the cultural, performative and emotive elements of protest can help us understand children's school-based activism.

The evolutionary view of the emergence of NSM in response to economic and political interference in the lifeworld (Habermas 1981, 1989) has been largely abandoned (Edwards 2009) in favour of perspectives originating in the US that are sensitive to multidirectional shifts, cycles and waves in social movement activity (Tilly 2008, Tilly and Tarrow 2015). From this perspective, protest tactics can be seen as performances designed to communicate and advance the claims of protestors (Tilly 2008; Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

Drawing on the notion of protest as performance, the role of emotions has been foregrounded in recent cultural theories of protest (Jasper 2014, 2018; Gupta 2017). This can include the shaming of big businesses or governments, the arousal of feelings of fear or pity in onlookers, or the galvanising of a sense of belonging and togetherness amongst activists themselves.

From this perspective, protest actions are not simply designed to convey messages or to change policies and practices, but can also be important in fostering solidarity amongst protestors (Gupta 2017). Cultural norms and influences can also play a role in determining activists' methods (Jasper 2014). For example, the worldwide popularity of demonstrations

and marches (Ortiz et al. 2022) is likely due to how easily recognisable and familiar they are (Tarrow 1993). Activists and groups draw on and adapt performances they have witnessed or participated in before, and use protest repertoires they have the skills, knowledge and resources to undertake. In this sense, participation in certain forms of protest helps to develop ‘protest repertoires’ - shared cultural understandings of what protest is and what it looks like (Alimi 2015). Protest repertoires evolve over time as activists creatively adapt to changing circumstances, audiences, and responses from authorities (Tilly 2008). When thinking about repertoires of pupil protest, then, we can consider how pupils come to know about different protest topics and repertoires of action, and how they might adapt these ideas for their own purposes.

Methodology

This paper uses two sources of data: i) an analysis of accounts of school protests in local and national UK newspapers over the last 20 years; ii) a survey with secondary school students about their participation in school protests.

Newspaper analysis

Our first dataset is derived from a systematic review of media reports on school-related pupil-protests across the UK 2000-2021. Newspaper analysis a common tool in social movements literature (e.g. Ortiz et al. 2022). The Nexis database was used to search for newspaper articles published in the English language in local and national UK newspapers with the search terms ‘school-protest’ and ‘pupil-protest’. This was supplemented with Google news

searches for ‘school protest’ ‘school uniform protest’, and ‘school pupil protest’. To be included in our analysis, newspaper articles had to satisfy two criteria:

(1) they must be reporting on a protest or activity that was initiated/led by children (aged up to 18), rather than by parents or teachers (reports that mentioned parents or teachers supporting or participating, rather than instigating or leading, were included).

While we recognise that children can be active participants even in protests led by adults, we were interested in the issues which galvanise children’s activism and so have included only those that were reportedly led by children.

(2) they must be reporting on protests that are linked specifically to school policies, rules or practices. This means that protests against national issues (e.g. Youth Strike for Climate) are not included, but localised campaigns that link to these broader issues – e.g. to change a school’s environmental policy – are.

Newspaper reports that met these criteria were catalogued with the following information: year of report, location, type of school and a summary of protest action. We recorded 86 reports of school related protests in the UK between January 2000 and July 2021. Reports were coded into one of nine themes (see Table 1). When reported protests could potentially fit into more than one theme or category, we chose the theme that seemed to best describe the issue(s) at stake. This enabled us to chart the prevalence of reporting on different school protests over the search period. We also coded and catalogued *modes* of activism related to the framework of protest repertoires that we set out below. Unlike our coding of the topic or issue of protest, for the methods of protest we used multiple codes for each newspaper report of protest to capture all of the different means employed to protest.

Table 1: Survey participants by year group

Year Group	Number of participants
7	177
9	405
11	218

Pupil Survey

Whilst our newspaper analysis includes schools across the UK, our second data set focusses specifically on pupils in Wales. This survey data derives from the WISERD Wales Multi-Cohort study – a national survey of young people from thirteen schools across Wales that has been running since 2012.

Secondary school students across Wales are surveyed annually about a range of issues relating to their lives and experiences of school. The 2021 sweep also included questions about children’s political engagement, exploring the prevalence and forms of activism that children were participating in, and the issues they were protesting about. We did not define ‘protest’ as we are interested in students’ own conceptions of activism. Whilst multiple choice questions provided examples of types of activism to select, we also included open-ended spaces for participants to define what forms of activism they participated in, to better understand how they perceive protest.

We received 800 responses from pupils in eight secondary schools across Wales, comprising of pupils from years 7 (ages 11-12), 9 (ages 13-14) and 11 (ages 15-16). The breakdown across year groups can be seen in Table 1.

Ethics

The research procedures for Sweep 9 were approved by Cardiff University's Research Ethics Committee on the 1st of August 2017 (SREC:2372). Parents of participants were provided with information sheets and opt-out consent forms prior to beginning the research. Students are given information about the study and its voluntary nature at the beginning of each survey, enabling them to make an informed decision about whether to participate.

Framework for children's school-based protest activism

We developed a framework to categorise children's school-based protest activism through our analysis of newspaper reports and survey data, that draws from categorisations of protest activity from the literature on social movements and children's activism (Table 2). Adapting existing conceptualisations to the context of children's schooling, we position the school as a microcosm of the state, with the breaking of school rules equivalent to the violation of the law.

The first distinction in our framework is between *institutional* and *non-institutional* repertoires of action. In the social movements literature this comparison is often made in a way that frames non-institutionalised methods as the only option for disenfranchised groups who are not permitted to participate in institutionalised forms of activism (Norris, 2002; Pitti, 2018). Amongst adult protestors this can refer to homeless people, migrants or traveller communities who may have limited access to institutionalised participation rights. It can also be argued that children have fewer opportunities than adults to participate in institutional repertoires of action, since such participation is often age-bounded. Most notably, children under 17 (or under 16 in Wales) cannot vote in elections, and many petitions and consultations have a minimum age requirement for engagement. There are, however, specific

mechanisms within schools that are intended to provide children with opportunities for participation in decision-making about school life. School councils are recommended across the UK and have been compulsory in all schools in Wales since 2005 (Welsh Assembly Government 2006), and aim to provide children with ways of participating in decision-making within their schools on a collective level. However, research has signalled children's dissatisfaction with school councils (Alderson 2000; Wyse 2001) and highlighted their potential to reinforce existing inequalities and to be used as a tool by the neoliberal state to 'deepen young people's self-governance' (Raby 2015, p. 78) rather than transform power relations between children and adults (see also Nolas 2015). We are concerned with identifying where children have sought to make claims through official school policies and practices (including school councils) and where they have chosen other channels for participation in our data.

The second distinction in our framework is between two forms of non-institutional repertoires – those that are *legitimated*, and those that are *disruptive*. This distinction is based on an assessment of how acceptable certain repertoires of action are considered to be by teachers and school managers. For example, legitimised repertoires may include actions such as petitions, boycotting the purchase of particular items from the cafeteria, or collecting testimonies from other pupils. These actions sit outside of school channels for participation but do not tend to break school rules or cause serious disruption to school routines. In contrast, disruptive repertoires involve some form of disruption to school routines, to expectations of behaviour, or violation of school rules. This includes walkouts, demonstrations, marches, and the wearing of banned attire. While demonstrations that take place during breaktime might not violate formal school routines (indeed only a third of reports on pupil demonstrations explicitly mentioned that pupils walked out of class), we decided to include these as a 'disruptive' form of action because they represent a rupture of

everyday expectations of behaviour for children. We also decided to include these actions here as they tend to be more visible than other forms of action and are often more challenging for schools to manage, often demanding an immediate response.

Our distinction between legitimated and disruptive repertoires of pupil activism is adapted from Tarrow's (2011) framework. Tarrow (2011) differentiates between *contained*, *disruptive* and *violent* forms of protest. Tarrow's category of contained protest aligns with our category of legitimised protest: both refer to legal and/or institutionally legitimised protest repertoires that pose minimal challenge and uncertainty to elites (in our case, to schools, headteachers and governors), and may even be supported facilitated by them. Both institutionalised and legitimated repertoires of protest, in our typology, can be seen as variants of 'dutiful' dissent, as identified by O'Brien et al. (2014). They identify both the voicing of concerns within existing or newly created institutional spaces (institutional) and engaging with technical, managerial and political elites (legitimated) as dutiful.

Our category of disruptive protest maps directly onto Tarrow's definition of disruptive actions: those which tend to have greater impact because they rupture conventional routines and expectations, and signal a direct challenge to elites. It also mirrors O'Brien et al.'s (2014) characterisation of 'disruptive dissent'. Political actors often turn to disruptive activism when they believe that institutional processes are unresponsive to the concerns of citizens, and are complicit in perpetuating injustice and inequality (O'Brien et al. 2014). The 'disruptive' category also includes the alteration of personal appearance to signify allegiance to a cause. Although adults might also undertake this form of protest, it is less likely to be positioned as disruptive activism, since personal appearance is not policed as closely amongst adults as it is amongst children whilst at school.

Unlike Tarrow, we have not created a separate category for actions that may be considered ‘violent’ since we could not find any evidence of students causing physical harm to others within either of our datasets. In our newspaper analysis we did identify two demonstrations that resulted in vandalism or damage to school property, and one case in which pupil behaviour was deemed by staff to be threatening. Whilst recognising that acts of intimidation or vandalism can be construed as violent, we have decided that these instances were rare and did not reach the threshold for requiring a separate category.

Table 2: Framework for children’s school-based activism

Institutionalised repertoires	Non-institutional repertoires	
	Legitimised	Disruptive
<p>Sits within school policies and routine practices</p> <p>Includes institutional channels established by adults such as school councils</p> <p>Examples include: conversations and meetings with staff</p>	<p>Sits outside of school channels but does not break school rules or cause disruption to routines.</p> <p>Generally within the bounds of what is considered acceptable to schools.</p> <p>Examples include: petitions, collecting testimonies, boycotting, letter-writing</p>	<p>Sits outside of school channels and involves breaking of rules and/or disruption of routines.</p> <p>Characterised by highly visible and performative nature.</p> <p>Tend to be more challenging for schools as often demand an immediate response.</p> <p>Challenge to social norms.</p> <p>Examples include: demonstrations, walkouts, marches as well as wearing of banned attire.</p>

While we find this framework useful for understanding the ways in which children’s activism manifests itself within school contexts in the UK, and for considering the potential dilemmas pupils may face in deciding whether or not to participate, we recognise that what is considered legitimised, disruptive (or even violent) is dependent on school ethos, norms of

behaviour and rules, and is subject to change over time. We also recognise that activists often use a range of different protest formats that span these different categories when mobilising for a particular cause (Norris, 2002)

Newspaper analysis findings

Multiple repertoires of protest

We logged the types of protest mentioned in each of the newspaper reports in our sample (see Table 3). Unsurprisingly, pupil protests had to involve some form of disruption to warrant media attention, so all of the reports in our dataset mention activities that fit into our disruptive category. However, reports often described multiple protest repertoires, and at least half of all protests reported on also mentioned legitimised repertoires, suggesting that pupils might resort to disruptive repertoires of action once other more ‘dutiful’ channels like raising matters at school council (institutionalised) or collecting signatures on a petition (non-institutionalised but legitimated) have been exhausted.

Table 3: Modes of non-institutional pupil activism

	Type of activism	Mentions in newspaper reports
Legitimated	Lobbying: addressing local/regional decision-makers.	10
	Petition writing/signing	13
	Letter writing: to teachers, governors, counsellors etc.	8
	Boycotting: canteen boycott over food quality/cost	1
	Collecting/contributing to testimonies: often anonymous, presented to a decision-maker.	2
	TOTAL	34
Disruptive	Demonstrations: includes walkouts, rallies and marches. Can include banners/placards.	59
	Rule break: includes defying uniform and appearance rules, but doesn't include walking out of classes (counted above).	17
	TOTAL	77

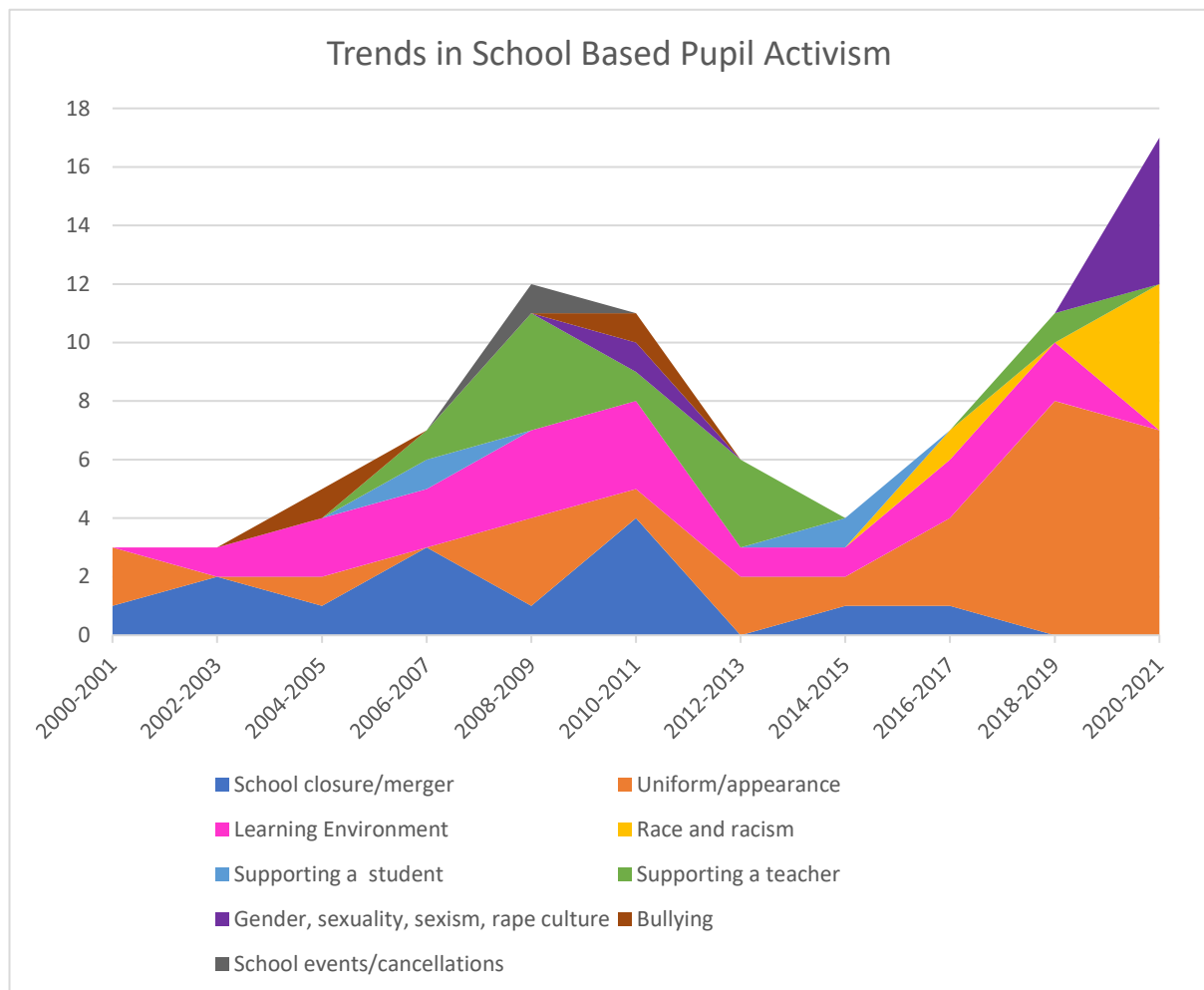
Trends in reporting on school activism

We recorded 86 reports of school related protests in the UK between 2000 and 2021. Almost all protests were recorded at secondary schools, with only four linked to primary schools. Although our search included all four home nations, there were no media reports of pupils protesting school-related issues in Northern Ireland returned by our searches for the period 2000-2021. The majority of reported pupil activism came from English schools (n=67), with 14 reports from Wales and 4 reports from Scotland. Rather than necessarily being reflective of different levels of pupil activism in the home countries, it could relate to perceived newsworthiness of such items in different regional contexts.

Using our nine categories of pupil activism, Figure 1 shows trends in newspaper reporting between January 2000 and July 2021. Reports related to activism around uniform and

appearance have increased substantially over the time period, making up over half of all reports of pupil activism we recorded in 2021. We can also see the emergence of reporting on pupil protests relating to racism from 2017 onwards, and a cluster of reports of protest activity relating to gender and sexuality in the final two years of the dataset. There is some overlap: eight of the protests recorded under ‘uniform/appearance’ were related to perceptions of sexist uniform rules, and one was linked to critiques of racist uniform rules. We focus on the most-reported upon topics of protest in the analysis below.

Figure 1: Trends in School Based Pupil Activism



Overall, Figure 1 suggests that pupils' school-based protest activities are receiving increasing media attention over time. We must be careful, however, not to assume a linear relationship between protest activity and media reporting. Changing attitudes towards the perceived newsworthiness of children's protest activities may have contributed to increased reporting, and the promotion of such activities on social media may also make it easier for journalists to seek out and attend children's protest activities. It is also possible that some older newspaper articles, especially those from local or discontinued newspapers, have not been uploaded/indexed and therefore were not accessible.

Uniform, appearance and the right to self-expression

Almost a third of newspaper reports in our sample (32.6%) related to protest about uniform and/or pupil appearance. The majority of protests on this topic involved pupils using their appearance as part of their protest activity. This included wearing shorts when forbidden to do so, wearing wristbands to signify an issue, face-painting and customisation of clothing. Perhaps it is unsurprising that activism relating to uniform and pupil appearance was most reported on, since the visual element of protest relating to these issues might make them more attractive to journalists to cover. Over half of the protests in this category were related to whether or not boys can wear shorts in warm weather, but other issues included changes to uniform policy and restrictions on hairstyles and head coverings. For example, pupils at a secondary school in Exeter protested a ban on spiked, waxed or gelled hair by defying these rules and holding a short silent protest (*The Mirror*, 1st October 2008). A pupil taking part in the protest is quoted as saying:

All the boys have been told if we keep using hair gel or wax we will get expelled [...] The toilet has been full of boys trying to get wax out of their hair. How does our hair style affect our learning? We are very upset. No reason was given for the rule and we were told that it was not up for discussion.

A lack of opportunity to participate in decision-making appears to be an important impetus for this protest: there is evidence that pupils sought to address this disagreement about what constitutes an appropriate hairstyle through institutionalised means prior to the demonstration, as seen in this quote from the chair of the school council (aged 16 at the time):

We were in constant talks with the head to resolve this [...] The school has said no outrageous hair styles, but the view of the student council is that everyone should be able to express their feelings, their looks and their individuality, and that includes having spiky hair.

In a similar protest reported in *The Chronicle* the following year (20th March 2009), around 70 pupils walked out of class at their secondary school in Hexham to protest planned changes to their uniforms. Participants reportedly explained that they were unhappy with the stricter rules because a more relaxed uniform policy helped them to ‘feel more confident’ and ‘more relaxed in school’ because you can ‘express yourself’. These accounts, centring the importance of self-expression and the right to feel comfortable, are typical of other newspaper articles in our sample. In both of these examples pupils had sought institutionalised and/or legitimated forms of redress before escalating into protest activity. This aligns with the argument made in the social movements literature that it is the failure of formal political processes to respond to the views of citizens which provides a key stimulus for disruptive activism (O’Brien et al. 2014).

Closures, mergers, learning environment

The second biggest category of reported protest in our dataset relates to learning environment (n= 17; 19.8%), followed by school closures or mergers (n=14; 16.3%). Our learning environment category includes timetabling, school facilities and discipline measures. For example, pupils at a secondary school in Bradford responded to new rules restricting pupil access to toilets during lesson time by launching an online petition that framed the new rule

as a human rights issue, and gathering in the toilets chanting ‘lock us in’ (*Keighley News* 21st February 2019). Later that year, *The Birmingham Mail* (14th July 2019) reported that pupils unhappy with the introduction of thumbprint scanners at their school issued an open letter expressing their concerns about a lack of consultation with pupils, stating that the new biometric system threatens their right to privacy.

Of the 14 protests about planned school mergers or closures (16.3%) – just over half were linked to ‘Academisation’ in England but in some cases planned closures were reportedly due to falling pupil numbers and no replacement provision was being offered. For example, in 2010 the *South Wales Argus* (6th July 2010) reported on pupil responses to the news that the sixth form (provision for pupils aged 16-18) at their school in south Wales would be closing without any consultation. Students held a silent protest, some taped their mouths shut to symbolize their lack of voice, while others held banners reading ‘no voice, no choice’. Again in both examples we see pupil responses focussing on their right to have a say in decisions about things that impact them and their learning.

Protesting in solidarity with teaching staff or pupils

There were ten newspaper articles about pupil protests in support of teaching staff , and two about protests in support of fellow pupils (11.6% and 2.3% of dataset, respectively). All reported instances of activism in support of teaching staff – in response to redundancy, forced retirement or other negative attention focussed on a teacher, took the form of demonstrations. For example, *The Birmingham Mail* (8th December 2008) reports that over 100 students formed a picket line and chanted to protest the removal of the school’s headteacher. These actions followed two petitions ‘begging’ for the teacher to stay, presented to school governors

signed by the ‘vast majority’ of the school’s pupils. The protest was led by a twelve year old student who is quoted as saying:

Everyone is up in arms about it [...] we were never consulted about it. It’s disgusting. They took no notice of our petitions so this is basically plan B to keep our headteacher, who we love [...] but no-one ever listens to what we have to say [...]

This picket line is the only way to get anyone to listen.

Once again we can see that the perceived lack of respect and consideration given to children’s perspectives are articulated as a key impetus for protest action.

Protesting racism, sexism and sexual harassment

The majority of the examples presented so far draw upon children’s expectations that they should have a voice and a right to self-expression and involvement in decision making. The following examples, however, show that an intersectional lens is needed when considering children’s civil, political and broader participation rights and that children’s social movements are often inextricably linked to broader social movements around inequality and social democracy, particularly around race and gender (Rodgers 2020).

There were six reports of protests related to racism within school and six reports of protests linked to gender and sexual inequality. All twelve protests about racialised or sexual inequalities were at English schools. One of the six reported racial incidents was at a fee-paying school, following a teacher’s use of racially charged language in a school assembly. A number of reported protests are linked to the aforementioned Pimlico Academy, where

changes to school management and policy have proven controversial (*The Guardian* 25th March 2021; *The Independent* 19th April 2021). Changes to the school uniform policy, stipulating that hairstyles should not ‘block the view of others’ and that hijabs ‘should not be too colourful’ were said to discriminate against Muslim pupils and those with afro hairstyles, prompting pupils to start a petition that gathered over one thousand signatures. One pupil is quoted as saying:

We as students have the right to express ourselves however we choose, and also have the right to our natural hair whether it be big hair, small hair, loads of facial hair or no facial hair.

Pupils also protested changes that were seen to clash with the school’s multicultural history and relationship with the local area. An anonymous source told *The Guardian* that the history curriculum had been re-written to focus on British kings and queens and that references to minoritised communities had been removed. The emotive and performative nature (Jasper 2014) of this protest is foregrounded in the pupils’ show of opposition to the erection of a Union Jack outside the school: protestors reportedly conceptualised this as a symbol of racial superiority and the marginalisation of Black students – as indicated by protest signs stating ‘There ain’t no black in the Union Jack.’ In an act of defiance and a challenge to the authority of the school, a group of pupils removed the flag and set light to it in a nearby housing. Protestors also communicated their dissatisfaction through graffiti on school buildings, including slogans such as ‘They want to expel the students for speaking out!!!’ and ‘Expel the racist headmaster!!’ although it is important to acknowledge that we cannot know whether pupils at the school were responsible for this.

The Pimlico case comes shortly after the wave of Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd by police officers in the USA, and is suggestive of students actively

holding their schools to account on issues of racial discrimination and challenging structural forms of racism (Joseph-Salisbury 2021).

Of the six reported protests relating to gender, sexuality, sexism and harassment, triggers included responses to homophobia, sexism, the sexualisation of female pupils and accusations of rape culture. Three of these protests took place at fee-paying schools, with a former pupil of Dulwich College independent boys school writing an open letter alleging an ‘established rape culture’ after collecting testimony from pupils at his school and the neighbouring James Allen’s Girls School (*The Standard* March 2021; *The Guardian* 26th March 2021). Other protests were linked more directly to the behaviour of teachers, rather than fellow pupils. For example, pupils demonstrated on their school playing field in Dorset, England after a video emerged of one of their teachers chastising girls for wearing skirts that are ‘too short’ and ‘tempt boys to say silly things’ (*The Mirror* 24th April 2021). Pupils broke uniform rules and wore leggings instead of skirts, with one pupil reportedly commenting:

[...] this highlights the deeply institutionalised misogyny that is still sadly so rife in today’s society. Victim blaming culture can be so harming to young people [...] the only person able to prevent sexual assault / harassment is the perpetrator.

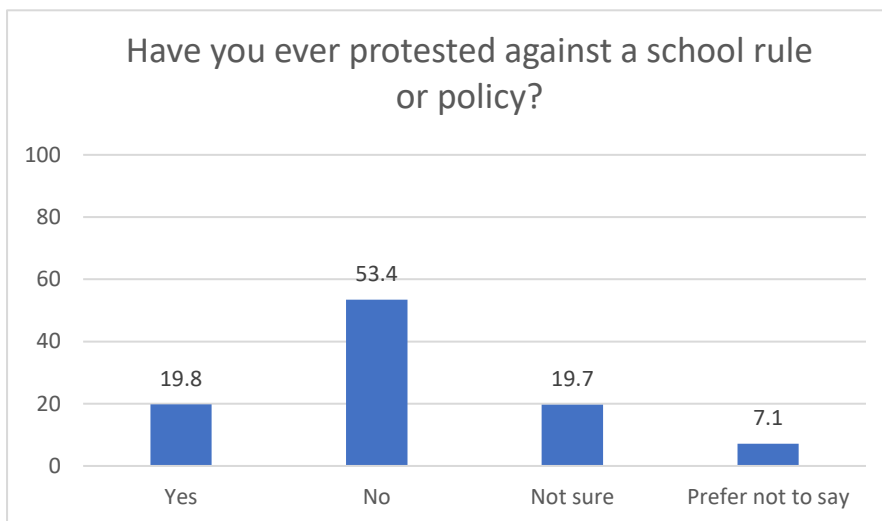
In cases like this, protests can be seen as attempts to ‘educate’ schooling staff about discrimination and victimisation, thus challenging traditional hierarchical models of learning in which teachers bestow knowledge upon students (Friere 2018).

Pupil Survey Findings

Our survey of pupil participation and views on protest provides more detail on the role of protest and activism in children and young people’s lives. Around one in five pupils (n=151)

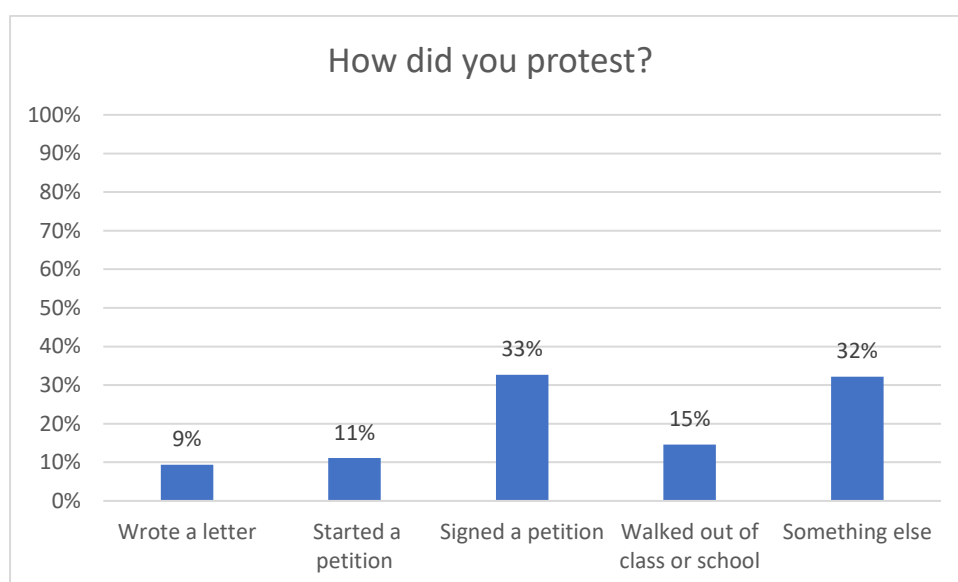
in our Welsh sample say that they have protested against a school rule or policy (Figure 2). A further 20% indicated that they were not sure if they had participated in such a protest, suggesting that they were unsure about whether to define their actions in terms of activism, and highlighting that protest is a ‘messy’ concept which can be understood in a variety of ways.

Figure 2: Survey responses to the question ‘have you ever protested against a school rule or policy?’



Those who indicated that they had protested were asked what they had protested about. As can be seen in Figure 3, the most popular response to this multiple choice question was ‘what we are allowed to wear at school’. This mirrors the prevalence of protests linked to uniform and appearance in our newspaper analysis and indicates that uniform and appearance are key ways in which children express themselves within schooling contexts (Swain, 2002).

Figure 3: Pupil responses to the prompt ‘how did you protest?’



A number of the responses in the learning environment, curricula and facilities theme relate to timetabling and the structure of the school day – with particular concern expressed in one school around breacktimes and lunchtimes, indicating that the amount of free time available to students is a key issue of concern. Five pupils (0.6%) used this space to give further details on their protest about what they are allowed to wear – these related not only to the uniform

itself, but to appearance more generally. This indicates that pupils are frustrated by the broader regulation of their self-presentation at school.

Further responses related more to social justice issues around equality and human rights, including LGBTQ+ related issues, the gendered treatment of pupils during PE, and teacher responses to racism. The responses relating to protest rights show that the boundary between protest relating to school and global issues can become blurred. While a protest may begin about a global issue, such as the Israeli-Palestine conflict, it may evolve into a protest against the school if it attempts to restrict children’s activism. In this sense, protests become focused around children’s rights and agency, and appear to emerge as a result of the clash between their expectations and their lived experiences of schooling (Table 4).

Table 4: Examples of open-text responses from pupils about the issues they have protested about

Code	Examples
Learning environment, curricula and facilities	‘Change in lunch hours’ ‘bathrooms’ ‘How we aren't allowed to choose what lessons we would like to learn.’ ‘school meals’ ‘our break got reduced’
Uniform/appearance	‘makeup’ ‘my hair colour’ ‘logos on school trousers’ ‘white socks’
Gender, sexuality, sexism	‘Lgbtq stuff’ ‘Girls getting treated differently in PE to the boys’ ‘making boys and girls do swimming together (girls felt uncomfortable)’
Racism, discrimination	‘Black Lives Matter’ ‘teachers to care about pupils saying slurs and racism’
Protest rights	‘They wouldn't let us protest’ ‘Not being able to say our opinion about Palestine and being told it is about politics’

Pupils were also asked how they protested the issues they had selected. They were presented with four options and given an open-ended space to give details of another form of protest, as can be seen in Figure 4. ‘Signed a petition’ was the most popular category, supporting Inglehart's (2018) suggestion that 'easier' protest activities are more accessible/popular than those that are more difficult or costly. ‘Something else’ was the second biggest, indicating that the options we had provided to pupils were not sufficient and that they had broader conceptualisations of protest than our responses allowed.

Figure 4: Survey responses indicating the issues pupils have protested about

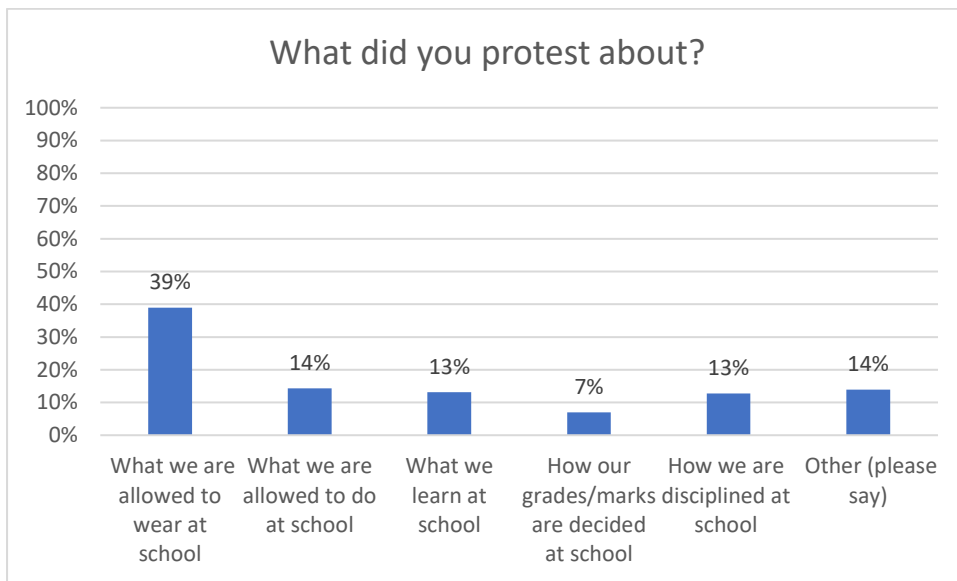


Table 5 provides examples of pupil’s open-ended responses, alongside the issues they were protesting. We have arranged these into three categories: ‘rule-breaking’, ‘demonstrations’ and ‘conversations/complaints’. We have defined the first two as *non-institutionalised disruptive* forms of protest, and the third, ‘conversations/complaints’, as *institutionalised* forms of protest. While these interactions with teachers may not have taken place within formal channels, children are permitted to have conversations and discuss grievances with

teachers, and so we consider these to fall within the bounds of institutional norms and expectations.

Table 5: Examples of open-text responses to the prompt ‘How did you protest?’

Code	Response to ‘How did you protest – other’	Protest topic
<i>Institutional</i> (conversations/complaints/letter-writing)	Had a civil conversation with teachers. Also (Wrote a letter)	What we learn at school
	kept speaking to all PE teachers	‘Girls getting treated differently in PE to the boys’
	<i>Grwp o merched o blwyddyn ni yn cynnal meeting gyda’r athrawon</i> (Group of girls in our year holding a meeting with the teachers)	What allowed to wear
<i>Non-institutionalised disruptive</i> (rule-breaking)	Kept wearing the trousers and coat I was wearing because uniform does not affect our learning	What allowed to wear
	I wore black and broke 2 school rules so people would pay attention to what I had to say	‘How we aren’t allowed to choose what lessons we would like to learn.’
	We all just wore the pe kit in summer until it became uniform.	What allowed to wear
<i>Non-institutionalised disruptive</i> (demonstrations/marches)	Marched around school with loads of kids and banners creating a disruption but was stopped	‘Palestine the school said they aren’t giving a political view on it’
	We were shouting and protesting at break	‘Our break got reduced’
	done a stampede and then a congo	How disciplined

Our first category, ‘conversations’ and complaints, suggests that many of the children in our study take a relatively broad view of protest, with a number of them stating that they protested by speaking to teachers about the issue they were concerned about. The majority of the participants give little detail about the nature of these conversations and complaints, so

that we do not know whether they followed formal procedures or were informal chats with individual teachers. However, in one case students describe holding a meeting with staff to raise questions about what they are allowed to wear, suggesting a level of collective organisation.

Our second and third categories included disruptive forms of activism. These included demonstrations and marches, as well as more unconventional forms of action which highlights the creative nature of pupil protest (King et al. 2021; Pitti, 2018). We find that pupils are drawing on diverse and unconventional protest repertoires such as a conga, a stampede, the breaking of school rules and wearing banned items of clothing.

Discussion: understanding school-based activism

Our analysis has identified numerous accounts of children protesting school policies and practices over the last twenty years, and our survey of pupils in Wales has found that a fifth of pupils consider themselves to have participated in some form of protest against their school. This supports and develops a growing body of literature around children's activism (Pickard, 2019) and the emerging field of young people's activism at school (Cunningham & Lavalette 2004, 2016). Drawing together literature on children's rights and on social movements, our framework moves beyond existing conceptualisations of protest activism aimed at understanding adult participation to provide a framework for understanding children's school-based protest activism.

Institutional and non-institutional repertoires

Our distinction between institutional and non-institutional repertoires enables us to identify when children resist within or outside of formal channels established by and managed by their schools. This is important because over the last twenty years of there has been an impetus upon schools in the UK to develop internal fora for children's participation such as school councils. Whilst our survey data indicates that children *are* using institutional repertoires – for example having conversations with teachers or making complaints – we also find many examples of non-institutionalised (legitimated and disruptive) repertoires of action across both datasets. In some of the cases we have described here, protestors were quoted as having explored and, sometimes, exhausted institutionalised means such as raising issues via School Council, before resorting to other means of protest.

Previous research has highlighted children's disillusionment with school councils (Alderson 2000; Wyse 2001) and the use of school councils for instrumental means to deepen children's self-discipline and to reinforce inequalities (Raby 2014; Wyness 2009). This may help us to understand why children are choosing non-institutionalised routes to make demands about their schooling. Indeed, several theorists of social movements note that protest activism emerges when there is a disillusionment with formal political processes and a sense that political elites are complicit in perpetuating inequalities (O'Brien et al. 2014) and our research suggests that this is also the case within the school context. In fact, our research suggests that the failure of these institutional forums may be leading not to the silencing of children's voices but to the development of increasingly disruptive and innovative counter-institutional repertoires of action outside of formally recognised channels.

Legitimated and disruptive repertoires

We found that children were using a variety of repertoires outside of institutional procedures to demand that schools recognise their claims. Some of these, which we describe as non-institutional *legitimised* repertoires, were within the realms of what was generally considered to be acceptable to schools, such as petitions, boycotts and letter-writing. Others, which we term non-institutional *disruptive* repertoires, involved the breaking of school rules or the disruption of routines. The high visibility of these types of protest – including demonstrations, walkouts and changes to pupil appearance - might explain why they were prominent in our newspaper analysis. These types of ‘disruptive’ protest also tend to be more challenging for schools to manage as they demand an immediate response in a way that a school petition or letter might not. Our data suggest that students often combined legitimated and disruptive forms – for example – organising a rally or protest to draw attention to a petition. In some of these cases, the accounts provided in newspaper reports indicate that students had explored legitimated repertoires of protest before embarking on a disruptive form of activism. Claims that petitions or open-letters had been ignored provided the rationale for more disruptive forms of protest. Our data therefore suggest that disruptive forms of protest might be experienced as more effective or efficient than either institutionalised or legitimated forms of protest.

If *both* of these institutionalised and legitimated forms of protest are experienced as unavailable or unfit for purpose, then it seems logical that students are moved to more disruptive forms of protest. This provides an important context for the claim made by England’s Chief Education Inspector that English schools are experiencing a ‘threatening’ wave of militancy, because it indicates that students *are* trying to raise issues ‘dutifully’ (O’Brien et al. 2014) through institutionalised and legitimated avenues *before* resorting to

disruptive or ‘militant’ tactics. If institutionalised and legitimated means of raising issues and concerns are not considered fit for purpose by children and young people, this has implications for the operation of School Councils and for the concept of rights respecting schooling.

Autonomy, self-expression and resistance

The prevalence of marches, walkouts and demonstrations in our datasets likely reflect the fact that these are the most widely used forms of protest activism worldwide (Ortiz et al. 2022), suggesting that children, like adults, are influenced by wider cultures of activism. However our analysis also highlights some creativity and innovation in children’s protest repertoires. The wearing of skirts by boys to protest a ban on shorts, for example, can be seen as a way to challenge or play with social norms around gender and clothing.

We note that given the relatively autocratic nature of schooling, many protest actions that would be considered low-level forms of resistance in the social movements literature, such as the wearing of particular clothing, symbols or hairstyles, can be conceptualised as disruptive in a school context because children’s appearance is closely monitored. Indeed, while the prominence of school uniform protests in our media analysis may be partly related to the eye-catching nature of these incidents, the fact that it was the most important issue for children to protest about in the survey data suggests that personal appearance and self-expression are key issues for pupils. Indeed, Swain (2002) suggests that children seek a sense of autonomy through clothing and appearance but are given limited scope to do so. The use of personal appearance to protest at school raises important questions about what is to be considered a legitimate form of activism and what is deemed to be bad behaviour, given that students themselves described instances when they wore items banned under their school rules as

forms of protest and did so with the aim of challenging a policy which they considered to be unfair or discriminatory.

Conclusion: towards recognising school-based activism

A key issue here is why children's school-based protest activism has received so little attention in either the social movements literature or the sociology of childhood literature. Our data suggest that school-based protests might only involve a small number of students, or even individual students. They can be reactive and short-lived, relating to, for example, decisions around uniform or the treatment of a pupil. However, we suggest that it would be a mistake to see such forms of activism as insignificant or mere 'practice' for the future. We echo Taft and Gordon (2013) who, in their work on youth councils, argue that perceiving youth councils as solely practice for the future undermines young people's attempts to influence their contexts and their right to meaningful participation in democratic structures. In fact, children spend a great deal of their lives within schools, and their attempts to shape policies and practices within schools are highly consequential for their lived experiences – and should be included in a conception of political action. Moreover, the manner in which teachers and school management respond to institutionalised, legitimated and disruptive repertoires of protest may inform pupils' onward experiences and appetite for political engagement.

There is some evidence that these protests constitute part of a broader NSM organised around a collective identity of children as a marginalised group, as proposed by Rodgers (2020) and Watts (2021). In many of our examples, children draw on discourses of rights and social democracy, and have a keen sense of themselves as rights-holders. While they did not

explicitly discuss ‘children’s rights’, they often articulated their grievances in terms of violation of their rights, and made demands for their ‘voices’ to be heard and respected. However, we echo Rodger’s (2020) case for an intersectional approach to analysing children’s social movement/s, and note that the young people in our dataset organised around other collective identities. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, pupils appear to be increasingly framing grievances with their schools in terms of other social movements around sexism and racism and to be influenced by these movements concerns with structural inequality. For example, while our dataset includes school uniform protests over the last twenty years, since 2020 we have begun to see more cases when students are explicitly challenging what they regard as sexist or racist school uniform rules. This shift could indicate that pupils are increasingly sensitive to how schooling cultures replicate and reproduce social injustices. It might also reflect a recognition by some pupils that framing issues in relation to key inequality indicators is likely to necessitate action from school management, since educators have a statutory duty to ensure that they are tackling issues of racism and sexism. Our data suggests that children’s demands for more inclusive and respectful school cultures often manifested as protest activity because children felt that these issues were not were not being addressed through institutional mechanisms, echoing a key theme in the social movement literature. In fact, many of these protests can be understood as attempts to communicate with and educate teachers on issues relating to discrimination and sexual harassment, disrupting the traditional hierarchy in which the teacher imparts knowledge to the learner.

These accounts of students trying to engage their schools in (sometimes difficult) conversations to provoke change align with critical pedagogic framings of the purpose and value of education. Friere (2018) describes interactions between teacher-learners and learner-teachers in which space for problem posing, rather than ‘banking’ knowledge is made.

Importantly, Friere argues that students must be able to critically approach the world and

understand social injustices as well as their own role in them. Building on Friere and incorporating an intersectional lens, hooks (1994) uses the term ‘engaged pedagogy’ to emphasize the importance of a sense of community amongst learners and teachers in order to unpack the problematic power dynamics that underpin contemporary regimes of education. From these perspectives, activism, protest and other means by which learners learn to *transgress* are seen as valuable opportunities for self-actualisation rather than as punishable offences. Our study therefore challenges hegemonic and deficit-laden ideas about children’s (mis)behaviour as potential mis-readings of activism. At a time when many educators and policy makers are seeking to involve and include children in decisions about things that impact them, through a variety of initiatives including School Councils and Rights-Respecting Schools, it may be reductive to dismiss student participation in protest activity as something to be minimised, undermined or framed as a disciplinary matter. Student protests may indeed provide a valuable opportunity to engage with children and young people in dialogue about changing school cultures.

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Declaration of interest statement

No interests declared.

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