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Schools as Sites of Activism: Students' Political Socialisation and Activism at School

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores students' political socialisation and activism at school. It draws on research from two datasets: interviews with 24 activists aged 15–25, and data from a national survey of 1600 school students in Wales. Wales offers a unique perspective as a case study for the enactment of young people's civil and political rights, given the focus on children's agency and citizenship in Welsh policy and legislation. The political socialisation of young activists in the study largely occurred outside of school through engagement with social movements and social media. However, participants also viewed school as a space for activism. They described attempts to change their school policies on a variety of environmental and social justice issues. They were sceptical about institutional forms of participation, such as school councils, and preferred student-led advocacy groups or more disruptive forms of activism as more effective avenues for change-making. Participants did not readily connect their activism to ideas encountered in lessons, suggesting that the *official curriculum* did not sensitise them politically. However, the *hidden curriculum*—including informal conversations with politically engaged teachers and witnessing strike action—did appear to foster their motivation for change. The research indicates that young people are claiming expertise on social justice issues and challenging hierarchical models of teaching and learning in line with critical pedagogic principles.

ABSENOLDEB

Mae'r papur hwn yn trin a thrafod myfyrwyr yn cymdeithasoli ac yn ymgyrchu'n wleidyddol yn yr ysgol. Defnyddia ymchwil o ddwy set ddata: cyfweliadau gyda 24 o ymgyrchwyr rhwng 15 a 25, a data o arolwg cenedlaethol o 1600 o ddisgyblion ysgol yng Nghymru. Mae Cymru'n cynnig safbwynt unigryw fel astudiaeth achos o weithrediad hawliau sifil a gwleidyddol pobl ifanc o ystyried y ffocws ar weithrediad a dinasyddiaeth plant ym mholisïau a deddfwriaeth Cymru. Roedd cymdeithasoli ymgyrchwyr ifanc yn wleidyddol yn yr astudiaeth yn digwydd y tu allan i'r ysgol i raddau helaeth drwy ymgysylltu â mudiadau cymdeithasol a chyfryngau cymdeithasol. Er hyn, roedd y rhai a oedd yn cymryd rhan hefyd yn ystyried yr ysgol yn lle i ymgyrchu. Gwnaethon nhw ddisgrifio ymdrechion i newid polisïau eu hysgolion ar amrywiaeth o faterion amgylcheddol a materion sy'n ymwneud â chyfiawnder cymdeithasol. Roedden nhw'n amheus ynghylch ffyrdd sefydliadol o gymryd rhan, megis cynghorau ysgol, ac roedd yn well ganddyn nhw grwpiau eirioli dan arweiniad disgyblion neu ffyrdd o ymgyrchu mwy aflonyddgar fel llwybrau mwy effeithiol i greu newid. Doedd y cyfranogwyr ddim yn cysylltu eu hymgyrchu'n rhwydd â syniadau a ddaethon nhw ar eu traws mewn gwersi, gan awgrymu nad oedd y *cwricwlwm swyddogol* yn eu sensiteiddio'n wleidyddol. Er hyn, ymddengys bod y *cwricwlwm cudd* – gan gynnwys sgyrsiau anffurfiol gydag athrawon sydd â diddordeb mewn gwleidyddiaeth a bod yn dyst i

streic – wedi meithrin eu cymhelliant i ysgogi newid. Mae'r ymchwil yn nodi bod pobl ifanc yn arddel arbenigedd ar faterion sy'n ymwneud â chyfiawnder troseddol a modelau hierarchaidd heriol o addysgu a dysgu yn unol ag egwyddorion addysgol beirniadol.

1 | Introduction

During the spring of 2023, pupil activism made newspaper headlines in the UK following a spate of protests at school, including incidents related to skirt-measuring and access to toilets (Weale 2023). Within elements of the media, these child protests were framed as a school disciplinary issue, rather than as children exercising their right to express their opinions (Barrance and Muddiman 2023). Such negative responses emanate from children's protests challenging historical and normative understandings of the apolitical child living in a 'walled garden' (Holt 1975), insulated from the adult world of politics. Further, they highlight conflicts between increasing support for childhood agency in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and hierarchical schooling cultures in the Global North which require children's compliance (Quennerstedt 2011).

Initiatives to support children's agency in schools have primarily been framed in terms of facilitating children's participation rights rather than supporting their protest rights (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2021). Children's participation rights in school are generally supported through institutional forums for consultation on school decisions, which require children's participation to be managed and facilitated by adults. There has, however, been little research that has considered the school as a site for promoting or inhibiting childhood protest. Nevertheless, there is a legacy of protests by young people at schools internationally and in the UK stretching back over the last century, with protests linked to government policies, the Iraq War, and the climate crisis (Cunningham and Lavalette 2016; Pickard 2019). African American high school students had an integral role in challenging their schools' racist policies and practices in the USA in the 1960s and 70s (Rury and Hill 2013). More recently, students in the USA walked out of school as part of the March for Our Lives movement to protest against the lack of gun regulation following school shootings (Emeran 2021). In the UK, Cunningham and Lavalette's (2016) history of school strikes shows how walkouts have been used by schoolchildren to protest on a wide range of school-based and national issues for over a century.

Alongside these forms of protest, there have been a range of initiatives to foster youth civic engagement in the UK: these include the creation of school councils and citizenship education. This paper engages with the tensions and complexities in realising the political and citizenship rights of children, using Wales as a case study in which policy and legal frameworks seem conducive to the expansion of children's political citizenship within the education system and beyond. Since devolution there have been a number of legislative and educational developments which indicate a desire on the part of decision-makers to be accountable to the voices and views of children: one of the Welsh National Assembly's earliest documents outlined Wales's post-devolution commitment to respecting children as 'active holders of rights' (NAW 2000, 10) and it made school councils compulsory in 2005 (WAG 2006). Further, in 2011 it introduced the Children and Young People's 2011 Measure, which puts a statutory duty on ministers to give due regard to children's rights in any decisions affecting children (Williams 2013). The new curriculum for Wales, introduced for pupils up to Year 7 (11–12 year-olds) in 2022, highlights human rights as a key cross-cutting theme. It therefore represents an interesting case study for exploring the opportunities and barriers for children and young people engaging in civic and political activism. However, our previous research within Wales indicates that students do not always feel listened to and taken seriously at school, with pupils resorting to *disruptive* forms of activism when they feel they have exhausted *institutional* and *legitimised* routes for changemaking (Barrance and Muddiman 2023; see also O'Brien et al. 2018).

Within our framework for children's school-based activism (Barrance and Muddiman 2023), *institutional* activism sits within school policies and routine practices: this includes school councils and other forms of participation facilitated and organised by staff. In contrast, *legitimised* activism sits outside of formal school channels but does not break school rules and is generally accepted as a legitimate forum of engagement by schools. In our original paper, which drew largely on newspaper reports (and thus generally highly visible and contentious activisms), examples of legitimised activism included petitions, boycotts and open letters. In this paper we also include student-led advocacy groups, such as LGBTQ+ groups, which aim to challenge heteronormative school cultures. Finally, *disruptive* activism sits outside of school channels and involves the breaking of school rules and/or the disruption of routines. Examples of disruptive activism include demonstrations, sit-ins, graffiti, walkouts and breaking school rules. These forms of activism usually prompt an immediate response from schools as they pose a significant challenge to the social norms expected of children. The research conceptualised school student protest as an attempt to break down hierarchical models of teaching and learning in line with critical pedagogic perspectives (Freire 2018; Giroux 2020; hooks 1994), and to educate teachers on issues of social justice.

In this research, we draw on young activists' accounts of their activism at school to consider how they make sense of their activism in relation to their education. We discuss the perceptions of young activists on their schools as spaces for political socialisation, including curricula and relationships with staff, but also reflect on broader school cultures. We begin by considering children's political and citizenship education in the UK and exploring conceptualisations of activism in schools. In our analysis, we examine the extent to which young activists see their school as a site for activism, and the ways they engage politically at school. We conclude by considering the role of schools in fostering or inhibiting children's political socialisation and activism. In doing so, we feed into debates about children's activism, which draw on broader definitions of the 'political' that include children's everyday activities in service of their communities or families (Bosco 2010; Cuevas-Parra and Zhu 2024).

1.1 | Children's Political and Citizenship Education

Formal citizenship education was introduced in all UK nations at the start of the twenty-first century, primarily as a result of concerns about the political disengagement of young people due to lower levels of voting (Pickard 2019). While England introduced discrete citizenship lessons following the Crick Report (2002), in Wales citizenship education was delivered through cross-curricular Personal and Social Education (WAG 2008) and Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) (Welsh Government 2012). While both prioritise sustainability and the preparation of pupils for life in a global society, the PSE curriculum foregrounds active citizenship on the local, national and global level. Given the cross-curricular design of the new curriculum for Wales, citizenship continues to be taught as an element across disciplines (Welsh Government 2022). The citizenship curriculum in Wales has been subject to many of the same critiques as those in other UK nations: Jerome et al. (2022) argue that all UK nations use a *soft* rather than *critical* citizenship approach, in which the focus is on personal responsibility, volunteering and doing good in one's community, rather than developing a critical mindset that interrogates power and challenges injustice. Further, they point out that none of the UK curricula prescribe teaching on governance within a devolved nation.

A key barrier to critical citizenship education is teachers' reluctance to teach what they see as controversial topics, with many avoiding such topics and others attempting to do so in a neutral way, so as to avoid politicising pupils (Donnelly et al. 2020). However, critical pedagogic approaches, as advocated by Giroux (2020), hooks (1994), Freire (2018) and others, contend that neutrality is impossible to achieve, precisely because schooling operates within the political sphere, and so neutrality simply signifies adherence to the status quo which maintains dominant power structures. Giroux (2020) argues that teachers should aim to develop problem-posing rather than politicising pedagogy, where the critical faculties of students are engaged. These debates reflect wider tensions and binaries in how childhood agency is conceived and the role of political socialisation, whether from the family, school or community: adults want children to be politically educated but relatively passive (a form of civic activism); they do not want them to be politically agentic and politicised (political activism).

1.2 | Civic Engagement and Activism at School

Alongside curriculum and pedagogy matters, there are a number of extracurricular activities allied with civic engagement that students can become involved with at school. As discussed above, these can include institutional forums such as school councils, school clubs and groups, as well as student-led groups such as advocacy and issues-based campaigning groups. Much research has been conducted on school councils over the last 20 years in the UK, the majority of which has been critical of the tokenistic nature of councils as consultative, rather than decision-making bodies that do little to stimulate children's active citizenship (Alderson 2000; Wyse 2001; Allan and I'Anson 2004).

A smaller body of research has examined the role of school advocacy groups. Some of this research relates to school groups that are part of *formal* school programmes, such as Eco Schools (Lee 2016). Other research explores individual and *informal* school groups, often led by students themselves, such as Gay-Straight-Alliances (Walls et al. 2010). Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2019) note that pupils' efforts to challenge the heteronormative cultures of their schools often involve 'reimagining themselves as experts' (p. 264) as well as their relationships with teachers. Although research indicates that these groups can provide a safe space for students and increase visibility, Queer-Straight-Alliances can meet resistance in schools where there is not an overall culture of tolerance, making it difficult to effect systemic change (Griffin et al. 2004). A critical perspective on school-based activism, distinguishing between child- and adult-led activism, helps us to problematize some adult-led interventions as attempts to socialise youth for a particular future. Similarly, while adult-led interventions can potentially be emancipatory, there is a risk that school-based activist programmes can be co-opted by a neo-liberal consumerist logic focused on self-optimisation (Gordon and Taft 2011; Renold 2019).

2 | Methodology

The research draws on two forms of data. The first is data from the WISERD Education Multi-Cohort Study (WMCS), a national longitudinal research project that surveys pupils about their views and experiences of growing up in Wales. The 12th sweep of the study (2024), included questions about participation in activism. The second is a set of 24 qualitative interviews with Welsh activists aged 15–25 (undertaken July 2023–June 2024). The authors received ethical approval for this second element of the research from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University (SREC:079).

The research procedures for Sweep 9 were approved by Cardiff University's Research Ethics Committee on the 1st of August 2017 (SREC:2372).

Participants were recruited through invitations sent to activist groups in Wales and interviews took place in person or online. The interviews focused on young people's experiences of taking part in activism in Wales and asked a series of questions about motivations and influences. Participants were asked about their schooling experiences to gauge whether schools had influenced their political expression and sensibilities, and to understand whether they saw school as a site for activism. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

2.1 | Ethical Considerations

Both of these research projects received ethical permission from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. Comprehensive and clear information sheets were provided at each stage of the research, enabling participants to give informed consent. Parents/guardians of participants in the MCS were provided with opt-out consent forms prior to the beginning of the research, and pupils consented on

the first page of the survey. Consent for participation in the interviews was sought online via a consent form using the Qualtrics survey platform. Participants who gave consent were asked for their names and contact details to arrange interviews. Those under 16 were asked for their parent/guardian contact details and opt-in consent was sought from parents/guardians before proceeding to arrange interviews. Undertaking research with children and young people understandably entails heightened ethical scrutiny, and a key issue for us has been how to protect the identities of our participants. Anonymising the interviews presented a key challenge, since many of the young people participating in the study are doing unique, highly visible work or are part of small activist groups in Wales. This required us to take additional steps to protect the identities of participants. In this paper we identify participants by number only, and do not include additional demographic information to reduce the risk of identification.

We interviewed 24 participants with a mixture of genders including those identifying as men, women, trans and non-binary people. Nine of the participants were under 18. All of those aged 18 or above were either attending university or had left; none were unemployed. We grouped participant causes into five interrelated areas to aid anonymity. Participants were often recruited through one group but discussed involvement with other groups/causes in their interview. The causes identified are:

- Anti Racism: includes activism linked to Black Lives Matter, Palestinian Solidarity and Stop the War movements.
- Climate Activism: includes involvement with School Strikes For Climate, Fridays For Future, XR and Green New Deal Rising.
- Welsh Activism: includes involvement with Welsh independence movements, protecting Welsh farmland, and organizations to promote Welsh language and culture.
- LGBTQ+ Activism: includes campaigning on menstrual health, sex education, and trans-inclusive activism.
- Left-Leaning Politics and Economic Inequalities: includes involvement with Labour, Socialist and Communist organisations, and material rights including housing/renters rights.

3 | Findings

3.1 | Mapping the Prevalence of Youth Activism in Welsh Schools

In the WMCS survey, 12% of school students ($n = 1458$) responded to say that they had participated in protests over the last year across a range of causes. Those who responded yes were asked to write which causes they had protested about. The most commonly reported form of protest was related to 'school issues', including activism on uniform, exclusion and school toilets. This reinforces findings from a previous sweep of the survey (Barrance and Muddiman 2023), where almost a quarter of pupils reported protesting against school policies and practices, highlighting that the school is a key site for young people's activism. The second most prevalent theme of protest is the climate crisis, followed by protest linked to Palestine. These were more widely reported than Wales-specific issues including Welsh Independence, the Welsh Government Sustainable Farming scheme and the closure of local services.

Our interviews help to contextualise this overview by exploring the perspectives of young activists. The sample includes those still at school and some who have left school and are reflecting back on their experiences and involvement with activism at school. In the following analysis we investigate the extent to which young activists in our sample see school as a forum for, or facilitator of, their activism. Activists in our study were involved with activism on a range of issues at school. These were not always aligned with the issues they organised and protested about outside of school, supporting Meyer's (2003) argument that activism stimulates participants' critical consciousness and this spills over into many areas of their life and work.

We begin by recounting participant accounts of *institutional* and *legitimised* forms of political campaigning and citizenship at school via school councils and advocacy groups, before exploring the more contested forms of participation that require some disruption of school norms. In the second section we consider the various opportunities and means through which participants describe building skills and experiences linked to activism.

3.2 | School Councils: Legitimate but Lacking?

School councils, as an institutional forum for participation, have been both celebrated for facilitating children's participation, and derided as tokenistic (Allan and I'Anson 2004; Alderson 2000; Wyse 2001). A minority of our participants linked their involvement in school council to the development of their activist tendencies. One participant mentioned being part of a school council at primary school as an example of their early interest in politics, whilst another described how participating in their school parliament developed their interest in girls' rights:

> I got into activism at a very young age through my School Parliament. I was very involved...looking at school skirts when the uniform changed...and, like accessing the toilets, and I was known as kind of the person on the Council that the girls-rights issues would go through
>
> (Activist-06)

However, for many participants, school council was seen only as a forum for fundraising or organising events like parties and proms. the majority of participants were dismissive of their school council as a forum for influencing their schools' policies and practices, and there was little evidence of school councils stimulating critical forms of active citizenship. One activist explained that a boy in their year at school had initially gone to the school council to overturn a ban on durag (also known as do-rag) head coverings—often worn by Black boys—but ended up going directly to school governors instead as the school council 'don't actually really do much'. (Activist-24).

Another activist tried to persuade her school to end its policy of gender-segregated assemblies, explaining that 'a few of my friends were transitioning at the time, it made them extremely uncomfortable'. She found students on the school council 'receptive' but said that for staff, the student council was more of a 'talking piece' to show that they're 'doing student voice' without acting on her concerns. She resorted to talking to the headteacher instead:

> I met with the headteacher...I must have been 15 at the time and ...[he] was probably a man in his mid-50s. And I was trying to explain like my perspective and then he said the boys would just be too distracted if they sat next to girls.
>
> (Activist-12)

Although this activist was successful in persuading her school to end gender-segregated assemblies, her account demonstrates the ways in which adult gatekeepers can frustrate the exercise of student voice by focussing on *listening* rather than following up with *action*, a condition for the fulfilment to the right to participation (Lundy 2007). We heard a similar narrative from another activist who 'pushed' for a prayer room for Muslim students and complained about resistance from her school. This activist also found alternative routes for making her voice heard when she became frustrated with the school council. Together these accounts demonstrate how young activists, hindered by the limitations of the school council, found other ways to push for change. In fact, schools lacking meaningful opportunities for participation could be providing activists with useful experience of interacting and negotiating with intransigent institutions: practising 'claim-making' and negotiation with authority figures, including those who are inflexible and resist their demands. This adds weight to the argument that pupils turn to other forms of activism once institutional forums for participation fail (Barrance and Muddiman 2023) and points to the flexibility and creativity of young activists facing barriers to the realisation of their demands. This echoes O'Brien et al.'s (2018) accounts of environmental activists turning towards disruptive and dangerous forms of environmental activism when they do not believe that change can be actualised from within existing institutions.

3.3 | School Advocacy Groups: Safer but Separate?

Participants in our study also discussed being part of issues-based school advocacy groups, including Eco Clubs, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups and branches of Amnesty International. Some of these are established and managed by schools, falling into our definition of *institutionalised activism*, while others were established and led by students, falling into our category of *legitimised activism*: schools have no role in running these groups but they accept their validity and engage with members. Examples of institutionalised activism include Eco Clubs, which have become popularised through an international programme requiring schools to have an eco-committee with student membership (Lee 2016). There were mixed perspectives on Eco Clubs in our research. One participant explicitly stated that he had not become involved with his school's Eco Club because it did not address structural issues and because the activities of the club mainly revolved around collecting rubbish at lunchtimes, the same task allocated to those who had violated school rules:

> There were no discussions about, you know, the school's emissions, things like that...But then they were also like you've been a naughty boy, go and join the Eco buddies
>
> (Activist-16)

Other participants were more positive about their school's environmental groups. In two cases, activists that we contacted via their environmental campaigning told us that they were active members of their school Eco Council. When reflecting on their involvement they discussed initiatives to reduce plastic waste and improve the natural environment through tree planting. One participant, who was still at school when interviewed, shared her hope that 'smaller scale' changes like 'stopping plastic cups' and 'encouraging people to bring their own water bottles' would lead to more substantial changes 'to do with the lighting or energy' (Activist-3).

3.4 | Awareness Raising: Creativity and Censorship

A number of participants discussed their involvement in legitimised forms of activism through student-led LGBTQ+ advocacy groups. They were engaged in awareness-raising activities such as running Pride events and presenting to school assemblies, with the aim of challenging heteronormative cultures. One participant discussed how the establishment of a Pride group by pupils influenced teachers and led to a change in the sex and relationships curriculum:

> I guess the school realized that when they were teaching us in year 7 [ages 12–13], it was very much... heteronormative and then they were like, maybe now that we've got a Pride club, we should actually, I don't know, teach sex education in a more varied, more diverse way.
>
> (Activist-19)

Activist-19 went on to describe how the group was involved directly in developing the approach to teaching, and their efforts to raise awareness around LGBTQ+ rights within school through assemblies. Their account is in line with previous research which has aimed to highlight young people as having 'expert subjectivities' in the field of gender and sexuality (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2019; Coll et al. 2017, 157):

> So a lot of it was kind of 'what is asexual?', and then we'd explain that [to] the younger kids and things like that. What is bisexuality, and sexuality, what's the differences? And...the history of gay rights activism, looking at Stonewall and other riots like that, and I guess legality of same-sex relationships throughout UK history.
>
> (Activist-19)

The same activist also described how their Amnesty International group ran assemblies 'to teach the school' on topics like racism and Islam. Another activist ran sessions on voting around the time of the Senedd elections. Further, Activist-7 described making presentations in their LGBTQ+ group on LGBT History Month, Pride Month and Trans Awareness week, to be shown in school assemblies, though was met with resistance from the school:

> Not all of them were shown, and the ones that were shown weren't shown to year 7 and 8 because they thought it was inappropriate...they just decided that any mention of gay and trans people was too much.

In addition to the group not being able to deliver the content themselves, Activist-7 described how teachers censored the presentations – 'they removed any mention of trans people' due to fears that the content 'might go against other teachers' beliefs or beliefs of parents'. This could be interpreted as a rejection, by teachers, of LGBTQ+ students' 'expert subjectivities' (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2019). Educational research into gender and sexualities has long advocated for the importance of (re)positioning young people as active agents, highlighting the transformative potential of schools (Coll et al. 2019, 2017). The recent overhaul of the national curriculum in Wales has created a conducive context for this work, placing an emphasis on empowering, creative and co-produced Relationships and Sexuality Education (Renold et al. 2021). However, the shifting policy landscape of RSE in Wales and England has been met with significant backlash as gender and sexualities education operates in an increasingly contested and politicised terrain (Cumper et al. 2023). As highlighted in the example above, reimagining the relationship between teachers and students by positioning students as architects of their own learning can be met with anxieties and a desire to maintain power and control.

3.5 | Problematising Institutional Neutrality

So far we have focused our analysis on *institutionalised* and *legitimised* forms of activism at school. In this section we focus on participant perspectives on *curriculum content* as a potential vehicle for political socialisation. Activists in our study almost unanimously expressed frustration about the level of political education at their schools, with some discussing running voting drives to compensate for their school's lack of action. Participants criticised a perceived lack of information about voting, as well as devolved politics, with Activist-20 calling for greater political education:

> How are people meant to know about how our political institutions work...who to hold to account?

The issue of neutrality was a key concern, with activists describing how teachers' fears of bias act as a barrier to facilitating good quality political education:

> I think teachers are too worried that they're going to have a bias – that they worry that it's too hard to do political education.
>
> (Activist-17)

Teacher commitment to political 'neutrality' or impartiality was taken to extremes in Activist-24's account of a debate about slavery in a history lesson, in which students were encouraged to debate 'whether we thought it was good or bad' with the teacher remaining 'impartial'. This example undermines the idea that impartiality is always benign in educational environments. We echo Giroux (2020) and hooks' (1994) critiques of the concept of neutrality in education—contending that neutrality cannot exist because 'education and pedagogy do not exist outside of relations of power, values or politics' (Giroux 2020, 210). Indeed, this reluctance to engage with politics and the deference to neutrality can be read as an abdication of the role of educators in developing informed and critical citizens (hooks 1994). Rather than being neutral, this type of pedagogy reinforces the status quo and denies young people the opportunity and tools to critically question the world around them.

However, a number of students noted that they sought out, and received informal political education through discussions with individual teachers. One activist discussed the influence of a 'Marxist teacher', another spoke about their history teacher being open about their anti-monarchy stance and their Welsh teacher's espoused support for Welsh independence. Several recalled having informal conversations about political issues with teachers outside of lessons, and one remembered the teacher putting the news on the TV during registration to prompt discussion about the issues of the day. Others reported learning about activism through witnessing and supporting picketing schoolteachers:

> I mean, the first thing I can think of is my teachers had a picket line outside of my school and I showed support to them.
>
> (Activist-22)

Another participant described supporting teachers striking at their school by bringing them food. Their account is suggestive of a reciprocal culture of solidarity between students and teachers:

> I think that shows that the teachers themselves were, I guess, politically active, politically involved, and maybe that shows why they were so receptive to us when we wanted to do something about LGBTQ+ or BLM... we had a similar mindset, so we'd support them when they were protesting and they'd support us when we wanted to do assemblies and raise awareness on certain topics.
>
> (Activist-19)

This suggests that in some cases both students and teachers were dissatisfied with the lack of formalised space for discussing political issues, and that some teachers felt comfortable bringing some elements of their political selves into their interactions with students in ways that students found to be affirming. In other cases, teachers saw engaging students in political discussions as a risky endeavour, preferring to remain 'neutral' so as to avoid the perception of political allegiance and accusations of bias.

3.6 | Social Media and Social Movements as Political Education

While informal engagement with teachers did have a role in the political socialisation of some students, several activists indicated that their political education primarily happened outside of school through social media and social movements. In fact, several students noted that they became politically engaged for the first time during the Covid-19 school closures, identifying the Covid-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd as politically galvanising events. Many discussed how Covid-19 gave them the time and space to think, read and reflect on injustice, with one stating that Covid and George Floyd 'pushed me politically...because I had so much time to myself' (Activist-13). Others noted that connections with online activist groups enabled their political engagement and socialisation:

> During the pandemic and it was the Black Lives Matter movement going on and I kind of started my political journey then just from maybe people online and reading stuff and I just kind of I gradually through learning more became more left wing
>
> (Activist-7)

> There was a lot of time and space to like do that political education, do those workshops...learn from other people... there'd be a lot of like reading groups, and you got to know a lot more people within the scene
>
> (Activist-20)

Many of these accounts note the role of social media in facilitating their engagement during the pandemic. Indeed, the role of social media in opening up new spaces for young people's political participation and activism is well recognised (Pickard 2019), particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic when much social movement organising moved online (Sainz and Hanna 2023). On the return to school, students appeared to be more willing to challenge injustices. One activist noted that after the first lockdown students asked their school 'to investigate more...how their staff and I guess the school just functions from like a racial specific viewpoint'. (Activist-19). This echoes the findings of our previous paper which found a rise in reports of school protests related to sexism and racism in 2021 on students' return to school after the first lockdown (Barrance and Muddiman 2023).

3.7 | Experimenting With Activist Tactics at School

In this final part of our analysis we turn to non-institutionalised forms of activism described by our participants. We begin with examples that position students in conflict with school rules and authorities to consider the enactment of *disruptive* forms of activism at school. We then look at the ways in which participants drew on established activist repertoires of collecting and disseminating data, to try to legitimate their claims making in the eyes of school decision-makers.

3.7.1 | Direct Action, Rule Breaking and Walk-Outs

While the majority of the activists we interviewed described participating in institutionalised or legitimised forms of activism at school, a minority engaged with disruptive forms of activism. Activist-5 recalled being part of a protest against 'uncomfortable uniform' for boys by wearing shorts—a prohibited item—to school.

> It's that idea that you have a voice and you're able to protest...when we showed up in the wrong uniform, they started to send people home just to show what a hardline attitude they had towards it all. And then when the media came, they were like, oh maybe we'll tone down a little bit.

The arrival of the media seems to have been consequential here, and the practice of wearing a banned item of clothing in order to pressure school decision-makers to change uniform rules was the most widely reported form of school protest in the UK over a 20-year period in our previous study (Barrance and Muddiman 2023).

Several participants were also involved in disruptive activism through their participation in the national School Strikes for Climate campaign. Participation in these strikes involved negotiation between schools and students and stimulated discussions about the importance of environmental action. Activist-4 described how their participation led to conflict and an attempt by the school to bargain with students to engage in less disruptive activities:

> We had a meeting with a head teacher, and she was like, I admire your principles and what you're doing, but... if you promise not to go on these school strike climate protests every Friday anymore...we'll give you...some green kind of school trip thing. And we thought that was a bit offensive.

Activist-4 noted that their Geography teacher encouraged pupils to turn down the offer, advising students to 'stick by what you believe', highlighting the complex ecosystem of schools in which students can be influenced by, and influence different actors. This resonates with research about the influence of liberal faculty in universities, and their role in facilitating an 'active political culture' (van Dyke 1998, 206) and shows how schooling can be seen as a site for resistance against national and school based policies.

3.8 | Surveys: Students as Researchers?

Our previous research highlights the role of open letters, petitions, and testimony gathering as a vehicle used by children and young people for drawing attention to perceived injustices at school (Barrance and Muddiman 2023). These forms of action could be read as attempts by students to be recognised as acting legitimately by teachers. For example, Activist-20 described emailing a survey on discrimination to all students in

their school. However, despite receiving almost 100 responses the school did not take the survey seriously:

> The school were like, well, you can't actually use this because it's biased and I'm like, I know...this is meant to be for a meeting we were going to have, so I could like show you some of the horrific stuff happening in the school.

In this instance, the school chose to dismiss the survey as evidence of the *existence* of discrimination, intended to inform a discussion, moving straight to a critique the methodology. It could be seen as an attempt to delegitimise and disregard the data collected by Activist-20. In a similar vein, Activist-25 was part of a group of girls who wanted to change uniform rules at her school:

> We just wanted to wear shorts like the boys...we did like a mini survey, on like how many girls wanted to change this, and yeah I added that to the [headteacher] email and, you know sent it off, and... he came to discuss it, and I'd given a variety of reasons, like not just that it was impractical, and not relaxed, but also that it's not really gender neutral, you know, it was very like old-fashioned and traditionalist really of them.

In both cases it could be suggested that by attempting to gather and harness the perspectives of the wider student body, students are grappling with claims-making: canvassing opinion and collating evidence of support to help strengthen their case and provide a sense of legitimacy to their claims, in ways that echo campaigning in political arenas. This supports previous research indicates that children often engage in research to influence decisions relevant to their lives and address situations they consider to be unfair (Cuevas-Parra 2025). In our analysis of media reporting on pupil protests in the UK, there were numerous examples in which surveys, petitions and collections of testimony had built to a tipping point to newsworthiness and resulted in change (Barrance and Muddiman 2023). It could also be the case that being 'backed up' by fellow students helps individual students to feel protected against individual punishment or recrimination in the school system. The responses of teaching staff, on the other hand, could be viewed as attempts to minimise or down-play the legitimacy of such activity. Attempts to critique methodology or re-individualise collective efforts by seeking out conversation with an individual could be seen as ways to de-escalate momentum, suggesting that schools are anxious about responding to such forms of highly organised activism, particularly when the claims made by students relate to issues of equality and social justice.

4 | Discussion

Despite various indications of a flourishing environment for the fostering and amplification of children's citizenship rights in the Welsh education and wider holtolicy context, the majority of participants in this study did not reflect positively on their schools as forums for political socialisation and activism. Schools in Wales have institutional forums for facilitating pupils' participation and agency in the form of school councils, which have been compulsory since 2005 (WAG 2006). However, our data highlight the perceived shortcomings of school councils as constrained by adult oversight. Pupils were also largely critical of the school's role in fostering political knowledge and engagement through the curriculum, with a palpable sense of frustration over their teachers' attempts to maintain political neutrality. The data suggests that there is a tension within the curriculum between the need for political impartiality and the aspiration to foster a politically sensitised youth. While concerns over political neutrality in education have been central to debates since the introduction of state education in the 19th century (Ball 2012), our data suggest that currently teachers feel pressure to remain impartial at school. However, there were instances where participants felt that their teachers were attempting to foster an activist sensibility. Indeed, the roles of individual teachers seem to be central to participant perceptions of whether or not they felt that they were supported or constrained in their activism at school. Activists in our study widely reported that it was the informal interactions with teachers, in casual conversation, or in relation to teachers' own industrial action, that were relevant or significant to their development of political activist identities, rather than through lessons or school councils. This indicates that there is likely to be much variability of experience amongst school students according to the individual characteristics and ability or appetite for openness amongst teachers. That these conversations are happening at the margins of the school experience, rather than being central to it, seems to be at odds with the stated aims of the New Curriculum for Wales and the wider policy context.

The less formalised advocacy and interest groups, which were mainly student-led, provided some participants with space to explore issues of importance to them. We suggest that the lack of institutional mandate for these groups meant that they were often under less surveillance than school councils and so provided opportunities for young people to connect with like-minded others and creatively explore topics important to them. However, some participants reported challenges when trying to move the discussion from within the interest group and out into the wider school environment, especially when awareness-raising initiatives were at odds with traditional ideas informed by heteronormativity. The restriction or censoring of these forms of student engagement represents a missed opportunity to recognise the lived expertise of, for example LGBTQ+ students, and indicates that despite a conducive policy context, such activities require a shift in teacher-learner authority that can be experienced by teachers as deeply uncomfortable (hooks 1994). In our previous paper we drew on critical pedagogic approaches (Freire 2018; hooks 1994) to conceptualise children's school-based activism as a means of challenging hierarchical models of teaching and learning, and attempts to educate teachers and other students on social injustices and democracy. In the current paper we identify examples of activists directly engaged in teaching and learning, for example through designing and delivering presentations for assemblies on LGBTQ+ rights, Islamophobia, racism and voting. We draw on Fitzpatrick and McGlashan's (2019)'s notion of LGBTQ+ students' 'expert subjectivities' (p. 264) to conceptualise how young people claim expertise on causes related to social

injustices more broadly. Much of this expertise comes from young people's lived experience of injustice, as in Fitzpatrick and McGlashan's accounts of LGBTQ+ students. However, we found that in our activist accounts, much of their political learning came from engagement with social movements outside of school, often facilitated through social media. As previous research has indicated, social media can have a key role in facilitating young people's activism, providing easily accessible information and allowing young people to organise nationally and internationally, which has been key to the climate strike movement (Pickard 2019). While digital activism can replicate the same injustices as other forms of activism, it can also open up new spaces for inclusivity while enabling young people to participate (Sainz and Hanna 2023).

Students in our study who developed activist tendencies *outside* of school generally identified the school as a key site for their activism, and found other ways to resist once institutionalised forums for participation fell short of their expectations. As in our previous research (Barrance and Muddiman 2023), we found that the Covid 19 pandemic was a politically galvanising event, with many pupils holding their schools to account on issues of sexism and racism on their return to school after lockdowns. There is evidence of our study participants experimenting with activist tactics including canvassing opinion, collecting testimony, walking out as part of SchoolStrikes4Climate, and negotiating with decision-makers. This suggests that the perceived lack of institutionalised means for political expression does not necessarily dampen *all* outlets for student political expression. In fact, interviewees appeared to refine their activist skills through experimenting with different ways to challenge school authorities and raise awareness of the issues they felt strongly about.

5 | Conclusion

While the study focuses on the Welsh context, it has implications for discussions of political education, rights and citizenship internationally, as it shows the systemic challenges inherent even in a country that has made an active commitment to promote children's citizenship and rights. In fact, it is notable that a number of participants described becoming politically engaged during periods of school closure (due to the Covid-19 pandemic), suggesting that time away from school provided the space and freedom they required to read, think and engage with activist groups. This indicates that the school is perceived as a barrier to, rather than a facilitator of young people's political socialisation. However, while the curriculum and institutions of school were not seen as enabling young people's political socialisation, it is clear that schooling is a key site for young people's activism. Young people have concerns about how their schooling cultures replicate injustices and are critical of school institutions regarding young people's political participation. While much research has focused on institutional forums' failures in fulfilling young people's rights to participation and agency, we show that school students are active in finding alternative ways to challenge their schools' policies and practices. Our research challenges deficit notions of young people as being politically disengaged and demonstrates the multitude of ways in which young people are attempting to make changes to their schools, asserting their knowledge and expertise in areas of social injustice.

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Ethics Statement

The authors received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University (SREC:079 and 2372).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Author elects not to share data. Research data are not shared.

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