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Article:
Bhargava, B. (2025) “All adults are paper tigers”: pupil power in English schools, 1968–1980. History of Education, 54 (4). pp. 428-448. ISSN: 0046-760X

https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760x.2024.2438963

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History of Education

Journal of the History of Education Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/thed20

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To cite this article: Beth Bhargava (08 Jan 2025): "All Adults are Paper Tigers": Pupil Power in English Schools, 1968–1980, History of Education, DOI: 10.1080/0046760X.2024.2438963

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2024.2438963

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HISTORY OF EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2024.2438963

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"All Adults are Paper Tigers": Pupil Power in English Schools, 1968–1980

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ABSTRACT

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the formation of multiple school students' unions in England, accompanied by a rich print culture. Young people retained absolute editorial control, even as they formed their work in dialogue with spaces constructed as belonging to the "adult" world. This article contends that youth-authored literature served a specific function for young people as a forum in which the meanings of childhood, youth, and adulthood were pulled apart and reconstructed. An emergent concept of age-based oppression – sometimes analysed in dialogue with other identities, including gender and class – provided the foundations for new political community.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 28 May 2024
Accepted 13 November 2024

KEYWORDS
Education; pupil power; childhood; protest

In the summer of 1969, Dulwich College, a prominent English fee-paying day school, held an open day in celebration of its 350th anniversary. Unbeknown to Dulwich's leadership, a unionised group of pupils from other schools set out to test how "open" the day really was.[1] As celebrations began, young people faced off with police and flooded into the school via a side gate: "the gates of privilege are not insurmountable," the protestors later boasted. As implied by the language of class and privilege, the school invasion was partly a symbolic assault on inequality within the British education system. Protestors expressed commitment to universal, comprehensive education. More than this, however, the demonstration was a public show of solidarity for Dulwich's own students. A specially produced newsletter collated statements, signed by current Dulwich pupils, against "named Masters who persistently indulge[d] in physical violence." It decried the "moral bankruptcy" of school regimes which violated their students' rights to safety and to freedom of expression in protest. A common sense of oppression and grievance – as young people and as school students – cut across the divisions of class.

The demonstration was coordinated and advertised by the Schools Action Union (hereafter SAU). From 1968 to 1969, a bewildering array of short-lived school students' unions were formed in Britain, principally in large cities such as Manchester, Cardiff and London. The SAU was the product of attempts to incorporate existing groups into

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a national campaigning body. When it collapsed following a series of factional disputes, the National Union of School Students (NUSS) stepped into the breach.

It is generally agreed that British education in the 1960s and 1970s was subject to intense, national political debate; comprehensivisation, the Great Debate, and the Raising of School Leaving Age (ROSLA) all comprised major flashpoints.[2] However, minimal attention has been devoted to the politicisation of education as it was experienced at the level of the individual school or classroom. The few attempts to rectify this have focused primarily on the experiences of teachers and staff. Using a long-neglected source base, this article dives down to the micro-historical level and examines the lived reality of contemporary pupils.

The contemporary political prominence of trade unionism seems to have inspired pupils to adopt a syndicalist structure for their own struggle. This paralleled developments in higher education. As Caroline M. Hoefferle has established, universities' students' unions were initially formed in emulation of an assertive trade union movement.[3] Syndicalist organisations typically generate a rich print culture, arising from the constant inter-branch communication needed to facilitate national action. School students' unions were no exception, leaving behind a substantial paper trail of newspapers, communiques, campaign documents, and correspondence deposited at multiple archives across Britain. Historians therefore have access to an unusually substantial repository of political materials produced *by and for* British children, in which youth voices appear in a relatively unmediated form.[4] By this, I mean that young people held absolute editorial control, even as they formed their work in dialogue with spaces constructed as belonging to the "adult" world.

The challenge, then, is how to read these texts. As Mona Gleason has argued, archival research which seeks only to prove the agency of young people in a historical context is inevitably self-limiting; to read sources solely to this end forecloses the discovery of multiple perspectives contained within them.[5] Following Gleason's analysis, this article contends that youth-authored literature served a specific function as a forum in which the meanings of childhood, youth and adulthood were navigated, pulled apart and reconstructed. The process of writing was envisaged as a process of political becoming for participants, both as young people and as school students. Members of the school students' movement articulated their politics in opposition to systematic age-based discrimination, which was sometimes analysed in dialogue with other identities such as gender and class.[6] As such, school students' unions must be understood as part of a broader history of social movements constituted on the basis of "identity politics."[7]

The article follows a loosely chronological structure. The first section situates the foundation of the school students' movement in the cultural and political context of May 1968. The second proceeds to examine regional and class-based exclusion within the SAU and traces the working-class rejection of union-based school politics in favour of a more spontaneous model of protest. The third covers the demoralisation and division which ultimately fatally undermined the SAU. The fourth section identifies significant commonalities within the experience of its successor organisation – the NUSS. The fifth and final section broadens the analysis to encompass backlash against the movement. Through their self-confident assertion of politics – and sexuality – pupils defied adult understandings of their own condition. Journalists and policymakers responded by forcefully reasserting conventional categories of age. School students' agency could be

denied if it was suggested that, as children, they were inherently vulnerable to manipulation, and could be easily subjected to adult control.

Britain's Juvenile 1968: The Foundation of the SAU

Amongst the many papers produced to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the May protests of 1968 was a seminal intervention in *Strenæ*. For the first time, authors came together to uncover a "Children's '68."[8] School students were highly sensitive to the sense of radical possibility and intensified political association which characterised this period. In France, *Comités d'Action Lycéens* (popularly known as CALs) were formed to represent the specific demands of high-school pupils and to coordinate solidarity actions with university-based protest.[9] CALs provided a model which the emergent British school students' movement would self-consciously emulate. Activists drawn from the epicentres of British student rebellion in 1968 (including LSE and Hornsey School of Art) offered their enthusiastic support.[10]

The breadth and popularity of the pre-1969 school students' movement can be gauged from the list of organisations which attended the open meeting at which the SAU was founded. These included the Free Schools' Campaign (FSC), the London-based Secondary School Students Union, and other regional groups representing students in "Bristol, Cardiff, Hertfordshire and Middlesex, Oxford, Surrey, [and] Swansea."[11] Formed in January 1969, the SAU represented the first attempt to provide a national backbone to this flood of independent campaigns. Affiliates to the SAU were expected to agree to a seven-point provisional "Action Programme," which outlined demands for "freedom of speech and assembly and the right to organise in schools"; "effective democratic control" within schools; "a free, non-segregated education"; and an end to corporal punishment. Beyond this, in an attempt to balance competing regional demands on the union, each branch was to have complete autonomy in questions of organisation and policy. Thus, activists in Glasgow were able to respond to high local unemployment rates with a targeted campaign demanding jobs for school-leavers, while in 1970 the Swansea branch co-operated with local trade unions to prevent school students receiving training in shops where assistants were on strike.[12]

Literature was seen as an important tool in the struggle to construct "a strong, but decentralised, union" in which regional specificity and autonomy were treated as assets rather than hindrances.[13] Following the January open meeting, little time was lost in converting the London school students' journal *Vanguard* into a national mouthpiece for the SAU. The editors' vision for their re-founded paper was expressed in the following terms:

> *Vanguard* is the means whereby school students involved in the struggle all over the country have a platform to tell others of valuable experiences, and to learn from those of others. In effect *Vanguard* is your magazine: it can be used for the coordination of regional struggles, for the discussion and development of ideas, and as the SAU's major medium of propaganda. This can only be accomplished if you and your group write for it![14]

As this implies, *Vanguard* did not seek to supplant the existing, autonomous publications of the school students' movement; instead, it positioned itself as their interface and mediator. Characteristically, its eighth edition featured reports from branches as far

apart as Salisbury and Glasgow. *Vanguard* also commonly reproduced material originally published by locality-specific school students' journals, including the *Liverpool Schools Broadsheet* and Cardiff's *Ashes and Grapes*.[15] In placing such voices side by side on the pages of a national journal, the SAU sought to create a textual community with the capacity to transcend geographical divides. The perennial funding problems faced by any organisation representing an unwaged constituency (in this case, school students) quickly put paid to these ambitions; the archive yields evidence of just nine editions of *Vanguard*, all published over the course of a single year. However, neither the literary production of the school students' movement, nor its use to enact forms of community and solidarity, ended at this point.

In Manchester, the magazine *Slug* – produced entirely by a "small group of kids from schools in and around [the city]" – offered a source of information and political community to its readership.[16] As well as advertising the next meetings of the SAU-affiliated Manchester Union of Secondary School Students, and giving tips on successful campaigning, the magazine described its own production as an open, collective and social process. Readers were invited to the editors' weekly meetings and promised discussion of "school and libertarian ideas," as well as the opportunity to use *Slug's* facilities for their creative and political work. A similarly collaborative, participatory approach to journalism was showcased in Hemel Hempstead's radical school students' paper, *Red Herring*. The paper suggested its readers submit articles, contribute funds or join the editorial team.[17] It also served as the point of departure for the creation of a local branch of the SAU, using its pages to popularise core policies (an end to corporal punishment; democratic School Councils; freedom of expression) and to announce the Hemel branch's inaugural meeting.

The practices of these local magazines recall the print culture associated with the contemporary feminist movement. As Laurel Forster has established, the production of feminist magazines during the late 1960s and early 1970s often took place in the collective, social context of an all-female campaigning group.[18] Within these spaces, the process of creating feminist literature was informed by the sharing of lived experiences of oppression and the forging of solidarity between participants. To participate in such a group was to express a "feminist commitment" which was not bounded by the world of ideas but constituted through interactions with one's peers. This desire to construct a community of the oppressed through the act of producing political material seems to have been shared by the groups behind *Slug* and *Red Herring*.

The commonalities between feminist and school students' publishing were not merely coincidental. Isobelle Barrett Meyering has noted the centrality of "children's liberation" to Australian feminist thought in the 1970s.[19] Interrogation of the nuclear family and motherhood as sources of female oppression generated critical thought on their relationship to ideas of childhood. Some believed that the essentialisation of the Child as an inherently dependent being placed women and children into a "mutually reinforcing" state of bondage. Others identified childhood as an experience of coming into gender – with its concomitant violence and limitations. The movement engaged young people in its work, but struggled to decide whether it was an ally or a liberator in the fight against children's oppression. Similar currents were at play in England.

History Workshop, a movement dedicated to the political uses of "history from below," held its sixth forum on the subject of "Childhood in History: Children's

Liberation."[20] The forum drew several speakers from the women's liberation movement (WLM), including the feminist historian – and sometime teacher – Sheila Rowbotham. As her memoirs reveal, Rowbotham had close personal ties with SAU activists.[21] She was also the driving force behind the organisation of an "anti-authoritarian" school – a political learning space in which prescriptive timetables were abandoned, and where union members were invited to express themselves creatively. These relationships were reflected and developed in print; in late 1969 Rowbotham co-edited a "Special Youth Section" in the journal *Black Dwarf*, which drew heavily on the language and history of the school students' movement.[22] Almost simultaneously, the SAU's national publications began to reprint material from *Black Dwarf*.[23]

Owen George Emmerson has characterised the experience of female activists within the SAU as one of feminist development.[24] The location of the SAU's office at North Gower Street, next to the radical printer Agitprop, brought young women into regular contact with figures from the WLM. These older women seem to have taken a position of mentorship relative to their younger peers. Liza Dresner, an activist in both movements, felt that the WLM offered the necessary tools to challenge the sexism present in the SAU (Emmerson notes a gendered division of labour, in which men were assigned the intellectual and women the practical work).[25] Nevertheless, the experience of cosy, intergenerational sisterhood was not universal. As this article will go on to show, activists in the SAU's successor organisation, the NUSS, would problematise the power imbalance between feminists designated as "adult" and "child" and demand recognition for the specificities of the young, female experience. In so doing, they crafted a new, dialectical relationship with the WLM.

Access and Exclusion

The collaborative, sociable nature of school students' literary production may help to explain the highly uneven distribution of the SAU's membership: in parts of the country where shared creative and social spaces were not readily available, activists were inevitably excluded from a critical part of the union's activities. Access to these spaces was to some degree a matter of luck and could be influenced by such random factors as the political sympathies of a school's teaching staff.[26] However, the proximity of a student to better-resourced urban centres, as well as high cultural and economic capital, are likely to have been greater determinants of involvement.

School students from rural areas suffered the most from a want of spaces suitable for communitarian forms of political self-expression. Although *Vanguard* occasionally referenced SAU branches operating in the rural environments of Surrey, Kent and Hertfordshire, it is telling that these counties formed part of the London commuter belt; in such cases, exposure to urban campaigning networks may have been the decisive factor in stimulating the formation of local groups.[27] Furthermore, although the SAU enjoyed a strong presence in many of Britain's most populous cities (at their largest, branch meetings in Cardiff and Norwich reported crowds of 70 and 40, respectively, whilst groups in Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester and Glasgow have all left extensive documentation), it is clear that the London Region SAU was significantly larger than any other branch.[28]

The SAU also attracted disproportionate numbers from middle-class backgrounds, and such pupils were overrepresented in its leadership.[29] The anarchist journal *Libertarian Education* attributed the over-representation of middle-class activists to a class-based proximity to, and identification with, institutions of higher education in the wake of the student protests of 1968.[30] A 1972 article penned by "Lula," a working-class activist with the SAU in London's East End, offers another perspective. Lula described her own group as "probably the first working class branch … in London." She quoted statistics to the effect that the vast majority of the city's members were middle-class, and that this was reflected in the types of school from which they were drawn ("about half from grammar schools, a third from comprehensives, and the rest from secondary moderns").[31] Lula herself was a student at a rare, predominantly working-class grammar school in the borough of Hackney, where she claimed to have encountered great difficulties while trying to recruit her classmates to union work. This she attributed to a prevailing cultural narrative in which working-class students were "made to feel they're being done a favour being at grammar school" and internalised the notion of meritocratic social ascendance encapsulated in the phrase "work hard and get out": to rock the boat was to risk sacrificing a rare privilege.

As Peter Mandler has noted, lower middle-class and upper working-class parents expressed a strong and frequently frustrated appetite for grammar schooling; when surveyed, two-thirds of parents in these groups said that their hopes for their children had been dashed with the process of eleven-plus selection.[32] Those who made it through would undoubtedly have been conscious of the role played by the school in their parents' aspirations. For some, the stakes simply seemed too high to take risks with their education.

This did not mean that working-class students were simply quiescent, or that they lacked critical engagement with educational conditions. Protests led by working-class students were a forceful presence in the classrooms of this era, but more typically operated outside the bounds of the union – perhaps surprisingly, given the heritage of syndicalist organising. Such protests followed a consistent pattern. They were typically called in spontaneous response to perceived assaults on the dignity of individuals, or the bonds of solidarity which joined local communities. This implies that the working-class rejection of the union model of continuous organising may have been attributable both to time constraints and to divergent priorities.

In March 1968, 200 working-class students staged an unpremeditated walk-out, in protest against degrading conditions at their Manchester school.[33] The most immediate cause for protest had been the head's removal of toilet doors "because of alleged vandalism." However, the strike also addressed longer-standing grievances, including excessive use of corporal punishment, and the firing of a popular local teacher. Newspaper reports observed that there was little or no overlap between the participants in this action and the membership of the Manchester Union of Secondary School Students, which had been founded almost contemporaneously. The circumstances of this protest bear a striking resemblance to the more famous "Stepney School Strike," during which working-class pupils picketed the gates of Sir John Cass School, London, in opposition to the dismissal of the well-loved radical educator Chris Searle.[34] Here, as in Manchester, participants had no discernible connections with the organised school students' movement.

These events allow us to reappraise assumptions commonly made in sociologies of education, and especially those theories derived from the work of Paul Willis. In *Learning to Labour*, Willis made explicit reference to school students' unions, arguing that disaffected, working-class students were less likely to display signs of political consciousness and organisation.[35] He is correct on only one of these two counts; although working-class students were frequently alienated from school students' unions, they nevertheless reacted strongly against perceived assaults on the dignity of individuals and communities – often drawing on the same repertoire of tactics as groups such as the SAU. This draws into question the wider argument constructed by Willis, which asserts that a quotidian, unreflexive rebellion against the bourgeois norms and values imposed by the British education system represented the limits of a working-class challenge to this system.

Divisions and Decline

Students' fears of reprisal were well-founded. In the words of one disillusioned former SAU member, Trudi Braun, "even a mass revolt has ring-leaders to be victimised."[36] School pupils' claims of age-based oppression were in many ways vindicated by the punishments to which they were exposed. Activists risked the pain and indignity of corporal punishment, as well as the life-altering implications of expulsion and the provision of negative references to the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA).

In the post-1968 era, politicians and university administrators were wary of the connections between the student struggle and the schools' movement.[37] *Children's Rights* emphasised the problems faced by pupil-activists hoping to enter higher education: "nowadays after the unrest in the universities many [admissions tutors] shy away from the more articulate and independent candidates for fear of 'trouble-makers.'"[38] These concerns were vindicated when an occupation of the University of Warwick administrative buildings uncovered a number of confidential documents. These revealed that that the headmaster of William Ellis High School, London, had warned the University's Registrar about the political activities of a pupil active in the schools' movement (a matter which had already been raised in the student's UCCA reference).[39] These comments were gratefully received by the University's Vice Chancellor, who seems to have personally intervened to ensure the candidate was rejected.

The threat of retaliation ultimately contributed to a catastrophic demoralisation amongst the SAU's membership, compounded by the problem of persistent infighting. The union's decentralised structure allowed mutually hostile factions to establish regional strongholds. From this base, such groups were able to contend the leadership of the national organisation. In March 1969, just months after the SAU's formation, its press office Robert ("Bob") Labi received a letter from a comrade in Glasgow complaining of factional struggles. His correspondent, Alex Wood, sought conformation of the rumour that "the London SAU is dominated by Maoists and IS [International Socialists]."[40] Wood himself represented the Militant grouping within the branch, and reflected with wry amusement on how "the Maoists here have actually approached the IMG [International Marxist Group]" – a rival Trotskyist

faction – "in the hope of forming an anti-Militant alliance." Other branches, too, were soon engulfed in such battles; in both London and Liverpool, the IS and IMG produced literature targeting school students, much to the chagrin of Militant activists within the SAU. These divisions soon posed an existential risk to the union.

At the end of 1972, a telling exchange occurred in the radical educational journal *Children's Rights*. A correspondent identified himself as "Jerry," one of the five students expelled from Kingsdale School for their role in the SAU-coordinated 1969 student-strike. He alleged that "a small Marxist–Leninist clique," the Marxist–Leninist Education Association, had recently taken control of the National Committee and was threatening to "expel any member who refused to fill in a questionnaire stating which political organisations they belonged to."[41] The SAU's Vice-Chairman, Simon Steyne, responded with a defence of the new policy of investigating the political allegiances of union members, arguing that the decision aimed to eliminate "elements engaged in various anti-SAU activities." Regardless of intent, these drastic measures were unable to arrest the union's decline. The SAU's reputation as a cohesive, representative and national body had been progressively eroded. According to Braun, "the last we heard from them was a letter from each half of the newly split SAU each telling us they were the real one and don't listen to the other lot."[42]

The university protests of the late 1960s are sometimes characterised as a product of the leadership of a small political vanguard affiliated with the organised far left. As Jodi Burkett observes, this attitude – which denied the movement's claims to mass representation – was dominant amongst "government, political leaders and the press" and remains popular in the historiography.[43] As this article will go on to explore, the spectre of far-left manipulation later merged with a language of safeguarding to delegitimise the school students' movement. It should nevertheless be possible to raise the question of far-left involvement in the two movements without taking a conspiratorial view which divides them into camps of (exploitative) leaders and (tractable) led. The participation of school students in far-left organisations was a freely chosen expression of political agency, just like participation in the SAU. The SAU was constituted on the basis of age-based oppression. What tore it apart was young people's investment in the construction of a broader political vision – one which was not specific to young people, and in fact viewed their organising as subordinate to that of the working class.

The Rise of the NUSS

In the two years following the mass student protests of 1968, the age of majority and the voting age were lowered from 21 to 18, thus positioning most university students – and some sixth-formers – as full adults and full citizens, with all attendant rights and responsibilities. The reforms undermined the authority which universities had previously derived from their capacity to act *in loco parentis* (with similar implications, perhaps, for some teachers). The new legislation aroused ambivalent emotions within Parliament. As Adrian Bingham has argued, young people's "counter-cultural radicalism" was thought to pose a risk to the political status quo; the trust implied in the extension of the franchise and legal majority was conditional and constrained by fear.[44] In the political imagination,

true adulthood stood in opposition to the disruptive capacities of recent waves of youth protest.

The National Union of Students (NUS), which represented students in higher and further education, maintained a complex relationship with these events. On the one hand, they encouraged the NUS to position itself as an "educational pressure group" – a role which demanded that the union cultivate a public image of moderacy and responsibility.[45] However, the NUS's self-fashioning as an authoritative, demonstrably adult political force only extended so far. In March 1969, Jack Straw became the first candidate to defeat a sitting NUS president in union elections. He ran with the intention of making the NUS "respected but not respectable."[46] In keeping with this aim, 1969 also witnessed the revocation of the so-called "no politics" clause of the NUS constitution, freeing it to lend support to those campaigns hitherto excluded from its remit.

The union's ambiguous response to the political construction of adulthood extended to its engagement with the school students' movement. Though some NUS members stood in solidarity with school pupils, as seen in Warwick, the union never mandated any formal, institutional engagements with the SAU. Records of the attitudes of NUS leaders to the SAU are few and far between, and no firm conclusions can be reached regarding the reasons for their lack of engagement. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the SAU's reputation as a radical, disruptive and self-divided organisation led the NUS leadership to believe that association would cast doubt on their own, hard-won reputation for moderate and responsible action.[47] The new adults in the room could not have their reputation marred by association with those identified with childhood.

As the schools' movement grew, however, it seemed to present an opportunity too great to ignore. At the organisation's 1971 national conference, one delegate surmised that the schools' union members of today were the trade unions' members of tomorrow; to support young people's endeavours was therefore to guarantee the future of organised labour.[48] Others expressed confidence in school pupils' assessment of their own condition. The NUS Executive's response to the question of engagement with the schools' movement developed in two stages. In 1970, the union issued an "Open Letter to Sixth Form Students," which detailed proposals to open membership to all students over the age of 15.[49] According to the NUS, the scheme aimed to celebrate the "growing sixth form [political] consciousness," and to provide support to school- and college-based campaigns on issues such as compulsory uniform, lack of student representation on governing bodies, and the introduction of grants required to open sixth-form education to working-class students.

The scheme was not universally welcomed. Critics associated with the SAU argued that the NUS had "pirated and diluted" the demands of the school students' movement for their own gain. The union was accused of promoting the scheme based on the financial perks of NUS membership – which included discounted travel, holidays and gallery entrance – rather than by any campaigning objectives. Many SAU members concluded that the NUS was consciously dividing and depoliticising the movement. The initiative attracted further criticism from the NUS's own grassroots.[50] Critics stressed the need to avoid "paternalism" in supporting the schools' movement. They expressed anxiety that the scheme, by excluding all under-fifteens, would reproduce within the movement the pernicious age-based hierarchies prevalent in the playground

(expressed, for example, through the role of prefects in disciplining younger years).[51] A compromise motion on schools' unions therefore argued for the creation of a "parallel" school students' organisation affiliated to, but not led by, the NUS. This was eventually put to the union's Annual Conference in November 1971.[52] The following May, the NUS provided financial and logistical support to help launch the National Union of School Students (NUSS).[53]

The NUSS defined itself in opposition to previous attempts to unionise school students. In the words of one NUSS Secretary, Dan Hopewell, the union's predecessors had been primarily concerned with "influencing school students [sic] political views" and pushing a particular "political line."[54] By contrast, the NUSS was to reject all guiding political frameworks and campaign for concrete, achievable goals. Similarly, the organisation's 1972 president, Mary Attenborough, described it as a sectional pressure group whose role was to negotiate with other parties in order to promote the rights and interests of its members.[55] The union's formal stance was thus self-consciously reformist, mirroring the long-standing policy of its parent organisation, the NUS. In this, the NUSS ultimately fulfilled the fears of those SAU activists who had argued that the NUS's history of "holding [students] back" and inviting them to refrain from revolutionary action made them unsuitable partners in a struggle for systematic educational change.[56] The NUSS must, however, be assessed on its own terms.

The foundation of the NUSS resulted in a professionalisation of the school students' movement.[57] The financial support of around 100 NUS-affiliated students'-unions, combined with receipts from membership fees, afforded the NUSS sufficient funds to maintain two full-time, paid positions – those of president and national organiser.[58] These paid officials were elected annually by a conference consisting of delegates from regional branches of the union, and sat alongside a maximum of 12 school students on the union's National Committee. The Committee met every six weeks at the London-based office the Union borrowed from the NUS – which may partially explain why this body was so heavily dominated by Londoners.

Of the 1977 National Committee, which totalled 12 members, no fewer than seven were from London (with the remaining five drawn from Glasgow, Reading, Portsmouth and Liverpool).[59] Though numerically larger than the SAU, reaching 15,000 members at its peak, the NUSS failed to expand beyond the bounds of the existing movement in a geographical sense, and may in fact have become more concentrated in fewer areas.[60] As one generally sympathetic commentator stressed, the NUSS – much like its predecessor – was a predominantly urban phenomenon. The most active branches at this time were based in London, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, Southampton and – the exception that proves the rule – the West Country.

As the above implies, professionalisation was accompanied by greater centralisation. This trend was reflected in the literature of the movement. Centrally produced and nationally distributed bulletins bearing the NUSS's distinctive branding (a clenched fist raised in a socialist salute) for the most part replaced the diverse local journals that had characterised the movement led by the SAU.[61] The few locally produced journals affiliated with the NUSS were conscious of their relation to the national struggle, and to the policies of the union's head office. *Big Bad Wolf*, a journal linked with the Cambridge NUSS, devoted considerable space to an assessment of the impact of comprehensivisation in East Anglia.[62] Meanwhile, faced with "cutbacks in educational

spending both Labour and Tory," one activist called on school students to "[fight] against a system which refuses to give school milk to children while spending millions on defence." These articles represented a notable departure from the highly localised content which had, up to this point, dominated student-produced literature.

The nationalisation of the NUSS's politics was likely influenced by the emergence of education as a divisive issue on the party-political stage. In the context of comprehensivisation, and the furious conservative backlash articulated in the Black Papers, local branches had no choice but to situate themselves within a fast-changing framework of national politics to maintain relevance. Thus, the NUSS entered 1977 with a list of six major issues on which it intended to campaign: an end to education cuts; freedom in schools; youth unemployment; comprehensive education; an end to sexism in schools; and grants for sixth formers.[63] It proceeded to create uniform leaflets explaining the rationale behind the campaigns and inviting students to "organise to represent your own interests and to make schools better places."[64]

For a brief period after 1978, NUSS messaging was reinforced on the pages of *BLOT*, its official, national journal. Key voices in the union had long advocated for a "general newspaper/magazine" targeted at all school students, but financial difficulties presented a persistent barrier.[65] *BLOT* was only made possible by a one-off, £1,500 grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation (a sizeable windfall for an organisation with an annual budget of £7,500, derived primarily from membership fees and NUS funding).[66] It was recognised from the start that this money could only feasibly support three issues of the paper (one per term for the 1978/9 academic year), and that the future of the publication thereafter could not be guaranteed. At its brief peak, however, the paper ensured that "hundreds of school students found out about NUSS who hadn't before. And people who the union hadn't attracted before began to start getting involved."

As the union itself recognised, *BLOT's* contents were varied in both theme and quality.[67] Taking seriously its role as the only national paper written "for and by school-children," *BLOT* was eager to allow for the broadest possible freedom of expression.[68] Although controversy was courted by the use of swearing in articles such as the infamous "Bullying is Fucking Dubious!" the editorial board concluded that no restrictions should be applied to the language used by students, except in cases where this was clearly discriminatory in nature.[69] The board noted, tongue-in-cheek, that the "dubious" in this headline was "more dubious than the 'fucking'!"

The opportunity for unrestrained self-expression was seized upon by students within the movement and the journal provides a panorama of their concerns. The anti-sexist focus of the NUSS's 1977 campaign was embraced and discussed in every issue of the magazine. In the very first edition, an account of school sit-ins held in protest against gendered discrimination was accompanied by practical advice on the topic of contraception.[70] Subsequent issues explained the hostility expressed by the NUSS and feminist groups towards the 1979 "Corrie" Bill – perceived as an attack on women's bodily autonomy and health – and address the patriarchal assumptions embedded in the phrase "becoming a man," and within girls' magazines' promotion of a feminine ideal.[71]

The latter frustration was cited by the editors of *Shocking Pink*, a feminist publication founded in 1979 and published intermittently until 1992, as the reason for its foundation.[72] *Shocking Pink* was pitched as an "anti-*Jackie*" (*Jackie* then being the

dominant force in the girls' magazine market). Run on a collective basis by girls aged 12 to 22, the magazine was written by and for young women. Through the articulation of lived experience, it hoped to provide a space for a more realistic discussion of oppression at the intersection of age and gender.[73] As Anna Gough-Yates has argued, the intention was to challenge demeaning notions of girlhood within popular culture, and the adult feminist movement.[74]

There is evidence that *Shocking Pink's* editors had prior involvement in the schools' movement. The NUSS was included in the "Useful Contacts" section published in *Shocking Pink's* first three issues, and those fighting to form Young Women's Groups in schools (especially without teacher involvement) were advised to seek the support of local NUSS branches.[75] The efforts of young women writing in *BLOT* and *Shocking Pink* – to make the mainstream feminist movement understand the specific problems which lay at the intersection of age- and gender-based oppression – were truly pioneering. By 1982, they had yielded fruit in the form of *Girls Are Powerful*, an anthology of writing by young women aged seven to 22, published by the women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib* in an effort to combat age-based marginalisation in the feminist movement.[76]

Concern, Controversy and the Category of the Child

In allowing its membership the space to write on taboo subjects, from the experience of homosexuality within the educational system to masturbation, the leadership of the NUSS were aware that they had made themselves vulnerable to accusations of corrupting young minds.[77] *BLOT* received a negative response from much of the tabloid press, with one national daily going so far as to run the headline "Sex Shock Mag Hits Schools."[78] The anxiety provoked by NUSS publications was part of a broader contemporary controversy, in which young people's sexuality and the figure of the paedophile were the chief protagonists.[79]

As Thomson notes, British society in the 1970s faced a mass reckoning with the limits of sexual liberation; ongoing campaigns to bring the age of consent for homosexual relationships in line with their heterosexual counterparts temporarily opened a space in which paedophiles could position the total abolition of the age of consent, and the recognition of child-love as a legitimate sexuality, as the final frontier to be crossed in the achievement of equality for sexual minorities. Meanwhile, some involved in the children's rights movement extended their understanding of such rights to encompass a right to freedom of expression and self-determination in the realm of sexual relations. The brief flowering of public advocacy by, and on behalf of, paedophiles generated new awareness of the risks to children by adult sexual predators. Fierce backlash ensued – ultimately creating the conditions in which the figure of the paedophile, elevated to the position of universal threat and terror, became the "bogeyman of our age."[80]

Fear of the bogeyman led to greater policing of adult interactions with young people, but also of young people's interactions with each other. The desire to protect children from the spectre of paedophilia led to the reification of the ideal of the Child – essentialised as a vulnerable, naive and asexual being. This imagining of the Child could have the effect of ignoring young people's own, lived experiences. In their quest to protect children's innocence, schools and government were eager to prevent sexually explicit materials reaching young audiences: *The Little Red Schoolbook* was banned on the basis

that it included guidance on safer sex.[81] While the courts believed they were protecting children from the dangers of underage sex, some school students accused them of a lack of realism. Some young people would always attempt sexual acts – alone or with their peers. To do so safely, they needed sex education. Thus, *Shocking Pink* risked prosecution to publish a detailed anatomical drawing of the clitoris, seeking to provide young women with the tools necessary to understand their own experiences.[82]

Understandings of the Child as fundamentally naive and vulnerable could also constrain young people's political self-expression. The Conservative MP and former headmaster Rhodes Boyson penned an article describing the NUSS as "one of the Pied Pipers of our time . . . concerned not for the good of pupils or people but . . . simply desirous of fomenting social tensions."[83] For Boyson, the solution was to mould these malleable young minds in the "correct" direction and, if necessary, through corporal punishment. Boyson's concern – if not his solution – was shared by a number of self-defined progressives. Michael Duane, former headmaster of the progressive school Risinghill and editor of *Children's Rights*, conceded that school students' organisations would be "perennially in danger of manipulation by [adult] political groups."[84] The socialist teachers' journal *Rank and File* published an article expressing anxiety that "to impose upon [children] the [s]train of making decisions for a whole community would constitute a great denial of a child's right to childhood."[85] It was answered in the paper's next edition by two school students who asserted that, far from being imposed upon them, the right to democratic control was one they had claimed for themselves.[86]

Discomfort at school students' expressions of agency and autonomy could be banished by suggesting that, as inherently manipulable children, they lacked all such characteristics. For most commentators, the NUSS was simply a tool in the hands of malignant adult forces. This mode of understanding the NUSS – which positioned the school student as Child, and the Child as perennial victim – likely exerted a major influence over public policy, and especially the severe repression faced by some activists. An illustrative case is the 1977 arrest of two students who had been distributing leaflets outside a Leeds school; both had their homes raided without a warrant, and one was then interrogated by the Special Branch.[87]

From the moment of its inception, the spectre of the SAU's co-option and collapse had hung over the NUSS. Early presidents of the union found themselves obliged to emphasise and defend its autonomy during public speeches: one, Robert Leeson, used an interview with a *Times* journalist to pledge that the union would never allow itself "to be manipulated by any political group."[88] By 1980, however, the union's membership had begun to contract in circumstances of intense political hostility and declining morale. A faction associated with the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) seized the opportunity to take control of the union's executive.[89] By bringing the NUSS into close contact with other SWP-affiliated organisations (including its youth branch, Red Rebel, and the Anti-Nazi League) the union's executive certainly compromised its independence.[90] Commentators who had long predicted a takeover of the union found themselves vindicated.

Even at this point, however, the sensationalism surrounding the adult political manipulation of the school student-coded-as-Child far outstripped reality. The NUSS certainly suffered the consequences of factionalism and faced the collapse of its independent political authority; in this sense, it was the victim of external political manipulation.

Nevertheless, this was a path freely chosen by school students whom it claimed to represent. As in the case of the SAU, the dominance of far-left groups represented the subordination of identity politics, organised around age-based oppression, to a class-based political vision. A 1980 report by the conservative policy institute Common Cause argued that "some left-wing organisations are exploiting the educational system of this country in order to influence the thinking of a younger generation [and] foment class hate."[91] Here, Common Cause was asserting a traditional vision of the Child as a passive, undiscerning receptacle of knowledge: a caricature which NUSS members rejected and against which they defined their politics in terms of identity.

Conclusion

The 1979 general election had delivered a Conservative landslide, and at the helm of the Party stood the abrasive former Education Minister Margaret Thatcher. Now, more than ever, progressive politics seemed to demand a truly national, coherent and coordinated engagement from those fighting for educational reform and school students' liberation. This did not occur. The NUSS in fact gradually faded from national view – with the exception of a few highly visible public actions, such its sizeable representation at the Right to Work Campaign's demonstration at the 1980 Conservative Party Conference.[92] Brought low by internal divisions and external hostility, the union's precise end-date is difficult to pin down (although records tail off in the early 1980s). The school students' movement had lost its organised, national expression.

The SAU and the NUSS were both relatively short-lived organisations. Their primary victories were localised; neither achieved the national abolition of corporal punishment, for example, though both may have created effective resistance to the cane at regional level.[93] What significance do they then hold for historians? The short answer is that these victories, and the mechanisms by which they were achieved, mattered to activist school students. NUSS and SAU campaigns record these pupils' attitudes to their own education, and the depth of feelings which educational issues could provoke. Because of them, we know that young people cared deeply about gendered divides in the classroom, and that some were willing to strike to preserve the fundamental dignity of privacy, stripped away by an overzealous head. We also know that others, involved in self-proclaimed revolutionary organisations, were willing to pursue systematic change – even at the expense of the organisational integrity of the school students' unions. Young people were – and remain – experts on their own condition. Where their voices are available, we have a duty to listen.

The longer answer is that the achievement of concrete demands was not the only concern of the school students' movement. When beginning my research on the SAU and NUSS, I expected to unearth a story about British trade unionism. I anticipated that the power of syndicalist organising, in the immediate pre-Thatcher years had exerted an overlooked influence on youth culture and politics. This may be true in one sense – school students clearly chose to style their organisations after trade unions, and did so for a reason. However, school students did not conceptualise their movement only in terms of common occupational identity and shared workplace concerns. Rather, they critiqued a shared structural position – that of the young person, stripped of power and designated

"Child" in an adult society. This history has much more to do with the birth of what might be described as identity politics than with the history of organised labour.

The story of the SAU and NUSS is, in part, the story of the self-definition and self-realisation of young people in opposition to, and defiance of, an identity which they felt to be alien. If, as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has claimed, the late twentieth century was characterised by a "decline in deference," this must surely be a prime example.[94] The work of school students within these unions demonstrates a rejection of notions of weakness, naivety and asexuality imposed upon them by adults. Understandably, this provoked mistrust and fear amongst adults. If, as Laura Tisdall argues, categories of age are relational, challenges to the idea of the Child must necessarily destabilise adult identities.[95] The discomfort experienced by many adults when faced with youth defiance of age-based hierarchies was combined with a desire (often sincere and well-intentioned) to protect young people from sexual or political exploitation. These dual factors engendered strong opposition to the school students' movement. Further research on the National Union of Teachers, whose rejection of the NUSS was probably founded on the desire to preserve professional and personal authority during a period of declining professional status, might help to illuminate such themes.[96]

Some adults, of course, were willing to lend their support to school students' unions. Young, female members of the SAU and NUSS claimed a space in the women's liberation movement, demanding to be seen as independent actors with a unique and valuable perspective on the confluence of gender- and age-based oppression. This marked a significant moment of intersectional learning for contemporary feminists. It is a lesson which remains important today. Children are too often treated as objects in women's and gender history; they figure most prominently as constraints on women's psychological and material freedoms, or as bio-essentialist signifiers of supposedly innate characteristics. The voices of those young people who demanded to be acknowledged as subjects echo down through the archives. They caution us that we cannot misidentify protagonists as props and still expect to understand the story unfolding on history's broad stage.

Notes

1. "Dulwich Col. Demo"; Modern Records Centre [hereafter MRC], University of Warwick, "The Socialist Party"; "Dulwich College."
2. See Simon, *Education and the Social Order 1940–1990*; Thomson, *Lost Freedom*; Tisdall, "Inside the Blackboard Jungle."
3. Hoefferle, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties*, 174.
4. For an account of the problem of mediation faced by most historians working on "child-authored" political sources, see de La Ferrière, "The Voice of the Innocent."
5. See Gleason, "Avoiding the Agency Trap."
6. Race is a curious absence here, especially as young people of colour at the time expressed awareness of the double burden of being young and racially minoritised. There is no clear explanation for the disconnect, though racism within the school students' movement and the tendency to apply different categories of age to Black young people, through the process of "adultification" and cultural studies' preoccupation with Black "youth," are both plausible reasons. See Davis and Marsh, "Boys to Men"; McGilchrist, *Black Voices*; Warmington, *Black British Intellectuals and Education*.

7. "Identity politics" is here used in its original sense, to signify that "oppression on the basis of identity … was a source of political radicalization [*sic*]" and effective mobilisation. See Taylor, *How We Get Free*, 8–9.
8. Heywood and Boulaire, "*Le '68 des enfants* / The Children's '68."
9. "If," *Vanguard* 8, 5; Bale and Knopp, *Education and Capitalism*, 231.
10. Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, 238–9; Wandsworth Schools Action Group, *Open Meeting – Friday July 16th*.
11. "Report on the National Conference."
12. Turner, "Pupils Who Demand the Right to Strike."
13. "Report", *Vanguard* 2, 4.
14. "Letters", *Vanguard* 8, 2.
15. "Exams"; and "Authority in Schools", *Vanguard* 5, n.p.
16. *Slug* 1, n.p.
17. *Red Herring* 2, n.p.
18. Forster, "Spreading the Word," 813.
19. Barrett Meyering, "Liberating Children," 61–9.
20. "Childhood in History: Children's Liberation."
21. Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, 216.
22. Rowbotham and Hoyland, "Special Youth Section."
23. "The Adventures of PC Frank"; "Tony Trend in Karnaby Kapers."
24. Emmerson, "Childhood and the Emotion of Corporal Punishment in Britain," 242–6.
25. Ibid.
26. "Diary," *Black Dwarf*, 16.
27. "SAU Groups," *Vanguard* 5, n.p.
28. Turner, "Pupils Who Demand the Right to Strike," 3. In 1970, the London region had 400 members (compared to 4,000 sales, nationally, of the previous issue of *Vanguard*).
29. Venning, "The Revolution is Over," 10.
30. Cohen and Don, "Class War", 9.
31. "SAU", *Children's Rights* 2, 31.
32. Mandler, "Educating the Nation I: Schools," 24.
33. Cohen and Don, "Class War", 9.
34. Mills, *Everything Happens in Cable Street*, 94–7.
35. Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 191.
36. Braun, "'Please Sir, May I Be Excused?,'" 13.
37. Bale and Knopp, *Education and Capitalism*, 231.
38. "Adviser," *Children's Rights* 2, 26.
39. The files were later published by the SAU in pamphlet form, under the title "Warwick: A Selection of Papers Extracted from Registry Files.".
40. Alex Wood to Robert ("Bob") Labi, Press Officer of the Schools Action Union.
41. "Forum: Schools Action Union," *Children's Rights* 3, 18; "Forum: Schools Action Union," *Children's Rights* 5, 32.
42. Braun, "'Please Sir, May I be Excused?" 13.
43. Burkett, "Revolutionary Vanguard or Agent Provocateur," 14.
44. Bingham, "'The Last Milestone' on the Journey to Full Adult Suffrage?"
45. Day, "Dubious Causes of No Interest to Students?"; Students continued to be excluded from sensitive council decisions through mechanisms such as the designation of "reserved" business.
46. Day, *National Union of Students*, 49–50.
47. Church, "Young Subversives or Democracy's Children," 3.
48. "Students Vote for Organised Pupil Power," 11.
49. "Open Letter to Sixth Form Students," 1.
50. "Pupils Need a Union," 12.
51. "NUS up in Arms," 3; "Students Vote for Organised Pupil Power," 11.
52. "Pupils Need a Union," 12.

53. Letter from Peter Knight to the Trades Union Congress; "Campaign for the Advancement of State Education, earlier the Confederation for the Advancement of State Education (CASE), 1960–2003."
54. Peter Knight: MRC (MSS.236/1982/84).
55. Venning, "The Revolution is Over," 10.
56. "Open Letter to Sixth Form Students," 1.
57. This was of a piece with broader trends within the third sector. See Evans, "Stopping the Poor Getting Poorer," 147–63.
58. Venning, "The Revolution is Over," 11.
59. "Introducing NUSS: Your Union," n.p.
60. Venning, "The Revolution is Over," 10.
61. NUSS Newsletter, n.p.: MRC (MSS.236/1982/84).
62. *Big Bad Wolf* 1, 3–4, 8–9; *Big Bad Wolf* 2, 4–5.
63. NUSS Newsletter, n.p.
64. See "Stop Sexism in Schools, Fully Comprehensive – Now!"; Labour History Archive, People's History Museum, Manchester (hereafter PHM), (CP/CENT/YOUTH/04/08).
65. "NUSS National Conference 1979: NC Report on BLOT," 1.
66. "NC Report on BLOT," 1, 3; Venning, "The Revolution is Over," 11.
67. "NC Report on BLOT," 3.
68. Venning, "The Revolution is Over," 11.
69. "NC Report on BLOT," 3, 5; "Bullying is Fucking Dubious!"
70. "Discrimination"; and "Contraception", *BLOT* 1, 2, 15.
71. "Abortion: Whose Choice?"; "Babies: Women Decide," *BLOT* 2, 14, 15; Prior, "How to Be a Man."
72. Blase, "A Shocking Shade of Pink."
73. First letter to *Shocking Pink* subscribers, materials donated to Grassroots Feminism by Sally O-J.
74. Gough-Yates, "'A Shock to the System,'" 392–3.
75. "Useful Contacts," n.p.; "NUSS," 22.
76. Hemmings, *Girls Are Powerful*, vii.
77. "Wanking," *BLOT* 1, 11; "Being Gay at School," *BLOT* 2, 10.
78. "NC Report on BLOT," 3.
79. Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, 153, 172–4.
80. Wilson and Silverman, *Innocence Betrayed*, 1.
81. Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, 173.
82. Blase, "A Shocking Shade of Pink."
83. Boyson, "Toddlers of the World Unite?" 7.
84. Church, "Young Subversives," 3.
85. Picton, "Democracy in Schools," 7.
86. Goldstein and James, "Kids Answer Back," 10–11.
87. Walker, "Class of '77," 28–9.
88. David, "School Union Aim is Vigour but No Politics," 3.
89. Berliner, "NUS Cuts Off Aid to Schools' Union," 2.
90. "Red Rebel Pupils Learn the Arts of Revolution," 4.
91. Common Cause, *A Survey of Left-Wing Plans for Transforming Education*.
92. "Oct 10th – Right to Work NUSS Demo," n.p.
93. Emmerson, "Childhood and the Emotion of Corporal Punishment," 248.
94. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968–2000*.
95. Tisdall, "Education, Parenting and Concepts of Childhood in England," 25.
96. See Boyson, "A Time for Realism," 8; Walker, "Class of '77"; Ironside and Seifert, *Industrial Relations in Schools*, 34.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/R012733/1] through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities.

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