

# Learning, sharing and caring: Pedagogical features of parents' educational activism

Education, Citizenship and  
Social Justice

1–16

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/17461979241290052

[journals.sagepub.com/home/esj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/esj)**Nathan Fretwell** 

Middlesex University, UK

## Abstract

Scholars of social movements have afforded increasing attention in recent years to pedagogical processes and practices within activist organisations. This article contributes to the 'pedagogical turn' in social movement studies by exploring pedagogical features of parents' educational activism. Drawing on qualitative data collected from parent-led campaign groups operating in England, UK, the article attends to three aspects of activist pedagogy evident within the campaigns. The first concerns the learning that occurs through engaging in activism. The second, internal and external processes of knowledge-sharing. And third, parents' perceptions of the educative potential of activism as a means for imparting democratic values to their children. I argue that the pedagogical dimension is a central feature of parents' activism. Indeed, such activism constitutes itself a form of civic education in which democratic values and ideals are transmitted from one generation to another.

## Keywords

activism, activist pedagogy, citizenship, civic education, parental activism, parents

## Introduction

Scholars of social movements have afforded increasing attention in recent years to pedagogical processes and practices within activist organisations (Choudry, 2015; Della Porta and Doerr, 2016; Novelli et al., 2024; Ollis, 2012). This article contributes to the 'pedagogical turn' (Ollis, 2020) in social movement studies by exploring pedagogical features of parents' educational activism. It also contributes to the growing body of literature specifically related to parental activism in education (Fretwell and Barker, 2023; Cortez, 2013; Hursh et al., 2020; Jasis, 2013; Stevenson, 2016; Warren and Mapp, 2011). Whilst some attention has been paid to activist pedagogies within this literature, the tendency has been to focus on educating parents *for* activism, vis-à-vis building skills and knowledge as part of a process of mobilising parents (Beckett et al., 2012; Warren and Mapp, 2011). The focus here, however, is on more organic forms of pedagogy occurring within parental campaigns, such as how they learn through engaging in activism

---

### Corresponding author:

Nathan Fretwell, Department of Education, Middlesex University, The Burroughs, Hendon, London NW4 4BT, UK.

Email: [n.fretwell@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:n.fretwell@mdx.ac.uk)

(Foley, 1999; Ollis, 2012); how knowledge is shared amongst themselves, with other campaigners, and with the wider public; and, how activism serves as a vehicle for passing democratic values and ideals onto their children.

Parental activism has become an increasingly visible feature of the educational landscape over recent years. In the UK alone, campaigns have emerged around school funding, academisation,<sup>1</sup> testing regimes, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities provision, closures of schools and children's centres, and the introduction of new relationships and sex education curricula into schools. Yet despite this apparent surge in parental activism, there is a dearth of scholarship exploring the phenomenon within the British context. Indeed, much of the extant literature focuses on cases from the USA (e.g. Cortez, 2013; Fennimore, 2017; Hursh et al., 2020; Jasis, 2013; Schroeder et al., 2018; Stitzlein, 2015; Warren and Mapp, 2011)). British scholarship, on the other hand, is restricted to Vincent's (2000) early study of parent-centred organisations, and, more recently, Stevenson's (2016) research on anti-academisation campaigns and Sibley-White's (2019) critical discourse analysis of online campaign materials, alongside my own research (Fretwell and Barker, 2023). The present article seeks to address this gap and further develop scholarship in the field, specifically by exploring the pedagogical dimensions of parents' educational activism.

The article draws on qualitative data collected from three parent-led campaign groups engaged in struggles over education in England, UK. Two of these groups formed to contest the academisation of local schools, whilst a third opposed national funding cuts to education. The article opens by surveying existing research on activist pedagogies and outlining the methodological details of the study. I then turn to consider the pedagogical features of parental activism in education. The first concerns the learning that takes place in and through engaging in activism and leading campaigns. The second concentrates on processes of networking and knowledge-sharing, both internally within campaign groups and externally in terms of assisting other campaigners and educating the wider public. The final aspect of activist pedagogy is peculiar to parental activism. It concerns parents' relationships with their children and how parents gave meaning to their activism by conceptualising it as a form of democratic education. This was often framed as a matter of care and good parenting in which parents modelled democratic values by acting as moral exemplars contributing to developing children's identities as future citizens, including, in some cases, by involving them in campaigning.

Attending to activist pedagogies not only sheds light on processes of knowledge-production within social movements, but it also helps us better understand movements and campaigns themselves (Choudry, 2015). In this context, the article offers a key contribution to theorising the character and nature of parental activism by detailing how parents often rationalised their involvement through direct reference to the educative potential it had for their children. I argue that pedagogical concerns are not a peripheral feature or a by-product of parental activism, but rather an essential component of campaigning. Parents' desire to set moral examples for their children and to teach them to stand up for things they believe are right, served as a crucial driver for their activism. Indeed, we might see parental activism itself as a form of civic education, a crucible for forging the future citizenship of children and young people.

## **Activist pedagogies**

Pedagogical elements are present in all forms of activism, whether short-lived campaigns or more longstanding social movements. This is most outwardly visible when we consider the purpose for engaging in activism. Activists ultimately seek change. They seek to challenge perceived injustices and resist, reform or replace undesirable social policies. But in seeking to institute change, activists have to convince policymakers, and the public, of the justice and necessity of their claims. They

must, in other words, educate them. At the most basic level, then, activists are engaged in public pedagogy. Pedagogical strategies are essential for publicising injustice and promoting remedies. Key to this is the production of what Della Porta and Doerr (2016) refer to as ‘counter-knowledge’. Activists are involved, they write, in ‘the production and spreading of alternative knowledge, which helps frame social problems, singling out prognosis and diagnosis’ (Della Porta and Doerr, 2016: 324). They undertake research and generate knowledge in an effort to garner support and sway public opinion.

However, this is only the most visible dimension of activist pedagogy. Alongside processes of knowledge generation and public pedagogy, we must also attend to the educational processes that occur *within* activism whereby activists learn and develop new skills as well as share their knowledge, experience and expertise (Della Porta and Doerr, 2016). Often, as Foley (1999) and Ollis (2012) note, the learning that occurs within activism is tacit and informal, sometimes even scarcely recognised as such. On other occasions it takes more overt and explicit forms, such as the use of teach-ins or the emergence of ‘free universities’ and social centres as radical educational experiments (Earl, 2018). It is in this regard, then, that social movements and activist organisations constitute ‘laboratories of learning’ (Novelli et al., 2024) or can be considered ‘educational spaces in themselves’ (Della Porta and Doerr, 2016: 348). They are sites pregnant with pedagogical potential, spaces in which situated learning occurs. Amongst the different types of learning that occur within activism we might look, for example, to activists learning about particular causes and wider social justice issues; learning about the law, the state and the police; learning how to collaborate with others; learning and developing skills in public speaking; learning how to manage and organise campaigns; and learning how to utilise the media (Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999; Warren and Mapp, 2011). Furthermore, social movements are also important sites for learning and practising democratic values, habits and dispositions, akin to political laboratories wherein democratic citizenship can be practised and enacted (Hytten, 2016). As this précis indicates, there is significant scope for learning in and through activism. Through the practice of developing, organising and leading campaigns, activists are engaged in a ‘continual cycle of learning in action’ (Choudry, 2015: 33).

Whilst there has been longstanding interest in activist pedagogies within radical political circles (Coté et al., 2007; Haworth, 2012; Haworth and Elmore, 2017) and social movement studies (Choudry, 2015; Niesz, 2022; Novelli et al., 2024; Tarlau, 2023), recent years have also witnessed renewed interest within the field of adult education and learning (Clancy et al., 2022; Curnow and Jurow, 2021; Hall et al., 2011; Ollis, 2012). This work builds upon and is indebted to Foley’s (1999) classic study of informal learning within activism. Activist movements and organisations, Foley contends, are important sites for adult learning. ‘[S]ome of the most powerful learning occurs’, he writes, ‘as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways of doing something about it’ (Foley, 1999: 1–2). Such learning tends to be embedded in action, occurring incidentally as people go about the practical business of their campaign work. It thus remains largely tacit and often goes unrecognised as learning even by those engaged in it.

Ollis (2012) develops these ideas by considering the learning experiences of what she terms ‘circumstantial activists’. Circumstantial activists are those who feel compelled to become engaged in activism due to specific changes in their life circumstances. They come to activism accidentally, having little or no prior experience of engaging in campaign work. Engaging in activism is something novel and thrust into the repertoire of activism they have to learn sharply and quickly, developing knowledge and expertise ‘on the job’, so to speak. As for the parents whose stories and voices thread throughout this article, they too are circumstantial activists. Few had any prior history of activism, instead the perceived injustice of changes being imposed on their children’s

education, changes over which they had little say or control, forced them to act. To establish and build campaigns capable of combatting the changes being forced upon them, they had to learn quickly. They had to develop their knowledge and understanding of the education system, master new skills and acquire new expertise. They had to learn with and from one another. All of this learning was informal and largely incidental. However, to fully realise its value, Foley (1999) argues, we must attend to it, expose it, make it visible. Such is the focus of the present article. I attend to the pedagogical features of parents' educational activism so that we might better appreciate their significance. Before moving on to consider this in more detail, though, I first outline key methodological details of the study.

## Methodology

This article draws on findings from a qualitative study into parental activism in education that was conducted between 2018 and 2020. From the outset, I approached this research in the spirit of a critical, engaged scholar (Apple, 2015), and inevitably my own social and political values shaped the study from its inception through to its design and delivery, including identifying campaign groups with progressive educational agendas. As a parent and scholar with a longstanding interest in social movements, the research was impelled by a desire to document this wave of parental activism and to contribute, in whatever small way, to the public record on contemporary educational activism. The study comprised three parent-led campaign groups. The first of these – *Protect Children's Education (PCE)* – was established in 2017 to oppose national funding cuts to education. Although initially formed in a large city on the south-coast of England, the campaign subsequently spawned a network of regional groups operating under the broad banner of PCE. The focus of the research, however, was on the original, founding group. Seven parent-activists from PCE participated in the research, six mothers and one father, the majority of whom were members of the core leadership group.

The second campaign – *Eastborough Anti-Academisation Coalition (EAC)* – formed in late 2017 to consolidate opposition to academisation within Eastborough, a large municipal borough in outer-London. The campaign was largely composed of parents, teachers and union activists from three primary schools voluntarily pursuing academisation: Old Leaf, Grovelands and Fenside. The campaign had significant successes. Old Leaf and Grovelands parents prevented the conversions from taking place, whilst the broader campaign pressurised the local authority into passing a motion refraining them from pursuing any further academisation within the borough. In total, seven parents from EAC participated in the research, five fathers and two mothers, plus a union activist who played a key role in coordinating the campaign.

The final campaign – *Crowley Parents Campaign (CPC)* – centred on the forced academisation of Stonefield Primary School, a school situated in a county on the northern border of London. Academisation was being pursued here against the wishes of school leadership, teachers and parents. This was a notable campaign that attracted significant media attention and resulted in one of the most protracted conversions on record, although ultimately it failed in its objective of preventing academisation of the school. Conducted between 2017 and 2019, the campaign was driven by two mothers in particular and the research draws on paired interviews with these parents during and after the campaign concluded.

Data were predominantly collected through semi-structured interviews, both individual (n.9) and paired (n.2), and focus groups (n.2). Data collection took place in a range of locations, including participants' homes, cafés and public houses and in some cases through the medium of telephone interviews. Data were also generated through non-participant observations of a national rally at Parliament Square (PCE), a protest lobby at Eastborough town hall (EAC), and a campaign

meeting (EAC). In terms of the composition of the sample, it is important to note that a majority of the participants were women (10 out of 16 in total) and that participants indicated in interviews that this was true of wider campaign membership as well. The predominance of mothers within the campaigns is perhaps indicative of persistent gendered divisions of labour around schooling (Reay, 2006), although many fathers in the sample also discussed playing active domestic roles and undertaking responsibilities around schooling. No systematic approach was undertaken for recording definitive data on the social class and ethnic composition of participating parents. However, PCE parents were mostly from White British backgrounds and could be described as middle-class based on their reported histories of working in a range of professional occupations. Eastborough, the locale in which the EAC campaign was fought, is a diverse multi-ethnic London Borough with high-levels of urban deprivation. The ethnic composition of the campaign reflected this diversity, although the ethnic make-up of the constituent schools differed according to the communities in which they were rooted. Grovelands Primary School, for instance, serves a predominantly British South-Asian population and participating parents shared this background. Fenside and Old Leaf, on the other hand, were more ethnically mixed. EAC participants reported working in a range of fields within the spectrum of lower middle-class and working-class occupations. No data is available on the composition of the wider CPC campaign, but there was variation between the two participating parents, one of whom could be described as White working-class, whilst the other is from a South Asian background and positioned as middle-class in terms of economic standing and professional background.

Ethical approval for the study was secured in advance from the researcher's host institution and ethical protocols and procedures were followed throughout. One area of uncertainty, though, concerned whether to anonymise the campaign groups themselves. I was torn here between the need to protect participants' identities and a desire, perhaps even a duty as critical scholars (Apple, 2015), to recognise and preserve the efforts of these campaigns for the historical record. Given, however, that each of the campaigns had a considerable public profile, alongside the fact that anti-academisation activists were engaged in acrimonious conflicts with educational authorities, I have duly anonymised the campaign groups themselves in order to better protect participants' identities. Throughout the article pseudonyms are used for the campaign groups, participants and all key locations.

## **Learning in and through activism**

Activism, as we have seen, can involve significant forms of pedagogy. Not only are activists endeavouring to educate the public, but they are also involved in 'internal practices of intellectual knowledge creation and diffusion' (Della Porta and Doerr, 2016: 322). From conducting research and organising campaigns through to articulating goals and determining suitable strategies and tactics, activists learn in and through the business of fighting for social change (Choudry, 2015). Parents involved in the campaigns comprising the present study reported on a variety of learning experiences. Some involved the acquisition of knowledge and skills, whilst others concerned sophisticated forms of political learning. Others still, related to parents' own personal development and transformation. To capture the nuance in parents' accounts I focus on each strand separately below.

### ***Knowledge and skills acquisition***

For those new to activism, like the vast majority of parents in the present study, the need to learn, and learn quickly, can be particularly acute. Circumstantial activists, in this regard, 'must develop

expertise very rapidly and are frequently taken onto a learning edge where they are out of their comfort zone and need to develop new knowledge and skills very quickly to be effective as activists' (Ollis, 2012: 134–135). Anti-academisation activists in particular faced an issue around which they had limited experience and hence were thrust into novel and challenging circumstances. Molly and Mina (CPC) reported, for instance, that they had to learn 'quickly, on our toes'. Whilst Isra (EAC) indicated that parents at Grovelands school 'were all pushing our comfort zone' and had to develop new skills to fight the campaign. Similarly, Aminul pointed out that parents were starting from a position of relative ignorance and had to conduct their own research in order to source information on what academisation would entail:

I didn't know nothing about academies, honestly, whether it was good or bad, to be honest with you. And I don't think any of us really did [. . .] it prompted us to find out more ourselves, sort of do our little homework. (Aminul, EAC)

As their campaign grew, EAC campaigners developed knowledge and skills in a host of areas, including public speaking and how to host and lead meetings; how to organise campaigns; how to promote causes effectively; how to conduct research; and, how to recruit and work with other organisations such as teaching unions.

CPC campaigners reported similar learning experiences and became particularly adept at garnering and making strategic use of media interest in the campaign. Key, however, was acquiring detailed knowledge about the organisations forcing through the academisation. Here the campaign benefitted from Molly's prior experience in corporate compliance and especially her familiarity with submitting Freedom of Information<sup>2</sup> (FOI) requests. As she put it, 'I also know the power of FOI'. Extensive use of FOI requests enabled CPC campaigners to uncover a wealth of information on the conversion, including alleged malpractice, which was subsequently used to stall the process. The knowledge they amassed was crucial in driving the campaign and meant that campaigners were better able to hold authorities to account: 'It's like a forensic knowledge, it is, it's like a forensic knowledge on this shit, you know [. . .] I know how DfE [Department for Education] legislation works probably better than some of the people in the DfE' (Molly, CPC). Choudry's (2015) contention that activists are knowledge-generators is clearly borne out here. What is also clear, though, is that the knowledge produced can be of huge strategic importance. The knowledge generated by campaigners about the inner-workings of the academisation process was pivotal in keeping the conversion at bay for as long as it did. To the extent even that it became a source of frustration for the authorities involved, with Molly uncovering through FOI requests that a senior figure within the local authority had been referring to her in emails as '[t]hat fucking FOI woman'.

Parents involved in PCE were also able to utilise and enhance existing skills in building the campaign by tapping into several parents' professional experience in design and media communications. PCE activists made adept use of social media, producing attractive, eye-catching infographics, GIFs and videos that could be easily disseminated through social media portals. The ability of PCE to successfully harness the power of social media ensured the campaign garnered significant exposure and undoubtedly contributed to raising the profile of their cause. This would have been impotent, though, without the extensive research parents conducted into the impact funding cuts would have on schools, both locally and nationally. For some parents, like Carole (PCE), this resulting in feeling more knowledgeable about the school system: 'I feel like I've got a much deeper understanding of the whole way the school system works, and, yeah, and all the way the funding works [. . .] Just made me much more like knowledgeable about all the ins and outs of it all'. As in the wider research on activist pedagogies, then, we see a range of learning experiences



being reported in the campaigns. Parent activists engage in research, generate new knowledge and develop or enhance skills useful for building and sustaining campaigns.

### *Political learning*

Activism also invites forms of political learning and the development of political literacy. Indeed, Isra remarked that campaigning ‘really opened up our eyes in terms of looking at politics’. Parents had to learn about how public institutions and local governance works, how the legal system might support them, and how to work with politicians. The latter in particular was an area that tended to push parents outside their comfort zones. Lynn (PCE) spoke, for instance, of her initial hesitancy about contacting politicians:

I remember the first email we sent to our local MPs and to [local Green Party leader] and it was all just so carefully and politely put and really ummed and ahed over every sentence and now I just send a quick text (both laugh) and just talk to them like I talk to anybody else. (Lynn, PCE)

Over the course of the campaign Lynn and her fellow campaigners became more confident in working with politicians and commanded such support they were able to host events within the Houses of Parliament and its vicinities.

Aalia, a member of EAC, also reported some initial hesitancy in liaising with politicians. Early efforts to do so had been largely rebuffed, but one evening the local Member of Parliament arrived unannounced at her door:

I was drawing the curtains, and I was like, ‘What the hell?!’ And my husband, he was like. . . go and open the door, and I was like, ‘I’m not opening the door, why has he come to my house for?’ Because I was just [. . .] I was a bit sort of taken back, like, you know. It’s Sunday evening, about five o’clock – why is this man at my door? And he’s quite a tall man. I saw the back of him and then when he turned and I saw his face through all the nets, and I was like, ‘I’m not opening the door’, and he kept saying, ‘Go and open the door’. ‘I’m not opening it; I refuse’. And so we pretended not to be at home. (Aalia, EAC)

Despite her initial anxieties, Aalia subsequently invited him to return and met with him on a further occasion as well. As the campaign grew and generated considerable public support, parents adapted, learning how to better identify and engage with political figures who might be receptive to their cause.

Political learning also took on another guise. Interviews with anti-academisation activists revealed numerous examples of what Foley (1999) refers to as ‘negative learning’. This is learning that has the potential for being profoundly disempowering, leading to inertia and passivity, where we might learn for instance that public institutions are perhaps not as democratic as we might hope or that existing power structures are impervious to change. However, negative learning, conceived here as learning that accentuates and reinforces barriers to action and participation, need not be considered automatically ‘mis-educative’ in the Deweyan sense of foreclosing future possibilities for learning, action, and experience (Dewey, [1938] 2015). It is only *potentially* disempowering. Whether it becomes actualised as such will likely depend on a range of factors, including the depth and types of feeling that instances of negative learning provoke.

In the context of the current study, parents’ negative learning largely centred around the belief that academisation processes intentionally obstruct or seek to silence dissenting voices. This revealed itself in parents’ experiences of consultation processes as merely ‘fictional’, ‘tick box’ or ‘paper exercises’; parents’ conviction that there ‘is fraud and manipulation and a lack of

information about academisation' (EAC observation notes); and, as Aminul put it, the belief that conversion 'can be pretty much done under the table'. Floyd (EAC) concluded on the basis of his experiences of fighting academisation in Eastborough that the local authority was engaged in a range of corrupt practices (Thomson, 2020). Molly and Mina similarly uncovered a range of potentially corrupt practices around the Stonefield conversion, including alleged conflicts of interest between the incoming multi-academy trust, the local authority and the Department for Education. Molly claimed to have evidence, for instance, 'that basically shows this decision was made before Ofsted even came in, right? They were lining everything up. The way they even sold the land; they transferred the land over a couple of months before. They've been lining this up for ages'. Ultimately, parents contesting academisation learnt that authorities at various levels of the education system were not to be trusted. Again, Molly paints this in the starkest terms:

'I'll tell you what I realised right from the off: they're all fucked, they're all involved, they're all corrupt; the only way you're ever going to win this is by showing them. . . getting out what they're actually doing. No one is helping you; your MPs aren't going to help you, the local authority, the DfE, "No one is going to help you, Molly", because they're all involved, they're all corrupt, they're all lying. [. . .] I've got the paperwork because I've FOI'd it. Go along to the LA [local authority] they're not going to help you; they're corrupt, they've done this. The only way we're going to get this sorted is by outing it because these people have got a lot to hide and they really have; it's horrific'. (Molly, CPC)

These examples of negative learning might dissuade parents from considering or undertaking any further action and hence constitute potentially mis-educative experiences. But what is remarkable here is that rather than disempowering or deterring parents, negative learning experiences actually galvanised them. Parents from the EAC and CPC campaigns responded with anger rather than apathy and used this to spur their efforts. The more recalcitrance they faced, the harder they fought (Fretwell and Barker, 2023). Although admittedly by the end of their campaign, Molly and Mina, at least, had indeed become rather despondent at the intransigence of the system.

A final aspect of political learning concerns activism as a vehicle for practising and realising democratic citizenship. Social movements and activist organisations are sites for expressing citizenship and for the creation of new political subjectivities (Hyttén, 2016; Jupp, 2022; Panitch, 2008). Through their campaigning activities parents were undergoing their own form of civic education, becoming politically literate citizens capable of affecting change (Crick and Porter, 1978). This conceptualisation of activism as a vehicle for civic education, for learning and practising democracy, received its most pronounced account in the interview with Floyd. '[W]e had a political situation', he recounted, 'where we said we want democracy and we're practising it':

We can't just say we live in a community, we go to work every day, we come home, we go shopping at the weekend, you know, and we watch TV, we socialise with our friends, and that's it. That's not democracy – and vote every four/five years or something like that, you know. That's not democracy [. . .] As an individual you won't have any power. So, we're demanding action. People should get up and rise up and should participate in exerting true democracy, because true democracy is about learning what's going on in your community, how things are affecting you, you know, your household, you get me, your livelihood, your transportation, your food you buy in the supermarket, your children's education, your services, your bills, you get me. (Floyd, EAC)

Floyd opines here that practising democracy involves learning about the local community, the issues affecting it and how local power-brokers function. More than that, though, he suggests that activism offers a platform for teaching democracy: 'Okay, we try to teach about democracy. Democracy itself needs to be taught. How to practise it. Because for us as parents organising, this



is democracy'. This theme of teaching democracy figured across our data and is one I return to in the final section in the context of discussing the example parents sought to set for their children. Now, however, I want to close this section by detailing how becoming engaged in activism was personally transformative for some of the parents involved.

### *Personal development and transformation*

Engaging in activism can be pleasurable (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Jasper, 1998). The same is true for the learning that occurs in and through activism. There is a joy to learning that several of our participants expressed during the interviews:

And I think, for me, it was a first. I've never done anything like this, and the things that I've learnt throughout this whole thing has just been amazing. What actually people can do. When communities get together. (Aminul, EAC)

We've had an education. We've learnt about all sorts of stuff; it's amazing. (Molly, CPC)

The pleasure that parents derived from learning new skills also generated greater self-assurance. As Isra put it, 'we had that buzz and that confidence'.

We get a sense here for how learning through activism can be personally satisfying and potentially transformative (Curnow et al., 2019). Ollis (2012) writes that the learning activists engage in often results in significant identity change. This was particularly evident for some of the mothers in our sample. In the context of a discussion about what she has learnt through campaigning, Rose (PCE) claimed that 'it has been quite transformational for a lot of us'. Not least because becoming involved in activism presented an opportunity to reclaim a sense of self beyond the demands of motherhood:

And it's actually, on a personal level, it's what I needed, coming from that baby world which having babies is really boring. So, it was quite nice to come out of that (laughs) and it's about identity and not being just a mum – even though interestingly, you have to position yourself as a mum in order to be, to do it – but it's about not just being a mum who's making fish fingers and whatever, all the other stuff. That that can be a political identity as well. (Rose, PCE)

Rose's comments here echo Jupp's (2022) findings which suggest that community activism offers women in particular a means to reclaim personal self-esteem. They are also borne out in the experiences of other mothers in the study. Molly remarked, for instance, that 'I've been a mum since I was 19, yeah, I've always just been "mum, mum, mum" I forgot my name was Molly. I forgot. . . and your confidence sort of gets lost'. Her involvement in campaigning, however, renewed her confidence and helped her regain self-esteem:

You know what it's made me do, it's made me appreciate my love of reading and writing and researching and studying a bit more, because of the kids, and obviously now my children are a little bit older, being a single mum, so everything has been my kids. [But now] I can sit on my laptop and study and do this. It doesn't mean I'm neglecting my kids, but I've started actually to be able to find Molly again, you know. I'm not just, 'mum, mum, mum. . .' I'm actually Molly, and people actually like having a conversation with me and I can discuss all these mad things with these people that I'm meeting [. . .] I've started appreciating myself a little bit more. Actually, shit mate, you are quite smart, Molly, you actually are quite capable. (Molly, CPC)

For mothers like Rose and Molly, engaging in activism enabled them to reclaim a sense of self, of their own personality, above and beyond their identity as mothers. For other parents, a burgeoning sense of political literacy and political efficacy had similarly transformative effects. After the conclusion of their campaigns, for instance, Aminul (EAC), Carole (PCE) and Mina (CPC) became parent-governors at their children's schools, whilst two further PCE campaigners became local councillors. Alongside knowledge and skills acquisition and the different forms of political learning that occasion activism, then, personal development and transformation is likewise of central importance. As the above discussion suggests, the learning that occurs within activist contexts can breed confidence which in turn can engender transformative identity-change.

## **Sharing knowledge, experience and expertise**

Thus far we have discussed activist learning as if it were something activists undertake independently. Yet, as Choudry (2015) and Ollis (2012) observe, activists rarely learn in isolation. On the contrary, such learning is predominantly social and collaborative. This section addresses the social dimension of activist pedagogies. It considers how parents shared knowledge, experience and expertise to strengthen their own and others' campaigns. I argue that this social dimension helps generate the communality necessary for sustaining campaigns and plays a key role in building wider networks of struggle.

EAC is a particularly instructive case in this regard. Originally comprising several separate struggles over academisation, parents banded together to form EAC so that they could share insights, provide mutual support and create a solid foundation for fighting academisation across the whole of Eastborough. One of the Grovelands parents, Aalia, explained how the process began:

There's another three schools that were going through a similar process to ours and they'd contacted us for support – what to do. Parents had said, 'Right', so we'd sort of said, 'Right, this is what you do. Set up a parents' groups, do this, do that, write to these people'. Because we weren't afraid to share what we'd sort of started. (Aalia, EAC)

Floyd, a parent at Fenside, stressed how important it was for parents within the borough to collaborate, not just for the campaign in Eastborough, but as an inspiration for other groups:

And now the campaign has spread, you know. It's spreading around the country. You can see the last meeting [Anti-Academy Alliance meeting] all this coalition learning from what we have done. And we've inspired. Grovelands parents and us coming together, we've inspired a whole generation of parents, you know, and teachers as well, that the possibilities are there to do it. (Floyd, EAC)

This was a sentiment shared by other parents involved in the campaign. Isra recounted, for instance, how 'we had everyone up and down the country watching us' and how the Grovelands campaign had become emblematic for anti-academisation activists:

I mean, at the moment we're, kind of, almost we are the beacon school, a parent group who, kind of, led this big campaign and everybody comes to, you know, us for advice on how to, kind of, mobilise, how to get parents' groups together. (Isra, EAC)

The influence EAC campaigners exerted and their ability to inspire others was clearly a source of pride, but it also highlights how sharing knowledge and expertise across campaigns is an effective means for building political literacy across wider activist networks.

The account above resonates with Ollis (2011) claim about the place of mentoring within activist contexts. EAC parents mentored one another as well as others involved in similar struggles around the country. Elements of mentoring were also evident in CPC. Molly and Mina spoke of regularly being contacted by other anti-academisation activists for their help and assistance:

The amount of times you've said or we've said to other parent groups, 'Don't waste your time doing that, if you feel this isn't right, don't waste your time FOling for x/y/z, just do this, because it will get you to the means you want to'. So, not our, downfalls isn't the right word, but our experiences mean we can help others. The fact that the campaign ended up being so high profile; we're still on everyone's radar, we've not just gone away. I think that's really important. (Mina, CPC)

For their part, PCE campaigners' expert use of social media established them as a trustworthy source of information for other campaigners. Indeed, the significant public profile built up by the original group inspired others around the country to adopt PCE branding and campaign around funding cuts within their own locales. Lynn remarked that the campaign raised the profile of the issue to such a degree that they became the media's 'go-to campaign': 'I'll regularly get phoned up if there's been a statement from the DfE to counteract it; we have become the voice of opposition'.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of collaborative learning, though, concerns the camaraderie generated through sharing experiences of struggle. It was common for parents to report forging strong friendships with fellow activists based on their shared experiences. Floyd's comment that – 'we've made lots of friendships, lots of connections' – was typical of the wider data-set in this regard. Sharing experiences was also crucial in fostering solidarity with the wider community. Aalia indicated that their efforts provided other parents with confidence: 'We reassured them [. . .] we empowered them to stand up and be heard'. As Mina points out, though, this works both ways as campaigners themselves can often draw moral sustenance from the networks they have created: 'we have a massive network of people that want to help, not just in Crowley, but outside of Crowley, and I think sometimes when you grab hope from them, it keeps you going'.

Activism around local issues and concerns, such as schooling, can be important for building social capital and creating feelings of community (Warren and Mapp, 2011); especially in the context of a putative decline in traditional sources of civic association (Putnam, 2001):

I think in the olden days (laughs) so to speak, communities worked together and acted together and that has just disappeared. If you don't go to church, which I don't, that sense of having a community hub disappears and this is an example of community work really, that can then be scaled up to become national community work. But, it's community and it's for the community and that's a really good thing to be doing. (Lynn, PCE)

It can also give communities a sense of political efficacy. Mark (EAC) discussed how the campaign 'stitched together' a formerly quite fragmented borough, ethnically speaking and imbued the local community with the belief that change is possible. 'We've turned our ward from a passive ward', he remarked, 'into an active, fighting ward'. Local, community activism can thus be a force for bringing together otherwise disparate groups of people and empowering them:

I have seen ordinary people that have never done any campaigning, that haven't got a clue about researching, come together, empower themselves, with the union, with communities, you know parents and teachers sharing information, knowledge, and using that knowledge, you know, to constantly pressure on, you know, push the boundaries in regards to say 'Listen to us. Listen to us. Listen to us'. And now they've started to listen. (Floyd, EAC)

Such mobilisation is made possible in part, though, through the pedagogical processes by which activists share their knowledge and experiences with one another as well as with the wider community.

## Caring for future citizens

The final pedagogical feature concerns the importance that parents attached to campaigning as a means for developing their children's political literacy. This represents a key finding of the research that advances understanding of parental activism as a particular field of inquiry. To fully grasp its significance, though, it is important to recognise that parental care constitutes the very specificity of parental activism. Parental activism is political action undertaken by parents aimed *specifically* at promoting, protecting or preserving their own (and often other) children's interests; a politicised variant, we might say, of 'moral parenthood' (Howard et al., 2021). By modelling democratic values and by demonstrating the importance of fighting for what you believe in, parents in the study sought to serve as moral exemplars for their children. They were caring for their children, that is, as future citizens to be.

Jasper (1997) suggests that becoming involved in activism is often closely bound up with how people see themselves and how they wish to be seen by others. '[D]oing the right thing', he claims, 'is a way of communicating to ourselves, as well as others, what kind of people we are' (Jasper, 1997: 136). Campaigning around education presented parents with an opportunity to embody values they wished their children to emulate. They wanted to be – and be seen to be – good role-models for their children: 'I sort of feel like it's good for them to know that you've got to like try and fight for things you believe in' (Carole, PCE). It was also tied to their understandings of what it means to be a 'good' parent. Fighting for their children's education was a way of demonstrating that they care; that they are good parents:

And this is where for me as a parent that's your job, isn't it? As a mum or a dad, it's to make everything better for your kids. And part of it as well is teaching my kids, hold on if something is not right you actually need to stand up – and they might not realise this now but I hope when they are old enough and the concepts are there, for them to actually go, 'Shit, you know what? That was really bad. Now I know why we had to sit in those meetings. Actually, we might have had fuck all and we might have been homeless but you know my mum? She was relentless and she never gave up and it doesn't matter, she still got up every day and she fought and she will. . . ' [. . .] I can't at the minute give them everything I want to give them but I'll tell you what I can give them: it's a set of values and a set of morals. (Molly, CPC)

This evocative passage encapsulates the importance parents attached to serving as role-models for their children. But it also speaks to a tension many parents encountered, where the demands of campaigning adversely impacted everyday family life. For parents like Molly, however, this tended to be offset against the desire to set a good example. Indeed, pedagogical considerations, in the form of contributing to children's moral and political development, were often at the forefront of parents' minds when they rationalised and justified their campaigning.

Beyond serving as role-models, some parents encouraged their children to participate in campaigning themselves. Mark, for instance, saw it as 'an important part of their education'. Not least, in his view, because it helps foster the confidence children need to better defend their interests: 'I think if we can teach our kids to resist things that are wrong in a fearless manner then it can protect them in so many other ways'. The PCE campaign went further and placed children and young people at the very heart of their activities. PCE actions and events tended to be family-friendly and oriented to children's participation. In part, as Rose and Lynn attested, this was a strategic decision.

Making events family-friendly and encouraging children's participation was a pragmatic way to maximise parents' involvement by negating the need for childcare. It was also a means to attract wider interest in the cause. Directly involving children, Rose observed, has an 'emotive attention-grabbing' quality, making it more likely for campaign events to garner interest from politicians and the media. Equally, however, parents like Rose and Lynn encouraged their children to participate because they wanted to introduce them to the democratic process and convey to them that they too can be political actors:

Yes, so teaching my girls about the democratic process and the fact that they do have a voice and that voice can be heard and that number 10 Downing Street and Westminster and Parliament are accessible to them. They have as much right to go there and speak their mind as anybody else; I think that's got to be an incredibly valuable thing. (Lynn, PCE)

For Lynn, 'being able to involve our children and seeing what it's teaching them' was one of the most important and valuable outcomes of campaigning. Achieving campaign goals is obviously hugely important for parents, but so too, it seems, is inducting children into the political process and imbuing them with democratic values and dispositions.

Recent scholarship has emphasised how activism and practices of care can become closely intertwined (Craddock, 2021; Jupp, 2022). Here, we see another example of this. Through their activism parents were caring for their children as future citizens. By acting as moral exemplars and role-models they engaged in the intergenerational transmission of democratic values and impulses. By offering children an insight into political processes, and in some cases involving them in activism directly, they were engaging them in a powerful form of political education and developing their political literacy. This was not an incidental feature of their campaigning. Rather, for many parents, it was a key motive for becoming involved. In turn, the conviction that they were shaping their children's values and contributing to their political development helped animate and sustain their campaigns.

## Conclusion

This article has explored pedagogical features of parents' educational activism. It has drawn attention to three areas in particular where we see pedagogical processes at work. First, we surveyed the range of learning experiences that parents reported during the course of their campaigning. These experiences included: acquiring knowledge and skills that could be utilised to benefit the campaigns; developing understanding of local and national politics, including instances of negative learning where parents became acutely aware of institutional obstacles to achieving their goals; and experiences of undergoing significant identity-change and personal transformation through becoming involved in activism. Second, we homed in on the social dimension of activist pedagogies, examining processes of knowledge-sharing and network-building both internally within campaigns and externally with respect to the local community, other campaign groups, and the wider public. Lastly, we turned to consider parents' moral and political tutelage of their children and how engaging in activism presented parents with an opportunity to shape their children's development as future citizens.

The findings discussed here confirm the perspective articulated in wider scholarship that engaging in activism involves sophisticated forms of learning and knowledge-production. However, they also further develop and advance our understanding of parental activism as a particular field of inquiry, demonstrating that the pedagogical dimension has special significance for parent activists. Parental activism is peculiar insofar as it is intentionally pedagogical. Through engaging in activism

parents seek to educate their children and shape their values. By acting as moral exemplars and modelling ideals of good citizenship, they care for their children as future citizens to be. Above and beyond the immediate goals of campaigning, it is perhaps here, in the intergenerational transmission of democratic values and ideals, that we see the true import of parents' educational activism.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to all of the parent campaigners for taking the time to contribute to the research. Thanks also to John Barker for his contribution to the original study.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Nathan Fretwell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8192-5843>

### Notes

1. First introduced in England in 2000, academy schools are administratively independent from local authorities and operate as not-for-profit companies often under sponsorship of other organisations as part of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Academisation can be either pursued voluntarily or schools can be issued with 'academy orders' that compel them to convert, usually on the grounds of receiving negative judgements from Ofsted, the school and children services inspectorate.
2. Citizens of the UK have a statutory right to access public information under the *Freedom of Public Information Act 2000*.

### References

- Apple MW (2015) Reflections on the educational crisis and the tasks of the critical scholar/activist. *Nordic Journal of Pedagogy and Critique* 1(0): 1–17.
- Beckett L, Glass R and Moreno A (2012) A pedagogy of community-building: Re-imagining parent involvement and community organizing in popular education efforts. *Association of Mexican-American Educators Journal* 6(1): 5–14.
- Brown G and Pickerill J (2009) Space for emotion in the spaces of activism. *Emotion Space and Society* 2(1): 24–35.
- Choudry A (2015) *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Clancy S, Harman K and Jones I (eds) (2022) Special issue on lived experience, learning, community activism and social change. *Studies in the Education of Adults* 54(2): 123–127.
- Cortez GA (2013) Occupy Public Education: A community's struggle for educational resources in the era of Privatization. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46(1): 7–19.
- Coté M, Day R and de Peuter G (eds)(2007) *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Craddock E (2021) *Living Against Austerity: A Feminist Investigation of Doing Activism and Being Activist*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Crick B and Porter A (1978) *Political Education and Political Literacy*. London: Longman.



- Curnow J, Davis A and Asher L (2019) Politicization in process: Developing political concepts, practices, epistemologies, and identities through activist engagement. *American Educational Research Journal* 56(3): 716–752.
- Curnow J and Jurow AS (2021) Learning in and for collective action. *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 30(1): 14–26.
- Della Porta D and Doerr N (2016) Learning democracy: Global protest for (democratic) education in the social forums and beyond. In: Nielsen H, Fiig C, Loftager J, et al. (eds) *The Democratic Sphere: Current Challenges and Prospects*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, pp.319–359.
- Dewey J ([1938] 2015) *Experience and Education*. New York: Free Press.
- Earl C (2018) *Spaces of Political Pedagogy: Occupy! And Other Radical Experiments in Adult Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fennimore BS (2017) Permission not required: The power of parents to disrupt educational hypocrisy. *Review of Research in Education* 41(1): 159–181.
- Foley G (1999) *Learning in Social Action: A Contribution to Understanding Informal Education*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Fretwell N and Barker J (2023) From active to activist parenting: Educational activism and the injuries of institutionalised misrecognition. In: Moreau M-P, Lee C and Okpokiri C (eds) *Reinventing 'The Family' in Uncertain Times: Education, Policy and Social Justice*. London: Bloomsbury, pp.187–208.
- Hall BL, Clover DE, Crowther J, et al. (2011) Social movement learning: A contemporary re-examination. *Studies in the Education of Adults* 43(2): 113–116.
- Haworth RH (ed.) (2012) *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories and Critical Reflections on Education*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Haworth RH and Elmore JM, (eds) (2017) *Out of the Ruins: The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Howard L, Howell R and Jamieson L (2021) (Re)configuring moral boundaries of intergenerational justice: The UK parent-led climate movement. *Local Environment* 26(12): 1429–1444.
- Hursh D, Deutermann J, Rudley L, et al. (2020) *Opting Out: The Story of the Parents Grassroots Movement to Achieve Whole-Child Public Schools*. Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press.
- Hyten K (2016) Globalization, democracy, and social movements: The educational potential of activism. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48(10): 981–996.
- Jasis P (2013) Latino families challenging exclusion in a middle school: A story from the trenches. *School Community Journal* 23(1): 111–130.
- Jasper JM (1997) *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Jasper JM (1998) The Emotions of protest: Affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. *Sociological Forum* 13(3): 397–424.
- Jupp E (2022) *Care, Crisis and Activism: The Politics of Everyday Life*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Niesz T (2022) Education as social movement tactic, target, context, and outcome. In: Desjardins R and Wiksten S (eds) *Handbook of Civic Engagement and Education*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.68–82.
- Novelli M, Kutan B, Kane P, et al. (2024) *Laboratories of Learning: Social Movements, Education and Knowledge-Making in the Global South*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ollis TA (2011) Learning in social action: The informal and social learning dimensions of circumstantial and lifelong activists. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 51(2): 248–268.
- Ollis TA (2012) *A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education: Learning to Become an Activist*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ollis TA (2020) Adult learning and circumstantial activism in the coal seam gas protests: Informal and incidental learning in an environmental justice movement. *Studies in the Education of Adults* 52(2): 215–231.
- Panitch M (2008) *Disability, Mothers, and Organization: Accidental Activists*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Putnam RD (2001) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Reay D (2006) Compounding inequalities of gender and class. In: Francis B, Skelton C and Smulyan L (eds) *Handbook on Gender and Education*. London: Sage, pp.339–349.

- Schroeder S, Currin E and McCardle T (2018) Mother tongues: The opt out movement's vocal response to patriarchal, neoliberal education reform. *Gender and Education* 30(8): 1001–1018.
- Sibley-White A (2019) A critical discourse analysis of the let our kids be kids protest. *Power and Education* 11(3): 327–345.
- Stevenson H (2016) Challenging school reform from below: Is leadership the missing link in mobilization theory? *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 15(1): 67–90.
- Stitzlein SM (2015) Improving public schools through the dissent of parents: Opting out of tests, demanding alternative curricula, invoking parent trigger laws, and withdrawing entirely. *Educational Studies* 51(1): 57–71.
- Tarlau R (2023) Education, pedagogy, and social movements in Latin America. In: Rossi F (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Social Movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.643–659.
- Thomson P (2020) *School Scandals: Blowing the Whistle on the Corruption of Our Education System*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Vincent C (2000) *Including Parents? Education, Citizenship and Parental Agency*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Warren MR and Mapp KL (2011) *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.