Battleground education: activism, protest and campaigning in diverse educational contexts

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Abstract
This Special Issue throws a spotlight on educational activism. It brings together an international collection of papers offering insights into struggles over education in a variety of contexts. Collectively, the papers capture the breadth and diversity of educational activism. They document battles fought by a range of different actors and illustrate how educational settings can become important sites for collective mobilisation and active citizenship. Beyond introducing the contributions to the collection, this opening paper serves two further purposes. First, we survey recent research in the field to build a picture of prominent areas of conflict in public education systems. And second, we present a novel conceptualisation of educational activism designed to aid further understanding and development of this important area of educational enquiry. Our ambition is for the collection to inspire further research in the field and encourage closer collaboration with campaigners engaged in struggles for educational and social justice.

Key words: activism, protest, campaigning, social movements, education, active citizenship

Public education is a battleground for the staging of conflicts over competing interests, values, and ideals. How education systems are governed and operate, how they are funded, who has access, and what knowledge gets taught and who gets to decide, are all deeply contentious issues (Apple, 2018). In recent years we have witnessed schools and universities become critical flashpoints in culture wars waged by rightist groups around issues such as antiracism, gender, and LGBT+ rights (Pappano, 2024). Whilst the global spread of authoritarian populism under various autocratic political leaders is likewise having a profound impact upon public education in many regions of the world (Salajan and Tavis, 2024). Javier Milei in Argentina, Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, and, of course, Donald Trump in America, have all sought to assert and reinforce their power by repressing democratic elements in public education and in some cases have sought to undermine it entirely. Yet schools, universities and other settings are also sites of resistance to dominant hegemonies within education. Indeed, Apple (2018) argues that it would be impossible to fully understand the history of education without attending to struggles between progressive educational movements and opposing efforts to frustrate and contain them. As critical scholars we need to engage with these struggles and attend to the different ways activists have sought to interrupt dominant ideologies and challenge unjust policies and practices (Apple, 2015). This means learning from activists involved in grassroots struggles over education 'from below' (Heidemann, 2022). Not only with respect to high-profile social movements, but also all the local, less dramatic and less visible forms of contestation through which teachers, students, parents and children can act as change-makers within their schools, universities, and communities.

This Special Issue throws a spotlight on educational activism. It brings together an international collection of papers offering new empirical and theoretical insights into struggles over education and the formation of activist identities within educational spaces. Drawing on examples from the UK, USA and India, the papers provide a snapshot of contemporary educational activism and further develop scholarship in the field. The contributions explore actions undertaken by an array of different actors, around a wide variety of issues, and in a diverse range of educational contexts. These stretch from forms of implicit activism in early years settings, through to young people's confrontational activism in schools and campaigns

driven by parents, schoolteachers and university students. Collectively, the papers capture the breadth and diversity of educational activism and illustrate how the various spaces and places of education can become important sites for collective mobilisation and active citizenship. Beyond introducing the contributions to the collection, this opening paper serves two further purposes. First, we survey recent research in the field in order to build a picture of prominent areas of conflict within contemporary public education systems. And second, we present a novel conceptualisation of educational activism that defines the phenomenon and outlines its characteristic features as a distinct variant of social activism. We anticipate that this account may prove a useful tool in aiding further understanding and development of this important field of educational enquiry.

The contested terrain of education

There is nothing new about educational activism. To the contrary, in many polities campaigning and collective action lie at the root of the emergence of modern public education systems. Regarding the UK, for instance, from whence the editors of this Special Issue write, political struggles and campaigns waged throughout the nineteenth century played a key role in establishing universal state-funded schooling (Fraser, 1977). Even the more particular phenomenon of student-led school strikes – brought to prominence in recent years through young people's environmental activism and opposition to the war in Palestine – can be traced back as far as 1889, when over a three-week period students across Scotland, England and Wales rebelled against issues such as the length of the school day, rote learning, homework, and corporal punishment (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2016; Taylor, 1994). Historically, educational activism has also proven to be an important lever for securing wider societal change, as we see in the battles fought over segregated schooling in the US (Douglas, 2005). In this section we review some recent battlegrounds in education. The review is not intended to be exhaustive but rather serves to highlight key issues around which educational battles have been fought, the different settings in which such struggles have been staged, and the range of actors involved in conducting campaigns within these contexts. It should also be noted that our review relies solely upon Anglophonic literature and hence constitutes an inevitably limited representation of the field. Even so, the review illustrates the scope and breadth of educational activism across many regions of the globe.

University students and campus activism

Perhaps the most prominent form of educational activism – certainly within the public imagination – concerns that undertaken by students in colleges and universities. There is, of course, a long association between universities and political activism, reaching back, for example, to events in Paris during May 1968, students' involvement in the US civil rights movement, and campus activism around the Vietnam war or apartheid in South Africa. More recently, we have seen students play an important role in the Arab Spring uprisings (R'boul, 2024), widespread occupations of university campuses across Europe calling for action to address the environmental crisis (Gayle, 2023), and mass student protests against the war in Palestine; an event depicted by Tarlau (2025: xii) as 'the largest student mobilization of the twenty-first century.' The public prominence afforded to student activism is reflected in the wealth of international research on the subject. This includes several recently published volumes on student opposition to neoliberal policies and practices in universities (Cini, della Porta and Guzmán- Concha, 2021; della Porta, Cini and Guzmán- Concha, 2020; Themelis, 2025) and a wide-ranging collection documenting various student movements across the global north and south (Choudry and Vally, 2020). Other scholarship has explored opposition to tuition fee increases and decolonisation struggles in South Africa (Cini, 2019; Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019), campaigns around the governance of universities in Pakistan (Sheikh, 2024), student mobilisations in Argentina and Chile (Guzmán- Concha, 2012; Gonzalez Vaillant and

Page Poma, 2021; Porto and Barboni, 2025), institutional conflicts within US higher education (Binder and Kidder, 2022; Cho, Davis III and Morgan, this volume), and tuition fee protests and student rent strikes in the UK (Hensby, 2019; Young and Wenham, this volume). The literature on student activism also encompasses struggles fought over issues that extend beyond universities to address wider social and political issues, such as Kadiwal (2021) and Sinha's contribution to this volume, which explore campus tensions in India around the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act, and student-led movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan challenging electoral and economic reforms (Shun Fong and Yuen, 2021; Themelis and Hsu, 2021). Beyond forms of confrontational activism, universities and student movements have also been sites for prefiguring and experimenting with educational alternatives (Earl, 2018; Themelis, 2025). Nor should we forget that university staff can often be allies and collaborators in campus activism or that they regularly mobilise to defend their own interests and working conditions (e.g., through union activity).

Teacher protests and strikes
Alongside universities, schools, too, are also important sites of struggle. Schoolteachers are often key actors in this regard. Within the US context there exists a considerable body of literature on teacher activism. This research has focused on issues as diverse as equity work within classrooms (Picower, 2012), community organising (Zavala and Henning, 2017), campaigns for bilingual education (Hurie and Joseph, 2021), teachers' involvement in social movements (Picower, 2013), and teachers' resistance to neoliberal reforms and the privatisation of education (Uetricht, 2014). Recent research has centred in particular on the wave of teacher-led protests and strikes that swept across many states in the USA during 2018 and 2019, where thousands of teachers undertook strike action to oppose funding cuts and contest threats to existing pay and conditions (Blanc, 2019; Battacharya, et al., 2018; Free Ramos, 2023; Powers and Kim, 2023). Brockman's contribution to this volume further develops analysis of this wave of teacher activism. In a wider international context, scholarship has explored teacher struggles over neoliberal reforms in Chile (Tapia et al., 2023) and Mexico (Bracho, 2025; Ramirez Plascencia, 2018), wages and conditions in Tunisia (Sobhy, 2024), the precaritization of teaching in Morocco (R'boul, 2025), and curriculum reforms in Taiwan (Hung, 2018). Whilst work by De Matthews and Tarlau (2019) and Richard, Salisbury and Cosner (2023) indicates that other professionals such as school administrators and leaders can also play important roles as educational and community activists.

Children and young people's school-based activism
Children and young people have been at the forefront of many campaigns within schools in recent years, practising what Pickard (2019) calls a *Do-It-Ourselves* politics by seeking to enact change through engaging in activism and protest. In the UK alone over the last decade, young people have organised strikes over climate change and the war in Palestine, protested against school toilet policies and period poverty, and staged walkouts over discriminatory uniform policies. In the case of *Everyone's Invited*, an Instagram campaign collecting accounts of sexual harassment and abuse in schools and colleges, youth activism has also had a significant policy impact by duly prompting a review of the issue by the school's regulatory body for England and Wales (Ofsted, 2021). Educational activism led by children and young people has been explored in a variety of contexts. Research has been conducted with young people leading campaigns around LGBT+ issues within schools, such as Pirie's account of young people's defence of trans-rights (this volume), Elliot's (2016) account of anti-homophobic activism, and Iskander and Shabtay's (2018) account of students' efforts to defend the right to form gay-straight alliance groups. The 2018 school climate change strikes, which took place in many countries, have also received significant attention from researchers (Belotti et al., 2022; Pickard, 2022; Trott, 2024). Further research in the US context has

explored children's involvement in school-based social activism projects (Torres-Harding et al., 2018), online campaigns centred on the experiences of students of colour attending Charter Schools (Narayanan and McCluskey, 2025), and the efforts of Black youth activists to secure educational reform in under-resourced urban schools (Wilson, Mae and Horne, 2023). Whilst within the UK, the long history of children and young people's school-based activism has been explored in great depth in Cunningham and Lavalette's (2016) fascinating work. Children and young people's engagement in educational struggles indicates that schools can be important sites for the formation of activist identities, as explored by Tibbits and Wong in this volume. At the same time, however, young people's activism is often viewed as contentious and problematic (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2016). Tong and Yen (2021) report, for instance, on concerted efforts by school authorities in Hong Kong to block student activism in schools. There can also be a tendency to belittle school-based activism by dismissing it as simple misbehaviour, but as Barrance and Muddiman (2023) and Pirie (this volume) argue this represents a diminished view of young people's agency. Engaging in activism can be empowering for young people (Taft, 2010). It presents them with opportunities to demonstrate political agency, to exercise the ability to effect change, and to contribute to decision-making in institutions that matter to them (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2024).

Parental activism in education
Schools can also be important platforms for parent-led activism. This has been brought dramatically to the fore in recent years with the coordinated efforts of powerful parent groups in the US, such as *Moms for Liberty*, to take control of public schools, shape school curricula, and rally against diversity initiatives. The leading role played by parents in these battles has been charted in considerable detail in the work of Laura Pappano (2024). Where once the involvement of 'school moms' was generally limited to fundraising activities and supporting children's learning, now, Pappano argues, it has transformed into political organising and campaigning, building networks of influence, undertaking extensive research into school governance and policies, and seeking election to school boards in order to co-opt and capture public schools for conservative political agendas. Another key area of struggle for parents in the US has taken shape around opposition to high-stakes testing in schools (Hursh et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky, 2021). These examples constitute what might be regarded as nationwide educational movements, but parental activism often tends to have a more local focus, responding to particular issues within particular school contexts. Examples include campaigns in the US to challenge discriminatory policies and practices (Jasis, 2013; Lanari, 2023), protect school buildings and services (Cortez, 2013), and improve school meals provision (Riggs Stapleton, 2021); and campaigns in Chile to prevent school closures (Pino-Yancovic, 2015). In the UK, the work of Fretwell and Barker (2023; 2025) and Fretwell (this volume) reports on parent-led campaigns around school funding and changes to the administration and ownership of local schools. Whilst it is generally recognised that parents have an important role to play in their children's education, these examples indicate that this role can also extend to fighting for changes to the governance, functioning, and resourcing of schools and public education systems more widely.

Activism in early years contexts
Early years provision constitutes another battleground. Historical accounts have explored women's campaigns for adequate childcare provision in the US (Fousekis, 2011), Europe (Bertone, 2015; Korsvik, 2011), Australia (Harris, 2008) and the UK (Stoller, 2023). Whilst research with a more contemporary focus has explored such issues as early years educators' subversion of policy demands (Archer, 2025); how dominant discourses and prevailing regulatory structures in the sector might be resisted (Moss, 2017; Richardson et al., 2023); and some of the complexities and challenges in maintaining childcare activist organisations with

diverse membership bodies (Tuominen, 2012). Perrier's (2022) contribution to understanding contemporary struggles around childcare is particularly important for its attention to intersections between race and gender and for extending the scope of scholarship on early years activism to consider a wider range of 'maternal workers,' including migrant nannies and maternal support workers, alongside childcare workers in nurseries. With reference to the Australian early years sector, Woodrow and Busch (2008) have argued for enacting forms of activist professionalism and leadership in the sector, a theme taken up in the UK context by Sakr and Halls' contribution to this volume. As these examples suggest, early years settings, no less than schools or universities, can also be sites of struggle in which practitioners, parents, leaders, and other interested parties pursue change through mobilising in campaigns and engaging in activism.

Conceptualising educational activism

In general terms, activism is the practice of undertaking action to challenge prevailing power structures in order to bring about desired changes in the current state of affairs, most commonly through engaging in organised campaigns targeting specific issues and grievances. Activists may draw on a variety of methods in pursuing their aims. These can range from consciousness-raising activities and the strategic use of social media through to petitioning, protesting, strikes and direct action. It would be a mistake, however, to view activism as inherently confrontational and antagonistic. It can also encompass more subtle forms of protest and opposition (Pottinger, 2017). These forms of 'implicit' activism may not garner attention to the same degree that more dramatic actions such as marches or protests might, but they can nevertheless prove quietly powerful and transformative (Horton and Kraftl, 2009). Consider, for example, the phenomenon of guerilla gardening, where the intention is to transform public spaces and subvert the spatial politics of the urban environment through the surreptitious beautification or cultivation of neglected land (Reynolds, 2008). Sakr and Halls' (this volume) account of dissensus in the baby rooms of early years settings would constitute a form of implicit activism in the terms outlined here.

Drawing on Heidemann's (2022) account of social movements, activism can be broadly characterised as being either protective or progressive in orientation. Progressive activism constitutes activism proactively undertaken to secure positive societal change, such as campaigning for equal rights or seeking to remedy unjust policies and practices. However, we would qualify this category by observing that there is nothing inherently socially progressive about activism in and of itself. Activism can be – and often is – adopted as a vehicle by socially regressive forces as much as it is by liberal or democratic ones (Apple, 2013). *Transformative activism* would thus be a better term to depict campaigns oriented to instituting changes to the given order, leaving open the question as to whether the ends sought are morally defensible or socially progressive. *Protective activism*, on the other hand, is primarily defensive in character. It involves undertaking actions to obstruct undesirable changes to the current order and preserve existing rights and privileges, such as, for example, campaigning to prevent spending cuts being imposed on public services. To this typology we might add activism oriented to practising alternative possibilities for social organisation. *Prefigurative activism*, in this sense, refers to activist experiments with forms of direct democracy, horizontalism, self-management, and consensus-based decision making, and so on, as realised through the *Global Justice Movement* in the early 2000s and the later *Occupy Movement* (Graeber, 2009; Pickerill et al., 2015). These distinctions should not be understood as mutually exclusive, in practice campaigns cut across such classifications; campaigns arising in defence of some particular good may also at the same time pursue an agenda of transformative change. Instead, much as with the account of educational activism developed below, this typology is simply offered as a means of parsing the complex field of activist practice to aid further understanding and enable more fine-grained analysis.

Educational activism can be transformative, protective or prefigurative in orientation. It can be undertaken to bring about changes in educational institutions or practices, to defend existing educational rights and goods, or to model and practise different ways of doing education. As a particular species of activism, though, it has its own specificity and distinctive characteristics. In the simplest terms it amounts to a variant of social activism explicitly centred on and undertaken around educational policies, practices, and institutions. One that is distinguished by its attention to particular kinds of actors, settings, and issues. These can be sketched out as follows:

(1) *Actors* – Children, young people, and adults attending educational institutions (e.g., school pupils and university students); staff working within these institutions, including leaders and administrators, staff with teaching responsibilities (e.g., lecturers, teachers and teaching assistants), and wider support staff (e.g., counsellors, educational psychologists, welfare officers, premises staff, cleaners, and so on); and other figures invested in educational provision (e.g., parents/caregivers, local education authorities, etc.).

(2) *Settings* – Institutions or organisations with a demonstrably educative function (e.g., nurseries and childcare settings, schools, colleges, universities, libraries, and museums, etc.)

(3) *Issues* – Disputes centred on educational policies, practices and provision (e.g., curricula; diversity initiatives; funding), the operation and functioning of educational settings (e.g., discipline and school rules, governance), and the experiences of actors within such settings (e.g., experiences of sexism, racism and classism, bullying, working conditions, etc).

On this understanding, the distinctive feature of educational activism is that it is undertaken by actors closely involved with educational services and provision, that it emanates from or is directed towards particular educational settings, and that it is oriented to explicitly educational issues.

A more expansive reading of educational activism might view it as encompassing any form of activism, protest or campaigning that occurs within educational settings (e.g., universities) or that is otherwise undertaken by educational actors (e.g., schoolteachers, parents, students). However, some further refinement and discrimination is necessary here. We can broadly distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic types of educational activism. Cases of *intrinsic educational activism* would encompass all three elements outlined above insofar as they involve educational actors and settings and focus on explicitly educational issues. Teachers striking over pay and conditions or children protesting against school disciplinary procedures would constitute cases of intrinsic educational activism in this regard. Among the contributions to the volume, readers will find examples of this form of educational activism in the work of Brockman, Fretwell, Pirie, and Young and Wenham. Cases of *extrinsic educational activism*, on the other hand, are geared towards wider societal issues lying outside the span of direct educational concern. Examples would include pro-Palestine protests on university campuses or school climate strikes. Although these examples involve educational actors and at the very least implicate educational settings, the animating issues driving protest activities are not themselves primarily educational in orientation. Sinha's (this volume) account of Indian university students protesting national policy reforms would also be categorizable in these terms.

There are other cases, though, in which the distinction becomes blurred. Imagine a case of university students campaigning for animal rights by targeting animal testing on campus. In this case the focus is on both a wider societal issue *and* specific university practices. Even though concern for animal rights is the principal motivation for campaigning, it is specific university practices that are actually in contest. The blurred boundaries between intrinsic and extrinsic forms of educational activism are also apparent in the cases of

institutional conflict on university campuses discussed by Cho, Davis III and Morgan (this volume). In their account of young people's school-based activism, Barrance and Muddiman (2023) exclude cases of youth protest that focus on wider social issues, such as climate change, unless those protests specifically target school policies and practices (akin to the animal rights example discussed above). However, rather than exclude such cases from consideration, it would be more appropriate to view them instead as examples of extrinsic educational activism. The reason being that even in cases where the governing issues are not directly related to education, campaigns conducted by educational actors within institutions such as schools and universities will invariably challenge educational authority, disrupt normal routines and structures, and subvert normative role expectations (especially regarding the status of children and young people as school pupils); as we see, for instance, in protest encampments and occupations on university campuses. They are also likely to provoke institutional responses designed to suppress protest activities. The distinction we have drawn here between intrinsic and extrinsic educational activism is not to be understood as a value distinction. We are not suggesting one is more valuable or authentic than the other. It is a distinction, rather, designed to encourage closer analysis of the phenomenon and the different forms it takes.

Two further points relevant to conceptualising educational activism warrant brief comment here. The first concerns its relationship with the growing body of research on activist pedagogies (e.g., Choudry, 2015; Novelli et al., 2024). Educational activism as we have described it here refers strictly to campaigning in, through, and around education as an institutional field. Understood in this way, it is important not to conflate it with activist pedagogies as an adjacent area of enquiry in which the emphasis is on pedagogical processes *within* activist groups and social movements. Nevertheless, it is of course valuable to attend to the ways that activists learn in and through engaging in activism and through which they develop activist identities. These are themes that are taken up in different ways by Fretwell, Tibbits and Wong, and Young and Wenham in this volume. The second point is that activism, protest and campaigning often occur outside of recognised social movements, and that small-scale, local and less-heralded forms of contentious politics ought to be considered as equally significant as their more high-profile and publicly visible peers. Heidemann (2022: 44) defines social movements as 'relatively organized and enduring networks of contentious collective action that emanate from the grassroots of civil society, and which seek to challenge established relations of power in order to variously realize and/or resist broader-level processes of change.' Yet, in the majority of cases, campaigns conducted in educational contexts by children, parents or schoolteachers, say, are unlikely to persist over longer durations of time or form wider networks of struggle, and hence unlikely to qualify as educational or social movements. Over recent years we have, of course, witnessed the emergence of more widespread educational movements, such as global campaigns to decolonise education or struggles over the marketisation of higher education, but these are exceptions rather than the rule. Educational activism is a phenomenon more likely to be found at the local level, responding to particular grievances in particular contexts. In curating this volume, we are guided by the conviction that attending to educational activism is essential if we are to grasp the fault lines running through contemporary public education systems (and perhaps society more widely), and this means attending not only to wider national and global educational movements, but also to all of the local struggles in which educational actors join together to fight for their rights and defend their interests.

Educational activism: insights from the frontline

The papers comprising this Special Issue address instances of educational activism occurring in a diverse range of educational contexts. Many of the contributions report on examples of intrinsic educational activism in which the focus rests squarely on educational actors, settings

and issues. Others draw attention to examples of extrinsic educational activism, where educational spaces are utilised to contest wider political or social issues. Some also seek to capture how activist identities are shaped in educational contexts. All are united, however, in the value they see in educational activism and in the democratic potential that it holds.

In a refreshing departure from the conventional research article format, the opening paper by Pirie utilises comic-based research methods to present a visually arresting account of young people's direct action to oppose the trans-exclusionary behaviours of school staff in two US middle schools. In documenting the mistreatment faced by trans- and non-binary youth at the schools in question, young people's resistance and rebellion to this mistreatment, and adult efforts to contain and manage their 'unruly' behaviour by channelling it into more docile, acceptable forms, Pirie raises important questions about young people's political agency and the (im)propriety of youth activism when viewed through the lens of adult prerogatives. The article challenges the primacy of adult-centred perspectives and adult policing of 'proper' forms of protest. It argues that engaging in unruly actions, such as holding sit-ins or defacing school property, whilst unpalatable to adults, nevertheless constitute means for expressing agency and resistance. To dismiss such actions as simple troublemaking or delinquent behaviour, Pirie contends, undermines young people's worth as political actors capable of defending their own interests and determining their own priorities. Providing rich insights into the dynamics of youth activism in school contexts this article is illustrative of the tensions and conflicts which can arise when young people exercise agency in ways that upset adult authority.

The contribution by Brockman also focuses on schools, but this time with attention to teachers' protest activities. The paper resurrects relative deprivation theory as a lens for understanding teachers' motivations for engaging in protest actions and the processes through which such actions might be sustained. Focusing on the historically unprecedented wave of teacher-led school strikes that occurred across various states within the US during 2018 and 2019, Brockman draws on qualitative research with teachers to attend to the local contexts out of which protest strikes emerged. Two key findings arise from Brockman's research. First, that relative deprivation, understood here as the belief that other comparable groups are favourably advantaged, primarily figured as a key motivating grievance in cases where teachers were aware or had direct experience of the more advantageous pay and conditions of their peers in neighbouring districts and states. And, secondly, that relative deprivation can serve as an effective framing strategy for sustaining and growing strike actions by helping to build support and consensus on the ground. The paper argues that further attention to the complexities of relative deprivation as a motivation for action and as a framing device, particularly through qualitative methods of inquiry, can help advance research on protest mobilisations.

Cho, Davis III and Morgan examine recent struggles within US universities. In contrast to the accompanying articles in this volume, this paper is purely theoretical in its approach. The authors apply their own novel theoretical framework – Actors, Contexts, Tactics, and Strategies (A.C.T.S.) – to case studies of institutional conflict around critical race theory, higher education governance, and pro-Palestinian activism on university campuses. In so doing, the paper extends the scope of educational activism beyond consideration of public demonstrations, protests, and student activism to encompass wider organising efforts within institutions to transform existing policies, practices, and systems. The authors argue that examining cases of educational activism through the lens of the A.C.T.S. framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of how power functions within institutions and more fine-grained analysis of the different layers of institutional conflict. It also opens up avenues for creatively reimagining higher education institutions and the potential for educational activism to contribute to this transformative work.

Sinha's contribution to the volume also focuses on the field of higher education. In this case attention is drawn to student mobilisations at the University of Delhi in opposition to and defence of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) introduced by India's governing party in 2019. The product of extensive ethnographic fieldwork including participant observation and interviews with student activists, the paper employs Bourdieusian theory to examine the role campus activism plays in the political socialisation of students and in the formation of political capital. It offers commentary on an important period of foment on Indian university campuses, charting the emergence of anti-CAA protests, their repression, and ensuing conflicts and tensions within the student body at the University of Delhi. It also offers valuable insights into the polarisation of higher education in India as a field in which different visions of the nation and nationalism are contested and reproduced.

The paper presented by Sakr and Halls turns our attention towards forms of implicit activism in English early years settings. Based on interviews with baby room leaders, the authors explore the potential for activist leadership in an area of early years provision regarded as relatively low-status and often undervalued and poorly remunerated. The paper focuses in particular on the theme of dissensus and the extent to which it might serve as a platform for the development of activist leadership. In attuning to threads of dissensus in baby room leaders' accounts, Sakr and Halls note disquiet at the lack of recognition and marginalisation of baby rooms within the internal hierarchies of early years settings. They also remark, however, on the relative silence in participants' accounts regarding pay and conditions. Breaking this silence and creating conditions in which members of the workforce feel confident to express dissent and voice their concerns, Sakr and Halls argue, constitutes an essential task for prospective activist leaders in the sector.

The final three papers explore the formation of activist identities and pedagogical processes within educational activism. Tibbits and Wong's contribution centres on the school experiences of youth leaders with a history of engaging in activism and campaigning for social change. As with Pirie's contribution to this volume, the authors seek to displace the 'adultism' often dominant in school settings by focusing directly on young people's voices and their own perspectives on the influence of schools in shaping their political development. Through in-depth interviews with youth leaders reflecting on their prior school experiences, Tibbits and Wong demonstrate that formal learning within classrooms was less significant for young activists' political development than was the opportunity to engage in self-expression and self-exploration by building relationships with teachers and friends in spaces outside the classroom, such as through participation in clubs and extra-curricular activities. Overall, they argue that the young people in the study served as architects of their own political socialization, actively seeking out support within the wider school environment to test and develop their ideas, and that more attention thus needs to be afforded in schools to creating student-driven spaces that can accommodate and enhance this agency.

This theme is further developed in the account offered by Young and Wenham of the formation of activist-learner identities amongst university students. With specific reference to the student rent strikes that occurred on many English university campuses during the Covid-19 lockdowns, the authors draw on Bronwyn Davies' conception of the theory of recognition to theorise the constitution of activist-learner identities. They detail how students increasingly came to view themselves as activists through participating in the campaigns and how learning with and from their fellow students led to greater appreciation of diversity and difference. They also chart how students began to connect their struggles to a more widespread opposition to the marketized model of higher education and how this articulated with broader social justice concerns. Through close engagement with student's accounts, Young and Wenham explore the complex interplay between altruism and self-interest, between individual and collective motivations for protest, and the potential that localised struggles may possess for opening up further avenues for collective action beyond the university campus.

The closing paper to the collection presented by Fretwell explores parental activism in the context of the English education system. Building on the contributions by Tibbits and Wong, and Young and Wenham, Fretwell draws on qualitative data collected from parents engaged in struggles over their children's education to shed light on pedagogical processes within educational activism. The paper attends to processes of knowledge and skills acquisition, political learning and literacy, personal development and transformation, and networking and knowledge-sharing between activists. Its distinctive contribution, however, lies in the insights it offers into parents' motivations for campaigning. Fretwell reports that a key driver was the desire to act as role models and moral exemplars for their children. In this respect, Fretwell observes, there is an intentionally pedagogical dimension to parents' activism. Through demonstrating the importance of standing up for their rights and interests and by modelling ideals of good citizenship, parents sought to impart democratic values to their children and contribute to their development as future citizens to be. This article reminds us that the value of engaging in activism is not dictated solely by achieving (or not) the immediate goals and objectives of campaigns, it can also be found in the forging of friendships and solidarities, in personal and political development, and in the intergenerational transmission of democratic values and ideals.

Conclusion

Throughout this introduction to the Special Issue, we have portrayed education as a battleground where competing forces come into conflict. This is not a mere metaphor. Engaging in activism can be a risky and at times dangerous endeavour. In challenging established authorities and powerful interest groups activists often face repression by the machinery of the state. They risk arrest, intimidation, surveillance, and the very real threat of violence. This also extends to activists campaigning within the field of education. One does not need to search far back into recent history to find cases of educational activists suffering violence in the course of staging their campaigns. Whether that be the shooting of Malala Yousafzai by the Taliban in Afghanistan or the teachers killed during protests in Oaxaca, Mexico. Even in ostensibly more liberal societies like the UK we find not too dissimilar cases, such as the life-threatening injury a young university student, Alfie Meadows, received at the hands of the police during tuition fee protests in 2010. Fortunately, with the exception of Sinha's account of the violence surrounding anti-CAA protests on Indian university campuses, the examples of educational activism recounted in the contributions to this volume have not incurred such extreme consequences. Nevertheless, educational activists still court other risks. Children and young people participating in protests may face exclusion from school, students may be expelled from universities and international students may be deported from their host countries, teachers risk being fired from their jobs, and parents risk fracturing relations with their children's schools or being ostracised by the wider school community. The courage needed to fight battles in the face of such risks is thus something that needs to be recognised and appreciated. This Special Issue offers rich insights into the nature of educational struggles and the breadth and diversity of the contexts in which these struggles are fought. It also signals the promise and potential of educational activism as a form of civic engagement. As editors we hope that this collection will serve as a springboard for future research in the field and encourage further collaboration with campaigners engaged in the pursuit of educational and social justice.

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