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PFI and the Performative Politics of Dissent: lessons for democratic education

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ABSTRACT This article reports on an instance of direct political action undertaken in the form of a boycott of a school canteen. The action was staged by students at the school, following redevelopment through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) project. The young people's experiences of the boycott and its impact on their learning were analysed in the context of a larger, interpretative study exploring the relationships between democratic education and the arts. The research offers some important insights into the nature of young people's political engagement and suggests some important implications for democratic education. Specifically it indicates that – at least in the case of the participants in this study – young people are not politically disengaged but are rather differently engaged, and that such engagement can act as an important resource within a critical approach to democratic education.

Introduction

The increased participation of the private sector in state secondary education has been a key feature of educational policy in the United Kingdom (UK) over the past 25 years, and of the various measures facilitating this shift, the financing of school building and infrastructure through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) has been amongst the most visible. First introduced under the then Conservative government in 1992, the PFI was enthusiastically embraced by New Labour (Flinders, 2005; Shaoul, 2005) and remains an important element of the current government's capital spending on education (Chowdry & Sibieta, 2011). Although in many ways superseded by newer developments such as private sponsorship and 'chains' of academies and free schools, the PFI remains a significant marker of the complex delineation of public and private interests within state education. Ball has described the PFI as 'in some respects the most radical form of privatisation of public services' (2007, p. 44) and one which 'reworks the landscape of the public sector' (2007, p. 47). As such, it provides an interesting focal point for exploring some broader issues about power, politics and democracy as they relate to young people's everyday lives and their experiences of education. Drawing on research carried out between 2007 and 2010 with young people in the south west of England, this article reports on an instance of direct political action triggered by changes wrought by a PFI project. As an example of one specific response to the reconfiguration of state education through private involvement, this instance offers important lessons for democratic education – indicating specifically the significance within democratic education of considering the breadth and extent of young people's actual political engagement in everyday life, as well as its specifically aesthetic dimensions and the ways in which the arts sometimes play a role in this.

Young People's Political Engagement and Democratic Education

Young people's political engagement has come to public attention again recently, as the growth in global protest movements sparked by the financial crisis of 2007-2008 appears to have signalled an

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increased appetite for political activism amongst the young – particularly in terms of participation in direct action. In the UK, the Occupy movement and the student fees protests of 2010 have been amongst the most prominent examples of this apparent revival. Much discussion surrounding this participation has focused on the use of new social media within contemporary forms of protest (see, for example, Gerbaudo, 2012). However there has also been a marked interest in the aesthetic dimensions of these 'new' forms of activism. Hatuka (2012), for example, has explored how imaginative forms of protest reconfigure space, while others have drawn on new social movement (NSM) theory to analyse how performative protest strategies have been used to create images that challenge the dominant discourses of capitalism (Barnard, 2011). The use of NSM to interpret the changing nature of young people's political activism has also reignited debate about the nature of political protest and social movements. One important question in this debate has been the extent to which specific instances of direct action can make an important contribution to more sustained political activism within the new social movements that employ them. Kriesi (1996), for example, has pointed to the questionable life-cycle of single issue politics, and Tarrow (1998) makes an important distinction between singular political acts and the more 'sustained engagement with political opponents' which characterises genuine social movements (1998, as cited in Crossley, 2002, p. 4). However, recent research has highlighted how concrete disputes over specific measures such as student fees have been effective in drawing attention to broader political issues (see, for example, Rheingans & Hollands, 2013).

This renewed interest is particularly pertinent given the anxiety expressed in relation to young people's political participation just over a decade ago, when perceived political apathy amongst young people became an important topic for both public debate and educational policy (Print, 2007). One consequence of this was the establishment of citizenship education as a statutory curriculum subject for secondary school pupils in England and Wales. The focus of this new curriculum subject was the promotion of 'active citizenship' (Crick, 1998). Despite debate over the definition of such citizenship and how best to promote it in schools (see for example, Kerr, 2005; Frazer, 2007), the subject has enjoyed broad cross party and public support. However, it is worth questioning the extent to which concerns about political apathy amongst young people were ever really justified. An alternative, more optimistic, interpretation is that young people's democratic and political participation is merely shifting in nature and changing shape (see for example, Loader, 2007). This interpretation would also fit with broader trends in society as a whole. Research into the nature of citizenship in Britain commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council in 1999 also pointed to a shift in the ways in which people participate in democracy and express their citizenship, but identified no overall decline in participation as such, or in the feelings, beliefs and attitudes associated with citizenship in general (Pattie et al, 2004). In an educational context, research carried out by O'Toole et al (2003) demonstrated that, far from being apathetic about politics, the young people in their study cared deeply about the political issues that affected them but often felt alienated by mainstream politics. Further research by Weller (2007) reflected this, identifying numerous ways in which teenagers contribute to their communities and engage in acts of citizenship.

Such interpretations clearly call into question the way in which citizenship education has been conceived and defined, suggesting that the 'problem' for democratic education may reside not in teaching young people how to become good citizens, but rather in finding ways to provide educational experiences that take into account both the diversity of young people's actual political participation and the reasons behind their apparent mistrust of mainstream politics. This line of argument has been pursued rigorously in the work of Biesta and Lawy (2006) who proposed the concepts of 'citizenship-as-practice' (Lawy & Biesta, 2006, p. 45) and democratic learning or 'learning democracy' (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 75) as ways of re-envisioning what is at stake in democratic education. Rather than teaching young people to become good or 'active' democratic citizens, their work draws on insights from critical pedagogy to propose a view of democratic education as a process of supporting young people in learning from their actual citizenship and experiences of democracy – or the lack of it – in their everyday lives.

The Research

The instance of direct political action discussed in this article is drawn from a research project exploring the relationship between young people's democratic learning and the arts. The research worked with the understanding of democratic learning discussed above, to explore the specific role of young people's arts engagement in this process. Following participation in a gallery education project, five young people took part in the study, which explored the impact over time of their involvement in the project set against their broader experiences of democracy, citizenship and the arts. Building on research that has highlighted the open-ended and dialogical nature of much learning in gallery contexts (Taylor, 2006) and pioneering work on the development of democratic approaches to gallery education – for example the 'young curators' scheme at Tate Liverpool (Sayers, 2011) – this project was explicitly set up by gallery educators to foster democratic ways for young people to work together to create and display art work. While the research focused in part on the impact of this initiative, it was also concerned with the young people's wider experiences in everyday life and how their actions in a variety of contexts contributed to their ongoing democratic learning.

Methodology

The research was carried out as an interpretative study, employing an adapted version of grounded theory based on the work of Charmaz (2003, 2006). As such, it was concerned with the 'construction' rather than 'discovery' of findings (Hodkinson 2008, pp. 91-99) through a process involving layers of analysis and interpretation. Data were gathered via a series of individual interviews taking place at roughly six-month intervals between June 2007 and October 2008. Each of the participants was interviewed at least three times. Interviews were semi-structured, beginning with quite open conversations about the young people's experiences. However, as the research progressed, the interviews took on a more structured nature, focusing on the categories emerging from data analysis. This analysis began right from the beginning of the research and followed the constant comparative method, with emerging categories used to shape and direct further rounds of data collection. In this way, the emerging categories were also shared with the participants. This strategy was adopted partly as an ethical consideration, as a way of keeping participants fully informed of the research as it progressed, but was also employed as a way of adopting a genuinely constructivist approach, in which not only the data but also the analysis and interpretation resulted from interaction between the researcher and participants (Silverman, 2005). Five core categories were constructed from the data: decision making, participation, creativity, identity, and change. Data relating to the boycott of the school canteen fell mainly into the categories of participation and change. The boycott itself was undertaken by the participants as part of a collective action organised through the school council and was staged in response to steep price rises in the canteen following the redevelopment of the school as part of a PFI project. This resulted in the construction company that owned the school also taking over responsibility for the provision of catering services.

Theoretical Framework

The research worked with a distinct theorisation of the relationships amongst democracy, education and the arts, based primarily on the work of Rancière (1999, 2004b, 2006) and Biesta (2006, 2010). Within this framework, democracy was seen as a fluid and dynamic movement, best understood in terms of democratic action or democratic subjectivity, i.e. as something that is performed, or enacted, in specific instances. In Rancière's work, this view is expressed in his claim that democracy, 'is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts' (2006, p. 97), an account which sits within his larger argument about the place of democracy within the history of western politics. For Rancière, there exists – in all political settlements since the original emergence of democracy in ancient Athens – a constant struggle between a 'police' logic which establishes and maintains the stable distribution of roles within the polity according to 'social competencies', and 'politics' which disrupts and unsettles this distribution, insisting instead on the more chaotic (and democratic) rule of 'anyone and everyone' (2006, p. 55). Because this entails the disruption and

redistribution of roles between the private and public spheres, democracy also involves an 'enlarging of the public sphere' (2006, p. 55) by bringing private roles, relations and disputes into the public realm.

Rancière describes how such disruption occurs through specific acts, when people who have no assigned role within the public sphere take seriously their equality with those who do, thus disrupting the police logic. He offers an example from the civil rights movement in the USA to illustrate this, referring to the actions of Rosa Parks – and the bus boycott sparked by her actions in Alabama – as an instance in which the protagonists 'really acted politically, staging the double relation of exclusion and inclusion inscribed in the duality of the human being and the citizen' (Rancière, 2006, p. 61). A crucial point here is that the political subject is supplementary to the two identities of 'human being' and 'citizen', and only becomes subject through the political action of staging the contradiction between them. For Rancière, the dichotomy between the 'citizen' with rights protected in law and the 'human being' stripped bare of those rights in everyday life – traceable back to the distinction made by Burke – is a false one (Rancière, 2004a). Rather, the political actor is one that becomes subject in the action itself and in the space between these two identities. This process of political subjectification is central to Rancière's view of democracy, involving specific disputes over equality which brings to light underlying contradictions inherent in the existing political order. It is also a process that has an aesthetic, or even dramatic, dimension – it 'stages' the tensions and contradictions within the police order in inventive ways. Elsewhere (1999, 2004b) Rancière has referred to the aesthetic dimensions inherent in this process of political subjectification in terms of what it makes visible and possible. This is most clearly expressed in his concept of the 'distribution of the sensible' (2004b, p. 12) and in his claim that 'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (2004b, p. 13). In this text, Rancière also makes a connection between politics and art itself, arguing that both politics and art create 'fictions' (2004b, p. 39) that create 'channels for political subjectivisation' (2004b, p. 40).

When read in conjunction with Biesta's (2006, 2010) work on democratic learning, Rancière's view of the nature of democracy and its aesthetic dimensions allows for a particular account of the role of art and aesthetics within the relationship between democracy and education. Biesta's (2006, 2010) work inverts the relationship between education and democracy, suggesting that instead of viewing education as a means of preparing people for democracy, it might more fruitfully be seen as a process of helping people to learn from their experiences of democracy. Particularly in his (2010) reading of Arendt's work on political existence, we can see how this view of the relationship between education and democracy also rests on a performative understanding of democratic subjectivity. Here, Biesta argues that it is political existence – understood in Arendt's terms as a quality of interaction that is performed in the moment, 'neither before nor after' (Arendt, cited in Biesta, 2010, p. 134), rather than an attribute of individuals – that can act as the starting point for democratic education. If we take a performative understanding of democratic subjectivity as central to democratic learning, Rancière's work illustrates that such performances can also have an aesthetic dimension and can also be related to the arts (for a fuller discussion of this theoretical framework see McDonnell, 2014).

Findings

The findings of the research are presented below, firstly via an analysis of the data relating to the boycott, and secondly via an interpretation of these in light of the theoretical framework. The boycott came to light during the research, through the second round of interviews in the context of a discussion about the school council. One of the participants, Emma, explained how the boycott came about in response to the steep price rises imposed by the catering company, and how the boycott itself represented an exception to her normal experiences of the school council. Subsequent interviews with both Emma and the other participants allowed for a more detailed exploration of the circumstances of the boycott, the young people's experiences of it and its impact on their learning. It became clear that the young people had decided on this course of action following the unwillingness of the company to listen to the students' concerns, as voiced through the school council. The boycott itself was staged as a one day protest and involved the majority of the student

population. It also caused a considerable amount of disruption – with canteen staff expressing their disapproval of the event – and attracted considerable attention in the local press. The young people had varied responses to the nature and impact of the boycott, but for all of them it appeared to be a significant experience that had prompted them to think differently about both the local politics of their school's governance and their own political engagement.

Data Analysis

Data relating to the boycott fell mainly into two core categories – 'participation' and 'change'. Data under the category of 'participation' provide an insight into the nature of the boycott, as experienced by the young people in the study. In discussing the boycott, it became clear that the students were motivated by a sense of injustice at being treated simultaneously as consumers and also as children who existed as a separate somewhat 'public' category, under the care of the state:

> from the beginning when [the company] came into the school when the new school was built the prices had gone up by like, oh I can't remember what it is now, but it was a big amount, especially for us who are like ... and our prices were meant to be ... because obviously we're tax free and as well we're meant to be a lot lower because it's a school sort of thing and like ... but then we had to pay the prices and everyone was like, 'if we we're allowed to go out of school to like Tesco's for our lunch it would be so much cheaper'. (Emma, interview 2)

As is clear from Emma's account, it was not the price rises per se that motivated the students to take action, but rather the fact that neither the premise of being treated as consumers with the right to choose, nor as minors entitled to subsidised meals were taken through to their logical conclusion. This left the students in effect caught between the public and private sphere, in practice a 'captive audience' for the catering company subcontracted to run the canteen. In addition, Emma cited the attitude of the company's staff towards student council representatives as one of the reasons why the boycott took place:

> [The staff] said, "There's nothing we can do about it" and I think they were quite rude to them as well, so ... and then they said, 'well, that's what you end up ... we end up going on strike'. (Emma, interview 2)

The fact that the company did not appear to take the students seriously was thus an important factor in precipitating the boycott. Not only were they not prepared to act on the students' concerns – as voiced through the appropriate democratic channels – but they also did not appear to treat the students with respect. The participants' comments also reflected their perceptions of the school's student council. Whilst the boycott was organised through the student council, this appeared to represent an anomaly in the students' everyday experiences of it:

> Oh I think that's ... I think it's really good because a lot like ... our student council like, everyone's like goes to student council and we sort of, a lot of the time, like our arguments and our ... the things that people point to are like petty like, 'oh, I don't like ...', say it's like the school uniform, it's like – which obviously is important – but it was sort of quite repetitive over the weeks, like the girls' skirts were too short and the boys didn't button their top buttons up if they wore shirts and like things like that, which like, and it was quite nice to have something which was like an actual like sort of really, like more valued point which we could do something about, and you sort of like, that makes it more sort of like a real council, like in the real world, like something which would happen like more of a meaningful point. (Emma, interview 3)

For Emma, the boycott not only represented an exception to her normal experiences of the student council but also seemed to confer it with more political significance and change her views of the council itself. Indeed, the boycott appeared to lead to a number of altered attitudes, views and behaviours amongst the participants. During analysis, the data reflecting these came under the category of 'change'. One of the most obvious changes in the participants' attitudes involved an increased appetite for, and willingness to take part in, direct political action. This is reflected in Craig's comments below, in relation to the boycott:

> I mean I'm all for making a scene about something rather than, you know ... because talking about it, sitting down and talking about it only works for so long and then you have to take

> action. I wouldn't go severe, like hold people hostage until they remove certain rules because that's just stupid but definitely taking protest action is more effective than just talking about it. (Craig, interview 3)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Tommy, although in a less extreme form:

> I do think it was a good idea because it shows them what the students think really because there's not many other ways that you can get, you can prove to them how many other people, like how many people generally want one thing. (Tommy, interview 3)

On a more subtle level, taking part in the boycott also led to an increased ethical awareness for Tommy, particularly in terms of the human impact of the action. Reflecting on whether the boycott was justified or not, he offered the following comments:

> Well I thought it was funny. I saw the dinner ladies get quite stressed out about it and they just didn't find it ... like they just didn't find it the right thing to do or anything and only a couple of people went in and erm everyone else was sort of outside and like having a go at the people who were actually in there because they were still buying things ... . But I don't think there was anything that wrong with it. (Tommy, interview 3)

In Tommy's case, reflecting on the boycott involved developing a new awareness of the ethical implications of the direct action, and forced him to take his own moral stance on the issue. For others the boycott led to an increased awareness of the political circumstances of the school's ownership. This was also the case for Claire, who talked about how seeing representatives of the press barred at the gates of the school drew her attention to the fact the school building and grounds were now owned by a private company:

> Erm, but no it was just so funny because the newspapers came and [the company], who are the people who own it, they wouldn't let them in because they own the school and so there were all these people outside who had been barred out and then everyone was sort of just like stood on the hill. I don't know, it was just the most surreal thing, it was really funny. (Claire, interview 3)

Interestingly, this new awareness was experienced aesthetically. The visual impact of the boycott – the 'surreal' sight of everyone gathered in one place and the press being barred at the gates – led to a new awareness of the circumstances surrounding the ownership of the school. This experience also made Claire aware of the nature of the school community in a new way:

> It was just so strange because it was like literally three quarters of the school just all in the courtyard and there were so many people – I'd never seen like the whole school together as well so it was quite nice how everyone did join in and support it. (Claire, interview 3)

The aesthetic dimensions of the boycott also featured in Emma's reflections and changing attitudes. Considering the effectiveness of the boycott, she considered the kinds of aesthetic or artistic strategies that might have been used:

> In my opinion, it would've been so much more effective if we'd all just like stood or like sat or even like gone into the canteen ... it would have been more effective if everyone had brought packed lunch and everyone had gone into the canteen and sat there in silence it would have had the most effect. (Emma, interview 3)

This consideration of the potential of aesthetic and artistic strategies for political action also appeared to be related to Emma's changing attitudes towards the arts in general, following her involvement in the gallery project. In this context, she had encountered new kinds of artistic practices such as street art and performance art, and her view of what counts as artistic had been expanded:

> I don't know, it's like, it's like different. I suppose there's like always been like a sort of like stereotypical sort of form of art and this like – which is like sort of paintings and that kind of thing – it's just like completely different and you have to like, you look at it and you think like, or well a lot of people would think, 'that isn't art', then it's like, it's nice to sort of, especially if you read about it and like find out like what the artist was thinking and why like ... because when you, if you looked at it straight away, like you don't always think, like you wouldn't always think

> that's a piece of art work but then you sort of like read into it and you think, 'oh yeah, I see why that thing's, what that's representing and like, stuff like that'. (Emma, interview 2)

Interpretation

When interpreted in light of the theoretical framework for the research, it is possible to see how taking part in the boycott was a significant political experience for the young people, one in which they engaged in performances of democratic subjectivity. Particularly in Emma's comments about the way in which the boycott came about, it is clear to see the high political stakes involved in the decision to take action. In fact, when interpreted via Rancière's (1999, 2006) work on the nature of politics and democracy, we can see that the boycott was really a way in which the young people were able to stage a disagreement over a very real dispute and to do so in a way that demonstrated their equality with those who had power over decisions affecting their daily experiences of school. What is perhaps most telling here is that the boycott came about not only, or even primarily, because of the rise in prices, but rather because the students experienced a sense of injustice at being treated as both consumers and children but paradoxically enjoying the benefits of neither status, and at what they perceived as being spoken down to by the catering staff. In other words, the boycott was not primarily an economic dispute over money but rather a political dispute over the students' status as equal political beings caught up in a larger conflict between public and private interests. In turn, this dispute allowed them to emerge as real political actors by staging the contradictions that affected their lives.

As well as being a significant political experience, the boycott was also a significant educational experience for the young people. The data show how the boycott impacted on the young people's attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. In some cases this was quite straightforward; Craig, for example, had come to an understanding that the established channels of democratic expression open to him were often ineffective, and he had acquired a greater willingness to take part in direct action. For others, the boycott had afforded a shift in perception and a new awareness of the political realities that affected their lives. This was the case for Claire, for whom the boycott exposed dormant realities about the ownership and governance of her school. Clearly, these examples of learning are also examples of 'political' or 'democratic' learning in that they constitute changes in the way the young people felt, and behaved in relation to their identity as political actors and the political circumstances of their lives. The data also offer important insights into the nature of such democratic learning, illustrating that this was often a disruptive and unsettling process for the young people. This is clear in Claire's account of the way the boycott literally reshaped her view of reality, provoking a 'surreal' and 'bizarre' situation. It is also evident in Tommy's remarks about the way the boycott affected the canteen staff. Here it is clear to see that the boycott unsettled the young people's taken for granted assumptions and challenged them to think anew for themselves about the causes of the boycott and its justification. In Tommy's case this involved recognising an ethical dilemma, and forced him to take a moral stance.

Finally, the data offer an insight into the ways in which both the political experience of taking part in the boycott and the educational experience of learning from it also involved an aesthetic dimension. Claire's comments perhaps demonstrate this most clearly; the experience of taking part in the boycott literally made her 'see' things in a new way, visually highlighting the reality of the school's ownership and the impact of the students' actions. This gives an illustration in action of what Rancière means in arguing that political subjectification (and therefore democratic politics) causes a rupture in the 'distribution of the sensible' (2004b, p. 12) and always involves an aesthetic dimension in what is makes visible, doable and possible. Emma's comments about the aesthetic impact of the boycott further illuminate the way in which the educational experience of the boycott involved an aesthetic dimension. In Emma's case it also illustrates a growing awareness of the ways in which the aesthetic dimensions of political action can be harnessed through the use of artistic strategies.

Discussion

The findings support existing research (see for example, O'Toole et al, 2003; Pattie et al, 2004; Weller, 2007) and interpretations (e.g. Loader, 2007) about the changing nature of young people's political participation, and the trend away from mainstream politics towards more diverse forms of democratic and political engagement. They also offer new insights into the deeply political nature of such forms of participation, in the broadest, macro-political sense. Interpreted in terms of Rancière's (1999, 2006) view of democracy as an unpredictable practice that stages the contradictions and tensions inherent in the given political distribution via a claim for equality, the research indicates how this small scale boycott over a single issue was in fact a very significant political act. In effect, the boycott staged the contradiction between public and private 'logics' of education (to appropriate Rancière's terminology, 2006, p. 55) in a dramatic way. At least in this instance, a seemingly minor and economically driven dispute over a specific and local issue in fact went to the heart of perhaps the biggest political question of all – what belongs in the private sphere and what belongs in the public. As a result, the research indicates the potential of single-issue politics, and singular political actions, for exposing broader concerns. In this sense, it supports recent research into contemporary examples of political protest (see, for example, Rheingans & Hollands, 2013) and suggests implications which run contrary to fears that such forms of participation remain limited in their potential to tackle the 'big' political questions (Tarrow, cited in Crossley, 2002). The research serves as a reminder that deeply political questions relating to 'larger' issues of power, governance, and democratic voice, are in fact often exposed through local disputes over small-scale concrete issues.

The research also suggests that assumed antagonisms between direct action and mainstream politics might be exaggerated, and that within the broader trend of a movement towards more direct forms of political participation (Pattie et al, 2004), mainstream political fora still have their place. Despite an open frustration with, and disappointment in, the student council, this was nevertheless used by the students as a forum through which to initiate and organise the boycott. As a result, the council took on a different status and meaning for some of the young people, as evident in Emma's remarks about it becoming 'more of sort of a real council, like in the real world'. Whilst favouring direct action, the young people were prepared to make use of mainstream political channels in order to bring their action into effect. The boycott reminds us therefore that the agency of political subjects, and the force of the political disputes they are involved in, are often more important than the nature of democratic structures and practices in determining how, and to what end, they will be put to use. Rancière's understanding of a disruptive democratic politics, enacted in specific claims to equality, is illustrative here. In essence, the young people took seriously their equality as political actors within the governing structures of the school, despite the fact that such formal channels had, in their view, proved unproductive in the past. In doing so they made a claim to equality within the given distribution of roles and places within their immediate political environment, and did so in a way that resulted in their own political subjectification, becoming real political actors and bringing new political realities to light.

As well as illuminating some of the dynamics of young people's democratic and political participation, the research also offers important insights into the educational dimensions of young people's experience of the boycott. Building on Biesta and Lawy's (2006) concept of democratic learning as a process of learning from experiences of democratic action – understood in terms of the occurrence of democratic subjectivity – the findings also indicate the nature of such learning as a risky and precarious process involving a great deal of disruption. For the young people in the study, this worked most obviously at the levels of ethics and aesthetics. As Tommy's comments about the way in which the boycott impacted on the canteen staff indicates, this provoked an ethical dilemma which required him to carefully examine his own views on the extent to which such direct political action was ethically viable and to come to his own stance on this issue. In performing his own political subjectivity, Tommy was made aware of the potentially damaging impact of this on others and was required to develop a new understanding of the ethical implications of his own actions.

For Claire and Emma, this disruptive element of democratic subjectivity – and the way they learned from it – was experienced in aesthetic terms. The visually unsettling experience of seeing 'the whole school' gathered together and the press being barred at the gates was an educational

experience for Claire, at once both disruptive and enlightening. This physically and visually jarring experience led Claire to an increased political awareness of the delineations of power as they affected her own school and her own life. Building on Rancière's understanding of moments of political subjectification (and therefore of democratic subjectivity) being disruptive at an aesthetic level – insofar as they create a rupture in the distribution of the sensible – Claire's experiences illustrate how this aesthetic dimension of political subjectification can be experienced. The research also indicates that the young people's experiences of taking part in a gallery education project had an impact on their democratic learning, in the sense that the new insights into art and arts participation afforded by the project appeared to have an influence on the ways in which the young people interpreted the boycott. For Emma, this involved a reflection on the potential use of aesthetic and 'artistic' strategies within political protest. In this way, the research highlights the role of art itself in democratic learning.

Implications

The research carries some important implications for educational practice. Firstly, the findings imply that democratic education ought to pay attention to young people's actual experiences of democracy and citizenship, and that direct action over single issues are an important part of this. In this sense, the trend towards more diffuse forms of political participation outside of mainstream channels (Pattie et al, 2004) is something that might be harnessed positively, as also implied by O'Toole et al's (2003) research. In addition, it implies that such actual experiences of democracy, whilst local and embedded in the day to day lives of young people, are also strongly bound up with broader political questions, and that lived experiences in which the clash between public and private has a real impact on people's experiences can be an important catalyst for democratic action. In this instance, changes wrought by the PFI, involving a significant blurring of the boundaries between public and private within state education, acted as just such a catalyst.

Furthermore, the research indicates that in paying attention to these diverse forms of political action, democratic education might also usefully take account of the role of aesthetics and the arts in young people's political engagement. This is not to advocate the kinds of instrumentalist approaches to arts education and citizenship that have been prevalent over the past 15 years, in which the arts are seen as a way of solving the problems of social cohesion and for promoting a certain kind of democratic citizenship (see McDonnell, 2011 for a discussion of this trend). Rather, this implication has more to do with a recognition of the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of the current and 'new' forms of political protest (see for example, Mouffe, 2007; Hatuka, 2012) that make up young people's actual experiences of democratic participation. In essence, these implications reiterate the shift in focus from teaching democratic citizenship to encouraging young people to learn from their actual experiences of democracy (or the lack of it) in their everyday lives, as argued by Biesta and Lawy (2006). What this research contributes to this account in particular is a recognition of the risky, disruptive, and ethically demanding nature of such learning, as well as its aesthetic dimensions and the role of young people's wider engagement with the arts in this process.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the ways in which a specific, local instance of direct action prompted by changes wrought by a PFI project involved young people in a very real dispute over the political conditions affecting their everyday experiences of education. It has illustrated the value of such instances within young people's democratic learning and highlighted the nature of such learning as an aesthetic experience in which the arts also play a role. This empirical picture adds texture and substance to the conceptualistion of the relationships amongst democracy, education and the arts outlined in the theoretical framework for the research. It also entails important implications for democratic education. In this article, I hope to have shown that very real and specific disputes related to the actual quality of policy and power structures as experienced in everyday life can constitute important political acts and play a significant role within young people's democratic education. The PFI is only one policy amongst many, and one which (though its financial legacy persists) has been superseded by newer political developments. However, the complex and

controversial delineation between the private and public that it stands for continues to be an important feature of state education in the UK. This article offers an indication that, far from being passive about such political realities, young people can and do respond to these in a manner which allows them to enact their own political subjectivity in important ways. Not only is this an important insight about young people's political engagement but also about their education as citizens.

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