

CHILDREN’S ACTIVISM AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: EXPLORING DIGITAL POLITICAL ACTION AS PEDAGOGY IN DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

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Abstract: In the last decade, emerging digital technologies have created spaces for youth-led activism to flourish across the world. These spaces have facilitated civic engagement and bottom-up political participation from children and young people that are grounded in their specific interests and needs. Since the participatory practices granted by digital activism have been at the core of how younger generations are fighting for and advancing social change, it is essential for development education (DE) to explore the pedagogical possibilities of this particular type of participation. This article analyses youth-led mobilisations in Brazil connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their corresponding social media activity as a way to explore digital activism experiences and practices. The mobilisation is the Brazilian school occupations under the hashtag #OccupaTudo and #EscolasEmLuta that address SDG 4 Quality Education. Through a digital ethnography that explores the social media discussions associated with this movement and what can be perceived as the lack of long term impact, the article demonstrates the relevance of political action as a pedagogy and a tool for teaching children and young people about their rights, how to uphold them and how to overcome existing barriers for their civic engagement and participation. Building upon Hannah Arendt’s theory of action, the article proposes an approach to digital political action as pedagogy and not only as an expected outcome for development education.

Key words: Children Human Rights Defenders; Children’s Activism; Climate Action; Digital Activism; Social Movements; Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

Development education (DE) seeks to promote social change towards a more just, fair and sustainable world through the empowerment, engagement and participation of individuals and communities. The four principles of DE as proposed by Bourn (2015) are: a global outlook; the recognition of power and inequality in the world; the belief in social justice and equity; and the commitment

to reflection, dialogue and transformation. DE fosters transformation of both the individual and the world ‘with which and in which they find themselves’ (Freire, 2005: 83). Action is an essential element for DE and is the core expected outcome of teaching and learning processes. As such, it unifies the diversity of approaches and stakeholders in this field (McCloskey, 2016).

Action for global social change has been significantly impacted by the emergence of a participatory culture challenging traditional forms of civic engagement and political participation (Jenkins et al., 2016). Digital technologies have created new spaces for activism that offer novel and inclusive ways to advocate for social change favouring actions in particular among individuals and groups often marginalised (Allen and Light, 2015; Kahne, Middaugh and Allen, 2014; Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023). These new spaces have been particularly relevant for children and how they exercise their fundamental human rights, including their right to participate, be heard and engage in public deliberation and influence decision-making. Digital spaces have facilitated unprecedented civic engagement and bottom-up political participation from children and young people leading to an activism that is deeply grounded in their specific interests and needs (Martínez Sainz et al., 2020). These spaces have not only afforded new opportunities for children and young people, they also pose risks and challenge to their rights, safety and wellbeing (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Since the participatory practices granted by digital activism have been at the core of how younger generations are fighting for and advancing social change, it becomes essential for DE to explore the pedagogical possibilities of digital spaces and the opportunities they create to advance transformative political participation. Deepening our understanding of digital activism among children and young people can help researchers and practitioners in the field of DE to create a responsive and child-centred blueprint for the field to move forward.

Children’s participatory rights and digital activism

Children, understood as those under 18 years old as stated in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), have been involved historically in protests and social movements around the world. Their involvement in social movements challenges key assumptions about power, children’s capacity and their perceived political passivity (Taft, 2019). Children’s rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are key for their political participation and civic

engagement because it provides them with effective channels for political participation in response to their exclusion from traditional mechanisms such as voting or forming political organisations. Children’s rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are recognised in Article 15 of the UNCRC (Ibid.) which states that:

“States Parties recognise the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.

No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interest of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”.

The effective exercise of these rights depends on the realisation of other children’s rights including the foundational right to non-discrimination (article 2), the right to express views and have them taken seriously (article 12), the right to be free from harm (article 19) and the right to recognise their best interests and evolving capacities (articles 3 and 5) (Hanna and Martinez Sainz, forthcoming). The full realisation of these rights requires not only the facilitation but also the implementation of measures that ensure children have the means and space to exercise their rights safely (Lundy, 2020). Their right to assembly allows them to effectively express their opinions, raise their voice on matters that affect them, successfully influence policy-makers and impact the political, economic and cultural landscape. In this sense, peaceful assembly not only empowers children at an individual level but also strengthens their collective capacity for social change despite the vulnerable status they have due to the lack of full legal capacity or political and economic power.

Children and young people have been traditionally marginalised and excluded from public debates and in many cases their participation has been limited to consultations or confined to narrowed definitions of what counts as active civic and political engagement (Collin, 2015). Through digital technologies, they have crafted non-conventional and new forms of civic engagement in order

to amplify their voices in public debates, influence policy and demand social change through active political participation in digital environments (Collin, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2016; Martínez Sainz et al., 2020). Digital technologies have redefined children’s political participation by enabling them to exercise rights and expanding their repertoire of citizenship practices, as a wide array of civic and political actions become available to them. Through digital technologies children can access and share information and engage in political discussions as well as taking part in campaigns and protests (Livingstone et al., 2019). Xenos et al. (2014) argue that social media offers children and young people a channel for political participation, and the expressive capacities to turn non-political methods into effective tools for engaging in political life (Theocharis, 2015; Cho et al., 2020). These digital spaces work as an educational environment for experiential learning of rights (Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023), a laboratory where they can create new forms of political action and try and test their own civic competencies (Jenkins et al., 2016). Digital technologies counteract the marginalisation of children and young people from public decision-making in a threefold way: providing them with the information needed, developing their civic skills and making accessible the tools to demand actions and disrupt political landscapes.

However, children face significant barriers to their right to peaceful assembly not only as a result of discrimination due to their age, but also from challenges that digital technologies have created for the enjoyment and protection of this right (Child Rights Connect, 2018; Hanna and Martínez Sainz, Forthcoming. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has noted, digital technologies have opened new spaces and opportunities for peaceful assembly and association but these have also created new risks and threats to this right. As stated in the report:

“By serving both as tools through which these rights can be exercised ‘offline’ and as spaces where individuals can actively form online assemblies and associations, digital technologies have vastly expanded the capacities of individuals and civil society groups to organize and mobilize, to advance human rights and to innovate for social change” (UN Human Rights Council, 2019).

Even though children have access to these tools and digital spaces to participate civically and politically either online or offline, the extent to which they can fully exercise their rights thanks to these technologies depends on multiple factors, from material conditions and access to the technologies (Joyce, 2010), to their digital literacy and networks of support that allow them to effectively use the technologies to exercise their participatory rights (Allen and Light, 2015; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023). So exploring digital activism becomes key to understand how children exercise their rights, how they participate in public debates, influence agendas and demand action from government and organisations. These demands are associated with political, economic and social change towards a more just and sustainable world that they want to grow up in.

Sustainable development and political action

Child-led activism, from concrete actions to protests or larger mobilisations, demonstrates that despite not being the generation with more responsibility to bear for the social, political and environmental problems of our times, children are not powerless witnesses (Kavanagh, Waldron and Mallon, 2021). On the contrary, they act as active agents of change and as dynamic catalysts for social transformation (Taft, 2019; Trott, 2021). Their involvement in activism, including digital activism, is rooted in their interests, needs and concerns on relevant matters both today and in the future, and these matters are strongly connected to the idea of a sustainable development. The idea of sustainable development was first presented in international policy documents in 1987 as part of the *Brundtland Report*, titled 'Our Common Future', which acknowledged the interconnection of ecological, economic and social systems (Sinakou, Boeve-de Pauw and Van Petegem, 2019). A comprehensive conceptualisation of sustainable development includes three pillars of sustainable development: environment, society and economy. Such a conceptualisation is guided by the aim to create policies and practices that allow us to meet the needs of present and future generations. The most widely accepted conceptualisation of and implementation plan for sustainable development is in the document *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015). Agenda 2030 comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to combat poverty and inequality, protecting the environment, and facilitating sustainable economies and peaceful societies. Each of the SDGs has targets that delimit the means of its implementation, and the emphasis is on the integration

and indivisibility of goals and targets based on the pillars of sustainable development pillars (Sinakou et al., 2019).

Even though Agenda 2030 has been key in advancing sustainable development, the SDGs represent a top-down implementation plan to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation through the development of policies. As de Man (2019) argues, the widespread scope of the SDGs results in severe difficulties to being effectively monitored and measured. Another criticism of the SDGs is their top-down approach that prioritises the decision-making of governments and policy-makers rather than focusing on the concerns of people that the policies directly impact and ignoring or dismissing political aspects and local conditions for implementation (Reuter, 2023). Because of all the interactions and interconnections between social, natural and economic systems, the SDGs as an international agenda cannot and should not replace direct political action at the grassroots level.

Hannah Arendt's theory of action

Hannah Arendt's theory of action (1958) is helpful to understand the value and significance of political action and its inherent transformative power. Arendt's proposal of political action is developed as part of her larger project on analysing human activities, including contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) and active life (*vita activa*) and how these have changed through time. She develops a framework distinguishing two broad categories: *thinking* from *doing*. Within *doing* she further differentiates labour (cyclical activities directed to meet biological human needs) from work (time-bounded activity that produces long-lasting artefacts) and action (means to disclose our individuality and uniqueness). For Arendt, action, unlike labour and work, constitutes an essential part of the human condition, that is of living a fully human life (Parekh, 2008). Because action is a way in which individuals can disclose themselves to others and form human relationships, action serves to affirm our human nature but it also emphasises our human capacity to be free, spontaneous, be creative, start something new or unexpected (Kateb, 2000).

Building from Arendt's conceptualisation of action, it is possible to understand political action in the public domain as a process that informs and shapes the construction of one's identity and individuality. Political action is necessary to develop all aspects of individual identity that are only possible in a

social context, but becomes a unique individual contribution towards society. Due to its inherent value to the individual and the role it plays in constructing individuality and identity, political action is irreplaceable as a process of growth as individuals and as a process of civic engagement to transform societies. Since the action is both constructed by and imprinted with one's identity, the absence of a single individual in the public domain represents a loss for society as a whole since no one else can replace the political actions of someone else. By looking at digital activism using this approach to political action, it is possible to articulate the value of active citizenship and civic engagement stressing the inherent transformative power of action for the individual and not only for the world where it happens.

Research design/materials and methods

This article explores children's digital activism in relation to the SDGs through analysis of child-led mobilisations and their corresponding social media discussions. The mobilisation is linked to SDG 4 quality education. A content analysis of social media data was conducted using the corresponding hashtags of the mobilisation to identify and collect relevant data. This approach to data collection and analysis has gained significant acceptance in the recent years and is now commonly used in qualitative research involving social media (Snelson, 2016). The data collected was publicly available and encompassed relevant text, images, photographs and videos, from the In-Real-Life (IRL) mobilisation such as speeches given during the mobilisations and recorded for social media or records of the placards shared in social media, to the online activity associated with the mobilisation such as media posts, documentaries and infographics. Data was collected from three main social media applications: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Even though other platforms are considered also relevant to explore digital activism, for example WhatsApp (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015), data from this social media application was not considered due to its private nature. Similarly, data from other social media platforms with a significant number of users aged under 18, such as Snapchat, was not collected due to its ephemeral nature and its lack of permanent record. Due to ethical concerns particularly regarding anonymity and data privacy (Williams and Burnap, 2017), this article paraphrased social media posts to avoid identification of individuals and reports mostly on identified patterns rather than individual accounts.

The fight for quality education - #OccupaTudo

The case study addresses the school occupations in Brazil and mobilisations organised to support them under the hashtag *#OccupaTudo* and *#EscolasEmLuta* that address SDG4 Quality Education. Between 2015 and 2016, over 1,100 secondary schools and 200 Universities were occupied across different states in Brazil as a way to denounce cuts in education and school spending as well as modifications to curriculum without student consultation and overcrowded classrooms. Agenda 2030 establishes quality education as one of the SDGs with the aim to ensure inclusive and equitable quality of education for all by 2030. 'Quality education' as an SDG must ensure, among other things: free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education (target 4.1), equal access to all levels of education (targets 4.2 and 4.5), an education that promotes sustainable development, gender equality and human rights (target 4.7) and educational environments that are safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective (target 4.a).

However, in Brazil, the reality of the educational system falls well short of the targets of Agenda 2030, with low performance, low completion and high out-of-school rates, and accumulated inequalities and barriers to access education (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, the violence experienced outside schools has a significant impact on students' educational attainment (Koppensteiner and Menezes, 2019). It is in this context of inequality and lack of educational opportunities that the schools' occupation in 2015 - 2016 took place. In late 2015, as a result of austerity measures and budget cuts, the government of the State of Sao Paulo announced that almost one hundred schools would close, sending students to schools far away from their homes and the ratio of students per classroom would increase in already overcrowded classrooms. These measures were part of the State's law to streamline and maximise the use of resources in education; however, the measures were decided without consultation with teachers, parents or students and would affect more than 300,000 students. After several protests by teachers' unions and students, a group of students decided to occupy the first school on 9 November 2015, with nearly one hundred school occupations a week later. The *#OccupaTudo* and *#EscolasEmLuta* movements were a direct response to these government measures, seeking not only to stop the school closures, but also challenge violent teaching approaches, demanding the improvement of school infrastructure and learning conditions, and protesting against new proposed curricular structures that would cause arts, humanities and social sciences subjects to disappear. In the occupations, students

used social media not only as communication tools but as collaborative spaces to organise activities within and beyond the schools they were occupying from assemblies to protests and related events (Klein, Macedo and Andrade, 2016; Lemos and Cunha, 2018; Cunha Jr and Ferreira Lemos, 2016).

The digital content of these two movements, the *#OccupaTudo* and *#EscolasEmLuta*, showed that social media was also used as a learning space for children to learn about their rights, in particular, their right to protest and freedom of assembly. Through their digital activism they were able to develop a children's rights education (CRE) that was self-directed, that responded to their specific needs and driven towards action. As explained by children taking part in the occupations, the knowledge and skills needed to carry out a school occupation cannot be found in the official curriculum; they had to look for the information themselves, they had to identify relevant sources and analyse the content so they could adapt the information to their own context.

“A student found a news story about the Penguins' Revolution in Chile. Nobody knew what an occupation was. So we learned what occupying meant and we decided to go ahead and do it” (Student in Diadema, Sao Paulo, interviewed by Alegria and Moresco, 2017).

“When we decided to take to the streets, I said: Let's go [...]. What shall we take there? Whistles, horns, balloons... We didn't know what to take. How to march in the streets? It was like... google it: How to plan a street protest?” (Student in Sao Paulo interviewed by Alonso and Colombini, 2016).

Children's digital activism in this movement helped them to learn their rights and how to take political action, accessing knowledge about civic disobedience and disruption that is not part of the formal curriculum. As a result of the mobilisation and including its digital component, they created a new youth-led curriculum with peer-learning workshops and lectures on the topics they decided mattered (racism, gender equality, music and arts).

“You learn more about politics in a week of occupying a school than in years of regular classes [...] Now young people know they can force

change” (Student in Rio de Janeiro interviewed by Prengaman and Dilorenzo, 2016).

Five years after the school occupations, it has been announced that the local government in Sao Paulo will start the restructuring of schools and classes that will see the closure of three hundred classes across state schools. Over two-thirds of the State will be affected with classes being resized and students being transferred, following the 2016 resolution (Quaresma, 2023). This political decision raises important questions about the long-term impact of the occupations and the movement itself, since one of the main goals of *#EscolasEmLuta* was to fight against lack of consultation in education and overcrowded classrooms. Many of the advances the movement achieved in terms of quality of education as framed in the SDGs have been halted while others have been reversed by the current administrations. Thus, even though the role of digital spaces as tools for political action before, during and after the occupations has been demonstrated (Romancini and Castilho, 2017; Cunha Jr and Ferreira Lemos, 2016), the lack of social change calls into question the significance of such political action and digital activism in general. It becomes necessary to re-think what counts as transformative when discussing political action, and its implications for development education.

Concluding discussion

Digital spaces allowed participants of the *#EscolasEmLuta* movement to gain the knowledge and develop the skills they needed to occupy their schools, corroborating evidence from previous research on other grassroots social movements about the role these spaces play as educational environments for children’s participatory rights (Martínez Sainz and Hanna, 2023). The findings show that the participatory practices afforded in these digital spaces not only promote children’s voices in public debates but foster their capacity for political action through collective mobilisations as much as individual activities. The digital spaces generate spaces and channels for horizontal political actions - without specific hierarchies - that shift power dynamics, which is key for children’s civic engagement as it gives them the possibility of influencing public debate and direct political decision-making that affects them (Jenkins et al., 2009). As such, digital activism becomes key to challenge political exclusion based on adult-centric views of children and young people’s development, which are associated with negative assumptions about their lack of knowledge and capacity to make

decisions and act as active agents in their own lives, or ‘negative assumptions and valuations about [...] their inadequate knowledge or their capacity to make decisions regarding their own lives’ (De Jong and Love, 2016: 348). Thus, digital technologies are key to empowering children and adolescents to claim their rights to participate in civic, social and political matters that affect them and to counter the marginalisation and powerlessness they encounter in their everyday lives.

In the digital spaces, children have found a space ‘to express resistance and imagine a new reality’ (Simmons, 2019: 109). Digital activism allows them to organise collective actions for their own benefit and that of their communities. Digital technologies give children and adolescents unprecedented access to relevant information to identify problems that affect them and their environment, see possible solutions and even contact relevant actors to generate them. With these possibilities, they can have an active role in the search for political and social solutions that take into account their interests and needs as well as the particular circumstances of their contexts. By offering multiple possibilities for action and facilitating the means to do so, digital activism not only democratises politics but also guarantees that children and young people exercise their right to participation. It is in the experience of exercising their rights and being politically active ‘in their own terms’, based on their interests and responding to their specific concerns, that the importance of digital activism proves to be twofold. While the findings of *#EscolasEmLuta* occupations corroborate the relevance of digital spaces as educational environments for children’s rights and citizenship, they also shed light on the possibilities of digital activism as a pedagogy. Pedagogy encompasses the knowledge, values, beliefs and practices that guide processes of teaching and shape relationships with learners. Pedagogy focuses on what is taught and learnt, how it is done and why.

Digital activism as pedagogy highlights how the new ways in which children and young people participate politically shapes their learning and the digital activism then becomes a laboratory to test their own skills and competencies. Fostering digital activism as pedagogy recognises the extrinsic as well as intrinsic value of political action for children and adolescents to develop their civic knowledge and skills such as communication, deliberation, collaboration and decision-making. The extrinsic value of digital activism is evident in the social, cultural and political transformations that occur as a result of their political actions; however, it is important to recognise there is value in

those actions even in the cases when the struggles continue, the outcomes of social movements are not the ones expected or when social change simply does not happen. In these cases, digital activism still has an extrinsic value as the means that allows individuals to develop their knowledge and skills to participate, that raises their awareness and motivates them to act. At the same time, following Arendt's theory of action, it is possible to emphasise the intrinsic value of digital activism as pedagogy as the political actions have a role shaping individuals' values, and identity through. In this sense, political action makes us more human while allowing us to imprint our own humanity and individuality in the efforts we carry out to create a more just and sustainable world. For DE, thinking about political action as pedagogy matters, not only because of the concerns in the field for a distinctive pedagogy (Bourn, 2015), but also because it embeds action not only as an outcome but as a guiding principle for the overall educational process.

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