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Youth worldlessness and civic participation online and at school: Exploring Arendt's philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the possible contribution that thinking with Arendt can bring to understanding the nuances of school-aged young people's civic participation. Using Arendt's work on responsibility, political presence and the notion of worldlessness, this paper will explore how young people's social media interactions can serve as a way to foster a more critical sense of civic participation and political agency in education. This paper comprises three main sections. Firstly, there is a critical discussion on how the notion of 'public sphere' may help to conceptualise school as an important site for youth political and civic participation and engagement, even when Arendt's position in education is that the school should not be touched by politics, in this way the paper uses Arendt to think against Arendt to position the school as a 'space of appearance'. Secondly, the notion of what I term in this paper youth worldlessness is developed by using Arendt's (2018) theory to frame for understanding the everyday exclusions and displacements experienced by research participants and how citizenship education struggles to serve as an outlet for them. Thirdly, the paper analyses the role of young people's social media engagements by examining data from a qualitative study with British young people, ranging from 15 to 18 years of age.

Introduction

Young people have been portrayed as politically disconnected or disengaged (Janmaat & Hoskins, 2022; Twenge et al., 2012), too individualistic and inactive in their citizenship (UNICEF, 2020). Through problematic labels, such as, 'millennials' and 'generation me', young people have been constructed as disaffected, increasingly aloof and not up to the task of reversing the declining trends in political citizenship (Twenge, 2013). As a result, young people's participation is expected to emulate patterns of engagement that correspond to past generations. Active citizenship continues to be constructed as chiefly enacted through the act of voting, volunteering, participation in local community groups and seeking change through appropriate dialogue with elected representatives,

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such as elected Members of Parliament (MP) or local councillors. Contrary to this existing perception, alternative acts of citizenship and political engagement should be recognised and understood, perhaps beyond the regulatory norms and traditional channels of communication which earlier generations used. Whilst the role of schools has been deemed crucial for strengthening citizenship and social participation (Brown, 2012; Davies, 2014); there are still considerable gaps in school provisions for citizenship education (Arthur et al., 2008).

This paper showcases qualitative data gathered with school-aged young people in and out of citizenship classes to make sense of how they perceive their civic participation in schools. The paper contends that a re-imagining of citizenship in the world of schooling through Arendt's theory throws the spotlight on contemporary issues around civic participation in schools, where the rigidity of school cultures makes schools very resistant to change. Schools struggle to create an environment where a renewed sense of citizenship can flourish. Therefore, the understanding of young people's acts of citizenship needs to be widened, particularly when the subject of citizenship faces a precarious future in schools in the UK, with a decline in subject specialists and its curriculum characterised by an historical under-development of subject knowledge (Jerome & Lalor, 2020).

With social media becoming ubiquitous in young people's lives, this paper explores how young people's social media engagements can be a constitutive aspect to understand citizenship engagements in schools and help their civic participation. Social media platforms have influenced how young people interact with their environment, how they understand emerging issues and how they learn about current affairs. Through qualitative data collected during observation and interviews focusing on the provision of citizenship as a subject in schools, this paper aims to create an understanding of how young people are active in their civic engagements in more nuanced ways. Citizenship as a subject is presented as more than learning about the act of voting, but rather takes into consideration the complex connectedness and the fabric of human relations emerging from the use of digital technologies by young people. Far from disconnected, or apathetic towards civic participation, young people appear concerned about their environment, drawing from their online support networks, actively learning about issues; with their engagements having the potential to 'broaden our view of democracy'.

Arendt's Philosophy, Citizenship and Schooling as a 'Space of Appearance'

Arendt is a leading thinker in modern conceptions of political action. Arendt argues that political life is essential for human existence. Guided by classical political experience as discussed by Aristotle, Arendt describes a political life as those fulfilling actions which reveal to our equals our identity, in a public world. However, Arendt (2018) was also concerned with how our sense of political action was constantly undermined by pervasive bureaucracies and government administrations that control and divide political action. In this paper, using selected Arendtian notions I outline responses to two main questions: how can Arendt's theory help make sense of the disaffection experienced by the young people in their educational lives? And how do young people seek to re-balance the school's exertions of power?

Arendt contended that for a revival of citizenship in modern societies it was important to create various 'spaces of appearance' where the 'common world' could be negotiated; the space of appearance is defined as a context in which 'everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity … as it constitutes reality' (2018, p. 50). I use Arendt's philosophy to argue that schools resemble a 'space of appearance' par excellence. Schools as sites can offer a very good contextual representation of a space of appearance, since schools, as part of the public realm, contain several expressions of visible conduct – abiding to rules, administering rewards and punishments, developing a collective identity, amongst others – which provides us with a reference point and confirms our common sense of reality. Schools are equally an important part of what Arendt refers to as the 'public realm' (Arendt, 2018, p. 51) and a place where one learns how to appear to others as a citizen. Yet, Arendt was also fervently opposed to the idea of school as a site for political activity: that

> we must decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life, in order to apply to it alone a concept of authority and an attitude toward the past which are appropriate to it but have no general validity and must not claim a general validity in the world of grown-ups. (Arendt, 2006, p. 192)

The paper uses Arendt to think against Arendt, arguing that schools are public instances which constitute a very important space of appearance even when Arendt's work in her essay the *Crisis of Education* (2006) points to schools as needing to remain apolitical places, which is a very idealistic position since even when schools might seem unbiased politically, they function according to a political agenda.

Some of the problems surrounding young people's engagement with citizenship have been outlined by Biesta et al. (2009, p. 6) as caused by how the subject is understood through a 'deficit model' approach where young people are 'citizens in the making'. Additionally, Biesta et al. (2009) argue that young people are discussed as needing 'skills and knowledge', and therefore, the approach individualises young people, constructing them as lacking in their dispositions to become 'good citizens'; but perhaps the salient issue is how civic participation is 'reduced to an outcome' (pp. 6–7). Instead, what is needed is an understanding that goes beyond knowledge and skills, or simple curricular change to include lively debate explorations of how 'young people actually learn democratic citizenship through their participation in the communities and practices that make up their everyday lives' (Biesta et al., 2009, p. 8). Based on this analysis, the following sections discuss how young people transitioned from their youth worldlessness to worldly existence through nuanced acts of participation and resistance, aided by their social media engagements.

For all my research participants, the school's inflexibility around curriculum and the lack of student voice when key decisions were made, left them feeling like one of them describes, 'everything is static, like nobody is really listening'. To this effect, Arendt warns of what could happen if political action became reduced to a 'public realm', where political action only appears as an extension of government; absorbed by bureaucratic and administrative structures. In this sense, the young research participants were disaffected because of their helplessness in the face of institutional change, carried out abruptly and with no consultation. It is precisely this lack of civic possibility as experienced by the young people that acts as a barrier to enacting their civic participation.

On this point, Arendt describes political action as the highest form of human activity, and emerging from incidents of living experience (Arendt, 2018). Another way in which is useful thinking with Arendt against Arendt is to do with the way in which Arendt downplays the role of schooling constituting a 'world' for children and young people:

> School is by no means the world and must not pretend to be; it is rather the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all. (Arendt, 2006, p. 185)

On the contrary, the school cultures seemed to exert a tremendous influence in the lives of the young people who took part in the study. The young people reported feeling disaffected and alienated as they tried to navigate what one of my research participants termed 'oppressive school politics'.

Within Arendtian political philosophy, the role of a space of appearance, is to foster connections among experience, thought and action to anchor us to a shared common space, where we can enact our civic engagement and feel worlded, that we belong. In the analysis of data in this paper, schools appear as a very important site for young people to feel this sense of *worldliness* which is better understood through the young people's worldlessness. Whilst Arendt (2006) presented a view of education as needing to be based on the authority of the teacher, and primarily a pre-political endeavour, the paper proposes that education should offer students opportunities to learn how to participate in a civil society, paying close attention to the immediate context of the school and citizenship education is a very suitable outlet for these learning experiences. Instead, in recent years citizenship education has suffered from stagnation in its conceptual frameworks, lack of interdisciplinarity, and understaffing in schools (Mathé, 2018).

There is a recognition in educational theory and research that schools have struggled to function in democratic ways and that the democratic decline in state schools can work to alienate young people from civic participation in adulthood (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 2005). Moreover, the role of both formal and informal curricula has been explored to argue that schooling practices can be detrimental for instilling critical thinking in future generations (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Re-conceptualising the school as a 'space of appearance' can bring education into the political realm beyond the idea that education is about the transmission of knowledge. Instead, as Arendt explains the true meaning of education is 'the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it' (Arendt, 2006, p. 196). Young respondents felt unable to take action or assume responsibility for what was happening at school through the normal channels of school communication. I argue that for schools to act as space of appearance, citizenship education is paramount in helping young people understand how the public realm is formed and changed. In contrast, citizenship education continues to be used as a subject for 'factual recall' (Jerome & Lalor, 2020, p. 106), instead of an opportunity for students to engage in 'critical thinking, debate … and civic and political activities … which make it likely they will want to engage in British democracy' (Kisby & Sloam, 2014, p. 53).

Following Arendt's (2018) arguments around political action as the active engagement in the public realm, this paper draws some implications for how citizenship education has an important role to play in how young people understand their place, both in

schools and in society in general. An important part of the discussion will point to how young people can become de-worlded at school and experience youth worldlessness, and how in order to enact their civic participation, they enrol the help of their social media worlds to reclaim a sense of *worldliness.*

Fieldwork and Methodology

The paper adopts an ethnographic study approach spanning over three years to explore young people's everyday school experiences and how they perceived and negotiated civic participation. The study involved observations of both online and offline contexts, as well as ethnographic interviews with research participants aged between 14 and 18 years of age. All the data collection took place at a school I have anonymised as Richmond Academy, a secondary school in south London. The research participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms the young people created themselves; this paper will comment on the experiences of Danielle (16), Taylor (15), Courtney (16), and Skeeks (18).

The first phase of the study involved a series of scheduled participant observations to gain a more practical understanding of the school's day to day to 'become familiar with "the field", its location, its practices and its inhabitants, a natural and important part of ethnographic research' (Barley & Bath, 2014, p. 182). Observations took place in both classrooms and other liminal and communal school areas, including school corridors, playgrounds, assemblies and school events. The second phase of the study involved interviews with young people. Interviews were carried out with all research participants within school premises, such as, the library and media rooms, and after consent forms had been received back at school. This process took several weeks to complete, as the researcher was careful not to impose on research participants' class time and was sensitive to various coursework deadlines. All interviews were conducted face to face and allowed the researcher to gather further insights from body language, facial expressions and feelings and emotions, deepening the understanding of their experiences (Irvine et al., 2013). The interviews followed an ethnographic approach to interviewing which allowed participants to tell their schooling narratives firsthand. The interview data was transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis which gave the study insights into overarching experiences among research participants, as well some of the nuances in separate themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The last phase of the study involved online observations of researchparticipants' selected social media platforms for three months and subsequent follow up ethnographic interviews.

Discussion

Young People's Experiences and Youth 'Worldlessness'

Whilst Arendt's philosophy has had significant scholarly attention over the years, the notion of worldlessness has remained elusive. In her book, *The Human Condition* Arendt (2018) sets out to make sense of 'worldlessness or world-alienation' (p. 54); the notion of worldlessness is a sense of displacement and atomisation where individuals have become separated from the modern world they inhabit and at risk of political

absence. Arendt's (2006) essay on *The Crisis in Education* is an example of how world-lessness can occur; she suggests that the crisis in education is symptomatic of a 'more general crisis and instability of modern society' (p. 179). Arendt argues that worldlessness becomes a real possibility across various aspects of our daily life due to a 'realm of politics', which is too individualising and marked by a 'conservative attitude which accepts the world as it is' (p. 189). Whilst Arendt carefully conceptualises education as significantly different from politics, she argues how there is still a need to find 'meaningful' and 'productive' engagement in everything we do (Arendt, 2018, p. 89). Arendt views education as providing an opportunity to enter a thread of tradition where we can share in a common world and 'where we act among and with adults and equals', going beyond a simple 'striving only to preserve the status quo' (Arendt, 2006, p. 189).

For the young people who participated in the study, the content of citizenship lessons was described as 'completely unexpected', as asserted by Skeeks, whilst Courtney remarked on the 'erratic' nature of the lessons and the 'unpredictability' surrounding who was asked to teach it. This is further illustrated by Taylor, who says,

> one week it would be a bit of geography because the geography teacher was leading, the next time it'd be a catch up because it was our form tutor … and you could see none of them really wanted to do it.

These experiences were corroborated by other research participants such as Courtney, who reported a 'lack of structure' or 'lack of purpose when it came to citizenship'. These issues have been highlighted in a report by the Youth Select Committee (2014), which describe citizenship education as an 'area that needed great improvement', and highlighted how the teaching of citizenship education was 'patchy' and 'was often taught by subject specialists from other areas and that those who taught citizenship were not sufficiently trained' (p. 30). The report also highlighted the ways in which a poor provision of citizenship education is associated with lower vote participation rates in young people, with only '25% of 18–24 year-olds certain to vote, even when over 65% of 18–24 year-olds are registered to vote' (2014, p. 23).

Arendt's concept of worldlessness also comprises the notions of the public and the private. We ordinarily think of citizenship as public (Knop, 2008), yet, Arendt (2018) offers insights into how the development of any political agency must include the intimacies of private life, or we run the risk of becoming 'no longer recognizable to the outer world of life' (p. 51). Poignantly, the research participants in the study felt a sense of disaffection at school and only became connected again through acts of resistance and contestation which involved engagements with social media platforms and formed the basis for the emergence of some political agency. Some school cultures were described by research participants as 'stifling', 'unfair', 'toxic' and 'oppressive'. The sense of worldlessness described by the young people who participated in the study can be explained through the unhealthy distinction between the public and the private which continues to reduce the field of civic participation, as explained by Arendt (2018):

> there are a great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene; there, only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated, so that the irrelevant becomes automatically a private matter. (p. 51)

Poignantly, the young people experienced a feeling of disenfranchisement and underrepresentation because they struggled to incorporate private aspects of their lives into their everyday encounters at school. For instance, Taylor, who was incredibly passionate about drama and theatre described how she coped at school because she could 'compartmentalise' her life, as at school 'everything just feels static, like nobody is really listening … and nobody wants a real answer, so to get by you stick to the normal'. In this way, Taylor was actively defining what she could express 'at school and what was out of the question' because 'schools are very good at silencing those who want to raise uncomfortable questions'. The disconnection that Taylor describes here refers to how she felt she could not challenge school decisions on curricula, teacher movement across subjects or timetabling. Taylor asserts, 'whatever happens you just turn a blind eye to, just so that you're not jarring anyone but it's like you're learning to be passive aggressive or something, but I care, I speak out and for others, that's the problem'. Taylor's dilemma of trying to strike the right balance at school, by not stirring 'trouble', but also by remaining active enough so that she does not feel that her education is entirely controlled evokes how Arendt discusses the public and the private in the emergence of worldlessness. Arendt (2018) discusses worldlessness as that site of constant struggle where 'public actions and words are reduced to the private realm', and government is 'no longer about action, but administration' (p. 252).

Arendt's arguments around worldlessness are also useful to contextualise young people's experiences of alienation and detachment from their environments due to school cultures that excluded parts of their identity. For example, Danielle felt 'invisible' in her citizenship education class when discussions around gender identity made no mention of bisexuality,

> my school is rubbish at teaching anything in relation to this. They haven't even started to brush against issues around consent, bisexuality, homosexuality … we were just told once that there was straight and there was gay and there's nothing in between … I thought that doesn't … apply to me … I'm bisexual.

Danielle's experience exemplifies how, despite numerous calls to broaden citizenship education by including issues of gender, migration and race, there are still substantive gaps in subject knowledge (Jerome & Lalor, 2020). Courtney, who describes herself as 'pansexual and queer' also referred to school practices as 'showing off their inclusion with posters on the wall but no action'. Referring to debates in citizenship lessons, Courtney described 'sexuality as more of a continuum', before being, 'just brushed off with a, yes that's a good point but let's get back to the lesson for a moment'. Danielle's and Courtney's youth worldlessness was primarily based on her school's reluctance to incorporate more inclusive versions of sex and relationships education (SRE) in the curriculum, in spite of recent developments in this field (Renold & McGeeney, 2017).

Similarly, this sense of youth worldlessness was identifiable in Skeeks experience who as a keen photographer, he regularly showcased his work at school's exhibitions and felt 'extraordinary support' from his teachers. Yet, he was dismayed to learn of the school's plans to reduce the arts department in favour of extending a mathematics school programme, Skeeks explains: 'I plan to do this for a living … my teachers have great connections, and they just know how to mentor and support … and in a few weeks they will be gone'. This resonates with Taylor's experience when she expressed her disappointment

with her school's decision to drastically reduce the drama department, losing her 'favour-ite teachers and witnessing my favourite subject totally decimated'. When raising her concerns in her citizenship class, Taylor was 'swiftly referred to pastoral care because I seemed too emotional and anxious', a referral to the pastoral care team, which mainly deals with emergent mental health issues in students, made Taylor feel like her opinions were simply dismissed.

Whilst Taylor describes herself as 'not a political person', she also explains how 'there are certain things that you just can't turn a blind eye to, like Drama … my teachers are being let go, our projects are put on hold … I feel like I'm not important at all'. The school's response has undermined her ability to participate in the common world of the school. To this effect, Arendt (2018) contends that political actions are central to citizenship, however, these experiences as explained by Danielle, Courtney, Skeeks and Taylor are representative of how young people feel 'without a citizenship … deprived of expression within and action upon a common world', which if it remains the same, 'loses all significance' (p. 302).

For Taylor, disclosure of her opinions on what she termed 'an attack on the arts' turned the school atmosphere hostile towards her in ways that she did not anticipate,

> once I asked questions in the lesson [citizenship] about why my drama teachers were being let go … the hours of teaching were reduced and why they had not consulted any of us about this; everything changed, from weird looks to being referred to pastoral care.

Taylor felt that her citizenship lesson was an appropriate space to raise her concerns, par-ticularly, since the teacher started by asking everyone 'to open up and use the lesson as a critical space to engage in healthy debate'. Yet, Taylor's questions were dismissed as 'opinions' and her tone was berated as 'too emotional, too biased for a debate to be had'; Taylor's school experiences of disregard reflect Arendt's (2006) worry about the separations between the public and the private, dividing public opinion and real politics where emotion and personal opinion have become flaws. Arendt (2006) argues that these divisions give rise to 'politics as a profession', represented by those 'chosen according to standards and criteria which are themselves profoundly unpolitical' (p. 277). Taylor's prompt referral to pastoral care also exemplifies how girls continue to be oversimplified as too emotional, not coping or irrational within the education system (Archer et al., 2007; Jackson, 2006). These are very important experiences for Taylor in her understand-ing of civic participation and sharing in a common world with others. Yet, Taylor's actions in her citizenship class underpin her youth worldlessness and left her devoid of validity in what could be a shared common space.

During our interview, Skeeks reflect on the subject of citizenship at school which he felt despite his teachers' efforts to include his and his peers' views, there was always a finite nature to participation at school, Skeeks explains this as 'dismissive listening', or 'when schools does listening just for show'. However, Skeeks is careful not to apportion blame to teachers, and praised his experiences in citizenship saying, 'when I think about all the things we got to talk about, I'm grateful, because I learnt from listening … but I certainly never felt like talking much, never felt like doing much, others did at their own risk maybe'. Skeeks' narrative can be explained through Arendt's (2018) 'vita activa', accounting for those active parts of everyday life that make us seem engaged, as opposed to what Arendt terms 'vita contemplativa', the more insidious domains of our existence (p. 248). Skeeks continued to explain his position by saying,

> I'm about to leave school and I don't feel I have a lot to show for it, like, I've done things … I've learnt but I'm not sure how to take it forward … for the most part it feels like a lot of what we have to do is learn but not doing very much.

Youth worldlessness appears as a real possibility in Skeeks' experience, who seems to be conflicted by the perceived immobility or lack of dynamism in his learning, where he recognises having learnt something, but also worries about how that learning took place whilst he was seemingly standing still. To this effect, Arendt (2018) oscillates from vita activa to vita contemplativa to make sense of a more worlded and meaningful human existence, and in Arendtian terms there seems to be a somewhat equal moral significance to acting and doing as much as there is a moral significance to thinking and listening.

Youth worldlessness appears as a residue of a collection of systemic shortcomings which the young people have experienced in schooling, which could be addressed through re-imaginations of citizenship education. These young people's accounts should not be discounted only as personal experience, but rather, representative of a citizenship education dominated by a fact-based, skills-centered curriculum which is further affected by the understaffing trends in the subject (Pontes et al., 2019). Schooling contexts are of significance importance in how we understand our position in society; the contentious issue is how schools can, institutionally and as sites of practice, help society to remain evaluative of its nature. One of the ways in which this could happen is by re-imagining schools as a public space of appearance where emergent and contingent issues are discussed with students, instead of focusing on what's worked in the past. With reference to the need for change in the 'public sphere', Arendt (2018) contends that, if the world is to contain a public space of appearance, 'it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only, it must transcend … Without this transcendence … no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible' (p. 55). The transcendence suggested by Arendt points to the need for change; the creation of a common world needs to increasingly account for emergent trends in identity, patterns of exclusion and social action. In this way, citizenship education should go beyond the

> understanding of how to conform to prevailing values and carry out basic democratic functions … the objective should be an emancipation whereby people are freed from the dominant ideology and the apparatus of the state and enabled to decide for themselves how their society should be organised. (Leighton, 2022, p. 4)

From 'Youth Worldlessness' to 'Worldly Existence'?

Tumblr

Having discussed the term youth worldlessness by borrowing from Arendt's (2018) ideas of civic participation, in this section, I explore some of the practices which research respondents, Taylor, Danielle, Courtney and Skeeks have used to enact their civic participation within the realm of new media. Whilst in recent years young people have been deemed as disengaged from politics, there are many ways in which young people are enacting their citizenship alternatively (Kligier-Vilenchik, 2017). This section explores the observed online media engagements and harnesses them with school events to make sense of how the context of citizenship education is an important site for youth civic participation.

Taylor and Danielle use Tumblr more than any other social media platform. Tumblr is a social media platform where mini-blogging is the main feature of content creation, its most used social feature is reblogging with 93% of the site's post being reblogs (Seko & Lewis, 2016, p. 4). Taylor and Danielle report that reblogging is what they do the most; Danielle reblogs in support of causes and everyday struggles of many people, but in particular, people in the LGBTQ communities, her Tumblr features several LGBTQ images and diverse sexuality blogs. Taylor writes mini-blogs about her love of art and theatre, with several quotes from famous scripts and plays and reblogging arts-based content. Taylor's and Danielle's blogs works as a repository of mix images, gifs, texts, and other media which she talks about as helping her to learn about herself and others.

The school climate at Richmond Academy was underpinned by the fear of performativity and accountability that can be very often found in UK schools (Ehren et al., 2015). The new expectations brought by the EBacc swept across the school and placed renewed demands on already struggling departments, such as Citizenship, Arts and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). The English Baccalaureate was introduced in schools as a qualification that would ensure a broader academic foundation in schools. The EBacc has been discussed in research as intensifying the historical divisions between core and non-core subjects, Maguire et al. (2019) point to how the EBacc 'is a key performance measure that is published annually for each school, which privileges a particular set of traditional academic subjects, and in doing so, marginalises other subjects' (p. 558).

Taylor found Tumblr very useful in finding information and posts by others by using the hashtag #Ebacc. Taylor started to create content for her Tumblr miniblog to contribute to discussions kept under several similar hashtags on Tumblr. Explaining this further Taylor says, 'it's not for everyone [Tumblr], I'm on it to follow art blogs … lately … my rage on the place of arts has been coming through … do you want to see?'. During our interview Taylor taps quickly on her phone and brings up a few posts. One of her posts is a letter that she published online and which she planned to send to the Headteacher:

> Without art, art of any kind, there are no masterpieces … There is no joy to be had in a world without art, and I fear … this is what the government wants. I see no joy in a world without art, or dance or music, that is to say, a world where individuals are discouraged from being individual … Such a world is one in which learning is a tool for fashioning our business acumen and not our characters; for developing our employability, and not our souls … In Drama we learn to be confident, to appreciate other people's contributions, we open our minds in a spontaneous environment, so why do we need to miss out on this? When you make us miss lessons such as Drama you are making us, the pupils, think those lessons have less importance. We leave school with grades but not with a passion for something. Shouldn't we be allowed to thrive and be inspired by teachers and a vibrant school environment?

Taylor's post is very articulate in addressing the political climate behind the cuts to Drama experienced at Richmond Academy. Moreover, Taylor's blogging on Tumblr shows how young people are engaging in politics and civic participation, although for many years they have been constructed as disengaged (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Vromen et al., 2015). In Taylor's view this is a situation created by government changes to assessment, particularly by the endorsement of the English baccalaureate to

which her school is strongly adhering to. When I asked Taylor why she posted her opinions on school on Tumblr, she explained: 'I post and reblog to show that I know what's happening, to share it with others who can give feedback, who like it or share it again'. Posting on Tumblr offers an outlet to make sense of the anti-arts sentiments that Taylor has been experiencing at school.

Producing and circulating content on Tumblr was an opportunity for both Taylor and Danielle to articulate their positions and rehearse how they planned to exercise civic participation at their school. The letter which Taylor first circulated on Tumblr served as a draft and as a way to get some more comments on her views. Taylor explains, 'in this letter I wanted to speak to him [the headteacher] as a person, as someone I know, someone who I see a lot of'. The contents of the letter reveal a very articulate and critical tone, raising several key questions and calls for collaboration if the school was to be thought about as a real community. The letter was sent, and Taylor waited patiently for acknowledgement, but also felt 'sick with worry' at addressing the Headteacher so directly. Taylor felt 'surprised' in how she felt 'more worried about her thoughts not being in the safety net of Tumblr but out there in the real world of action … online people get back to you quickly, at school everything drags', since it took weeks to get any response at all. Instead, Taylor talks of how disappointed she was to find that the letter had only managed to edge its way into an 'assembly announcement', where students were reminded to seek pastoral staff if they felt overwhelmed by changes at the school, particularly cuts to subjects. After the assembly Taylor was asked by her form tutor to speak to pastoral care; her attempts at civic participation at school were simply dismissed as a potential mental health issue.

However, Taylor reflects on the event by saying,

> it doesn't take away from the fact that I went on and did it, I would have not done that before, I feel brave and still angry, but less angry now, more like clued up, I know what it feels like to speak your mind, I know what's happening around me now, next time I'll be more demanding.

Taylor's civic participation is not diffused by this event, instead, Taylor feels that these events have been essential to her worldliness at school, as Arendt (2006) contends that enacting our civic participation helps us know how to challenge the common world. This is expressed by Taylor as 'knowing how it feels to speak out stays with you'. The actions by Taylor demonstrate how youth participation in politics and activism is not in decline or absent, but rather nuanced and actualised beyond the formal means used to measure such activity (Leighton, 2022).

Moreover, having discussed how Danielle's youth worldlessness was characterised by the lack of awareness and representation of gender and sexual identities, Danielle attempts to address this whilst at one of her Citizenship lessons. Danielle recounts how when a cover teacher took over the class for a couple of weeks due to staff absences, she had the opportunity to bring up issues for discussion that would have never been allowed under the designated citizenship teacher. In one lesson based on the question: What is social justice to you? Danielle answered 'representation … but how can you represent if you don't understand? I want people to be more open to LGBTQ' and read aloud a post from her Tumblrlog which she had written into her notebook, since mobile phones are not allowed in class and must be kept out of sight, it read:

A guide to Sexuality:

Straight: Swings that way

Gay: Swings the other way

Bisexual: Swings both ways

Pansexual: Swings everywhere

Asexual: Does not swing and can not see themselves swinging

Demisexual: Only swings after forming a strong bond with the direction they're swinging

Polysexual: Swings wherever the hell they want.

(Post from Danielle's Tumblr)

After reading the post, which caused much laughter amongst everyone, Danielle was asked to sit down but the class had already started talking about the short excerpt, expressing their agreement and disagreement with parts of the post and so a debate ensued. Through a beaming smile Danielle explained during our interview, 'the teacher just had to manage the debate, there were too many things being said and so she didn't change the subject, that debate probably took up half of our lesson'. Through these actions Danielle felt a sense of belonging that equated to those experiences online, 'at that moment, I felt like finally there's a recognition of a difference that mattered to me and others like me'. According to Arendt (2018) it is in these 'un-quiet' expressions of 'vita activa' that 'worldlessness can turn to worldliness, allowing our love for the common world to emerge' (p. 15).

Whilst Danielle's use of Tumblr helped her to self-actualise her bisexual identity at school; it was this important moment which sparked her understanding of what it takes to engage in civic participation, Danielle explains, 'since that day I felt like I went public with who I am, and it matters'. Danielle's actions are representative of how Arendt (2006) argues that a responsibility for our common world gives shape to citizenship as a political presence, which she defines through the simultaneity of our 'actions in the presence of others' (p. 154), and the importance of 'making present … the standpoints of those who are absent' (p. 241). Danielle feels she is an outsider at school for believing in the importance of these issues and that her school's attempts are less than satisfactory with teachers 'avoiding debate in class altogether … refusing to discuss other identities like, queer identities, non-binary, gay, how can people learn to be tolerant if they never know of others'. Danielle's use of Tumblr is helping her rehearse ways to find worldliness at school. Danielle's experience exemplifies Arendt's claim that 'political activity is representative', Arendt (2006) argues that an 'enlarged mentality' means that 'the more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking' (p. 237).

Courtney and Skeeks had different experiences and were very cautious not to 'express opinions' at school. They engaged through passivity and compliance, yet, as Courtney explains, 'what can't be said at school can be said on social media … all of it'. Courtneys' Tumblr persona was organised through a humorous blogging and reblogging which

included anti-school content from various hashtags, such as, #anti-school and #hate-school. Skeeks, who was also an avid Tumblr user, posted about what he called his 'life beyond school', where he poured his dreams of becoming photographer, and how relieved he felt about his 'decision not to go to university'. Nevertheless, Courtney and Skeeks, did not feel that they were 'bold enough' to speak at school, an experience which they found 'frustrating' and 'suffocating', Skeeks recounts, 'there have been so many times when I feel so badly judged, so hard done by and bottling everything up seems like the only option to get by'. Similarly, Courtney says, 'without my mum and dad who know how much I detest school right now, I'd feel lost … At school almost everything I care about is off limits … but like they [parents] say, it will come to an end soon'. Courtney's and Skeeks' feelings of frustration due to their lack of action and expression in school is evocative of Arendt's focus on political action as central to worldly existence, whereby we are not just living in 'vita activa'; but also share a sense of purpose with others in our world.

So, whilst digital opportunities were used by Taylor and Danielle to create and collate identity outputs in the form of blogs which transcended the online to the offline threshold of the school (Hart, 2015; Warfield, 2016), Courtney and Skeeks used Tumblr as an outlet, but their engagements did not reverberate into the everyday world of the school. However, both Courtney and Skeeks were actively engaged in media critique cultures on tumblr, through blogging and reblogging. Importantly, all four research respondents experienced different nuances of youth worldlessness at school, yet, both Taylor and Danielle remarked on the 'satisfaction' they felt with their civic participations at school, having rehearsed them on social media. These bold and risky actions by Taylor and Danielle meant they could counteract, through stepping onto worldly action and expression, the pervasive effects of 'world alienation' (Arendt, 2018, p. 248).

Concluding Remarks

The paper has explored the intricacies between young people's schooling experiences and their engagements with the social media site, Tumblr. For the young people, Tumblr offered modes of sociality, such as access to online communities, creating and mobilisation of online content and an opportunity to test their ideas before bringing them past the school threshold. All of these social media engagements exercised the young people's political agency and enabled forms of resistance and ethical responses to issues within schooling. In this way, the young people have been discussed as taking responsibility for their school environment, challenging school curricula and school cultures. Crucially, the paper has proposed that young people's social media engagements can create a more critical form of political agency and civic participation. The young people's actions, both online and at school, resemble how Arendt (2006) further suggests that political presence emerges from 'belonging', 'actions' and a desire 'to intervene, to alter, to create what is new' (p. 189).

Using Arendtian philosophical notions to interpret and understand young people's experiences in schools, both in citizenship lessons and in the wider context of the school, this paper argued that youth worldlessness was a possible way to understand how young people experience exclusions. From the discussions the paper has elaborated

on how schools continue to struggle to provide an environment where young people can develop their civic participation and sense of belonging. Theorising school as an important space of appearance was an attempt to re-imagine schools as an emerging civic context where young people learn to develop their political agency. Therefore, underpinning the institution of schooling through Arendt's theory helps to highlight how, the often limiting and highly regulated school practices, can further alienate young people from their environment and stifle their opportunity to engage in civic participation.

Nevertheless, in spite of students' experiences of exclusion at school, they seem very resilient and determined to question how the school addresses or neglects issues that matter to them, yet, schools are very resistant to change. The paper has contended that one of the ways in which young people do this is by using social media affordabilities and spaces as outlets to rehearse their opinions, to create and mobilise content around issues of their interest. Some of these social media engagements reverberated back to the school environment in the form of a formal letter sent to the Headteacher, drafted online by Taylor and an interjection to a citizenship lesson, delivered by Danielle. The experiences of these young people represent important instances where young people are actively negotiating their sense of political agency and civic participation. According to Arendt, becoming responsible for your environment is the optimal form of citizenship, one that centres around action and participation.

Disclosure Statement

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