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# Curriculum wars and youth political education in the UK and Australia—a narrative review

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the questions at the heart of the tussle between different types of knowledge within curricula that we conceptualise as ‘curriculum wars’. Across the world, we see increasing instances of young people’s radicalization around axes of race, religion, and gender. Viewing these developments side by side throws into question the various local, national, and global issues shaping young people’s political education and action in liberal democracies experiencing ongoing shift away from liberal values. Through a comprehensive narrative review, we provide an overview of key themes that have been explored in recent research on curriculum, youth political education, and democracy in England and Australia. We find that young peoples’ shift away from traditional electoral (big ‘P’) politics focussed on wider socio-economic issues to an individualised (small ‘p’) politics focussed on personal experiences poses serious curricular challenges—around content and modes of political education. Young peoples’ unparalleled access to online information and digital affordances creates further need to include digital and media education within the political education curriculum. This educational challenge could prospectively be met by a curriculum that is collaborative, action-research and activist based. Such a curriculum addresses issues relevant to young people’s lived realities including topics deemed ‘controversial’ for classrooms. Such an approach requires a perspectival shift away from youth as subjects of curricular reform to youth as collaborators and knowledge workers. We argue that critical literacy offers a practical and theoretical scaffold to conceptualise transformative and progressive youth political education and political action by emphasizing the need for socially justice focussed spaces for learning, reflection and action within schools and in communities.

**Keywords** Education for democracy · Progressive neoliberalism · Critical pedagogies · Youth political participation

## Introduction

As recent as in 2022, a major overhaul of the school curriculum was announced by the New South Wales government in Australia. Dominic Perrottet, at the time the premier of NSW- Australia’s most populous state, and member of the conservative Liberal Party, made clear his perspective of what the new curriculum should bring to the children of

his state: “I want more reading, writing and arithmetic; less puppetry, politics, and wearable art. And I don’t want classrooms focused on superfluous and inherently divisive political issues that distract from the core subjects and skills our children need” (Aubusson, 2022). Earlier in 2018 responding to School Strikes 4Climate, the then PM Scott Morrison said: “...We don’t support our schools being turned into parliaments. What we want is more learning in schools and less activism in schools” (The Guardian, 26th Nov 2018). Similarly, in 2020, responding to school students’ posters in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in USA, David Elliott, the minister for education of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) said, “We don’t have a race problem here in Australia... this is not our war” (The Australian Independent Media, 21st April 2021). In England too, the BLM movement led to renewed tensions in acknowledging the systemic nature of racism in the country and the best way to educate people about it. More recently marking

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Black History Month in the Parliament the equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch said, “We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt.” She further adds: “Any school which teaches these elements of critical race theory, or which promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law” (Trilling, 2020).

While the contentions around teaching of race and racism are not new either in England or in Australia but their shared distancing reactions to the BLM movement offer some important insights around conservative education ideology. First it rejects the inter-connections between the colonial and post-colonial forms of violence and control across colonial and settler colonial sites such as England, Australia, and USA—viewing them as disconnected from one another and from the racial logics of colonialism and capitalism (Rudolph & Thomas, 2023). Second it denies the links between the justice system and the education system (McQuire, 2020). Moreton-Robinson (2020, p. 87) views this as “white anxiety” in the face of visible, global and interconnected protests that attempt to disrupt the racial order. Drawing from Sriprakash et al. (2022) we strongly feel that the English and Australian conservative-led governments’ attempts to discipline schools underscore the urgency to investigate and challenge schools (curriculum in particular) as sites of colonial and settler colonial nation making and racial power.

Research from across the world suggests curriculum is a key site of ideological contestation between different visions of the world, and of self, and other (Durrani & Dunne, 2010; Lall, 2008; Silberberg and Agbaria, 2021). Following Apple (1993, p. 222) we view curriculum as “never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always part of a selective tradition, someone’s selection, some group’s vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize people”. As such curriculum is as an ‘inherently ideological and political’ issue (Apple, 1990, vii). What is included (official knowledge) and what is excluded (unofficial knowledge) from the curriculum reveals who holds the power in a society (Apple, 2006). The official curriculum also offers valuable insights into knowledge that older generations deem necessary to transfer to the young ones during their school years (Loveless, 2014). However, in the highly mediated and digitised lives of young people today the official curriculum is no longer the main source of a ‘political’ vision nor are the traditional ways of engaging with politics (voting, protesting, etc.) the only ways of ‘doing’ politics. Understood in this way, both official and unofficial knowledge (and the interplay of the two) are likely to shape young people’s political education.

By looking at curricula, we are interested in understanding the relationship between education and young people’s political actions. By studying the English and Australian contexts side by side this paper offers important insights into the workings of wider conservative educational ideologies specifically within what are otherwise functioning liberal democracies. Overall understanding the distancing of English and Australian governments from racism in a comparative perspective will enable us to distil implications of conservative and illiberal educational projects in liberal democracies.

We start by a brief explanation of our research methods and positionalities. Then, we illustrate that we are living through a cultural and ideological shift away from liberal values. This shift underlines the contentions around curriculum across liberal democracies. This contention has to do with the questions relating to political education of young people and the nature of their political participation within democratic contexts. These are the questions at the heart of the tussle between different types of knowledge within curricula that can be conceptualised as ‘curriculum wars’. The second section maps out the changing nature of youth’s focus politics and political action from big ‘P’ politics—the traditional parliamentary democratic institutions—to small everyday ‘p’ politics, and the increasing salience of digital technologies. The next section focusses attention on the role of teachers in negotiating complex educational policies and curriculum that can either favour or hinder youth political participation within their school communities and beyond. The paper concludes by highlighting some of the gaps in literature on curriculum and youth political education and offers a blueprint for the future.

## Narrative review as a method

In this study, a narrative review approach to the review of literature has been adopted to summarize and synthesize what has been written on youth political education and participation. Instead of seeking generalization or cumulative knowledge from what is reviewed (Davies, 2000; Green et al., 2006), we gather and synthesize the research to demonstrate some of the key themes that emerge in relation to contemporary youth political education in the literature in the last three decades. We also identify some of the gaps in this research and outline a blueprint for future studies in this area. Our review is retrospective in providing a summary of work published. It is also a prospective step towards future conceptual development around youth political education and participation. Notably drawing from Taylor and Spicer (2007, p. 326) we “do not seek to synthesize evidence in an additive way. Rather we attempt to draw out the contributions of a range of studies towards a cumulative

understanding” of youth political education as an emerging theoretical and empirical research area.

We acknowledge that our individual and collective histories have shaped our research questions, the nature of our collaboration and the selection of articles for review. There is a substantive body of work around researcher positionality in qualitative social research. These studies recognise that no research or researcher can be considered value free, and “acknowledging the subjective nature of qualitative research, integrating reflexivity in an open and honest manner enhances transparency, accountability, credibility, trustworthiness, and sincerity in qualitative research” (Pascoe, 2022, p. 176). However, the questions of how researcher’s world views and political leaning shape their interest areas, choice of literature and ways of synthesising ‘reading’, and ‘writing’ is much more complicated and often not make explicit. We describe the political positionality of the authorial team as a group of three transnational academics located in universities in the Global North (Britain and Australia) with shared interests in understanding the ideological functions of education. All of us have been training initially in the Global South (India, Brazil, and Fiji)- countries where colonial histories and influential conservative/ right-wing politics continue to shape the nature of education, citizenship, and democracy in the post-colonial period. Upon migration to Britain and in Australia, we also find ourselves as a part of Connell’s ‘neoliberal cascade’ in education which has led to the application of the market logics of privatization, profit, and competition upon educational institutions. Our multiple locations, and roles have undoubtedly shaped our interest in education’s role in strengthening or weakening democratic practice. Needless to say, we remain committed to curricular and pedagogical practices that can strengthen democratic education and institutions globally.

### **Moving away from liberal values in the West: curriculum wars and youth political education**

In the last decade, we have seen unprecedented challenge to the longstanding consensus on liberal values in the West (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Fraser, 2017; Kundnani, 2020). Writing insightfully in the context of USA, Fraser (2017) views this as the end of hegemony of ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (as opposed to reactionary neoliberalism) in the wake of Trump’s election in America. Fraser (2017) views progressive neoliberalism as genuine and influential partnership formed between two bedfellows: Firstly, the mainstream liberal aspects of the emerging social movements, encompassing feminism, antiracism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ rights. Secondly, the vibrant and affluent sectors of the economy known for their symbolic value and

financial strength. For instance, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood in the US—seemingly disparate groups united by a unique blend of perspectives concerning the distribution of resources and the acknowledgment of various identities. This has created a fracture between progressive cultural politics (politics of recognition) and progressive economic policies (of redistribution). This fracture renders progressive identity politics around gender, sexuality, race, etc. possible without the backing of progressive economic politics of redistribution and transformation of the means of production (Fraser, 2017). As such the ideal of equality under progressive neoliberalism is interpreted as diversity, meritocracy, and equal access as opposed to equitable and socially just outcome for everyone.

Giroux (2011) characterises this period of progressive neoliberalism as an intensifying assault on young people using soft war and hard war. A “hard war” deploys upon young people state violence and disciplinary techniques resembling the prison culture. And “soft war” is waged on the cultural front aided by the new electronic technologies of consumerism and surveillance. Giroux (2003, 2008) views this as a ‘crisis of youth’ linked to crisis of public life, schooling, and ultimately of democracy in West liberal democracies. Parallel to this crisis of youth is the longstanding narrative of young people as politically apathetic, lazy, disengaged and preoccupied with material pursuits (Pickard & Bessant, 2018, p. 7). This perceived youth disengagement was the problem the Crick Report (1998) tried to respond to in England and Wales. Following the release of the report, citizenship education was introduced as a compulsory element of the national curriculum in 2002 for students aged 11–16. The wider vision was to initiate a transformation in the political culture, both nationality and locally, ‘for people to think of themselves as active citizens who were willing, able, and equipped to have an influence in public life’ (Crick, 1998, p. 7). Drawing heavily on the Crick Report, the Australian Curriculum identifies four aims: the development of active citizenship; deep knowledge and understanding of Australia’s democracy; critical appreciation of the duties and privileges of citizenship to act in a responsible way; and an informed commitment to Australia as a ‘multicultural and multi-faith society’ (ACARA, 2012, p. 18). As such both countries carry in a narrow focus on civic duties justice ‘... within the constitutional and legal framework of the state’ prioritising them over individual rights and social concerns (Osler & Starkey, 2003, p. 244).

The economic changes unleashed by the neoliberal worldview of policymakers in major Western democracies adopted from the 1970s onwards unleashed a sense of insecurity, precarity and fear among many young people about their future despite major expansion of higher education (Bessant et al., 2017; Furlong & Cartmel, 2012; Howker & Malik, 2013; MacDonald et al., 2019; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2014). There

is emerging research on young people's 'political' responses to the social, economic, cultural, and environmental 'crisis' facing the youth. Broadly two strands of research can be identified. On one hand we see research on young people mobilising for racial (Carney, 2016; Hope et al., 2019) sexual (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Pender et al., 2019), gender (Harris, 2012; Keller, 2012), environmental justice (McGimpsey et al., 2023; O'brien et al., 2018) with campaigns like 'Why is my curriculum White?' 'Fridays for Future', 'Australian Youth Climate Coalition' and 'Rhodes Must Fall'. On the other hand, there is research on youth radicalization around nativist, racist/xenophobic, misogynist, and religious extremist ideas (Cherney et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2018; Sieckelinck et al., 2018). These groups are very influential online and have the power to translate ideas into calls for 'political' action (progressive or otherwise) e.g. the incel movement on one end, and on the other hand- K-pop fans in USA who used TikTok to co-ordinate mass ticket purchase of Donald Trump's election in rally, leaving hundreds of noticeably empty seats (Evelyn, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Viewing these developments side-by-side forces us to consider the modalities of competing worldviews in the political education of young people in liberal democracies. The question then is why do certain political ideas or worldviews appeal to young people over others? Curriculum being a key site of political education of young people, we conceptualise the competing ideas and worldviews in the curriculum as 'curriculum wars'—a 'war' for the hearts and minds of young people, their political views, and actions. As such the *curriculum wars* offer a productive site to investigate the dynamic between the knowledge(s) and worldviews competing to provide a de facto political education to young people in Western liberal democratic societies.

Connell (2013, p. 105) understands neoliberal view of education as "human capital formation" or "the business of forming the skills and attitudes needed by a productive workforce". One of the ways in which neoliberal education produces human capital is by pushing schools towards high-stakes competitive testing and teaching to the test. Thus, narrowing curricular focus to the knowledge and skills being assessed, and pedagogical focus to repetitively practicing tasks expected to be performed during the examination. This severely undermines teachers' capacity to make autonomous curricular and pedagogical judgments. And creates transactional educational encounters between students and teachers that are stripped off respect, reciprocity, intellectual excitement nor engagement with the truth and the ethic of care (Connell, 2013). This type of educational encounter though not uncontested in England or Australia

has come to represent a dominant way of thinking about education. In both countries citizenship education is the vehicle for formal political education of young people. However, citizenship education is largely aimed at individual young people. This "individualizes the problem of young people's citizenship—and in doing so follows the neoliberal line of thinking in which individuals are blamed for their social malfunctioning" (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 71). As such it appears that in England and Australia there is an attempt to "create a programme of study that emphasises individual responsibility and social cohesion over and above the need for students to critique society from within the range of contexts in which they find themselves" (Hopkins & Coster, 2019, p. 71). This deeply individualised thinking came out in recent post-pandemic UK-based research showing high level of optimism among youth despite unprecedented levels of unemployment and lack of opportunities. For Keating and Melis (2022, p. 5) "hope itself has been shaped by neoliberal discourses and has become positioned as an ideal characteristic of the neoliberal subjectivity". As an ideal neoliberal subject 'controls their own fate' and views the 'free market as a fair system' where meritocratic and hardworking individuals succeed (ibid). Such a meritocratic discourse embedded in young people's psyche through the school curriculum is likely to disregard systemic questions (e.g. race, class, gender, etc.) tied to historical injustices (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018).

Discussions in this section prompts us to consider how education in Western liberal democracies with a neoliberal education system can obscure young people's political education. Fraser's (2017) analysis of crisis of progressive neoliberalism shows that under neoliberalism, radical struggles and social movements like feminism are at the risk of being disconnected from the economic struggles for production and control of resources. This leaves curricular space only for progressive neoliberalism and reactionary neoliberalism and not for substantive social and economic transformation—that in essence is the curriculum war. This lack of transformative curricular choices in political education necessitates continuous interrogation of the political subjectivities forged through available modes of education. It also prompts us to imagine what these transformative curricular choices for political education will look like.

## Changing form and focus of youth politics

There have also been attempts to understand the changing landscape of youth political engagement in the context of neoliberalism. Notably, the question of youth political apathy and disaffection has remained a dominant lens through which historically youth political participation is viewed (Dahl et al., 2018; Pickard & Bessant, 2018). Cammaerts

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/21/trump-tulsa-rally-scheme-k-pop-fans-tiktok-users>

et al., (2014, p. 645) find that “young people are willing to engage politically but are turned off by the focus and nature of existing mainstream political discourse and practice, which many believe excludes them and ignores their needs and interests”. In other words, youth are less likely to focus on “big P” politics—elections and on the influence of elites and state institutions. Instead, youth today are more motivated by the power of direct action and a range of more direct forms of lifestyle politics, and community-based work that emphasize self-expression and self-actualization understood as “little p” politics (Dalton, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006, Kahne et al., 2013). As such many youth researchers are broadening traditional understandings of ‘being’ or ‘doing’ politics to including the lived experience of diverse young people (Pickard & Bessant, 2018; Loader et al., 2015). This has led to an increasing scholarly shift away from youth ‘participation in “big P” politics to “small p” politics. This shift poses a challenge for formal civic and political education curriculum as it requires a curricular shift from conventional civic models centred around the concept of a “Dutiful Citizen” (DC) to newer models of citizenship such as ‘political consumerism’ (Micheletti, 2003), ‘mundane citizenship’ (Bakardjieva, 2012), ‘self-actualizing citizen’ (Bennett et al., 2011), ‘critical citizen’ (Norris, 2002), ‘everyday-maker’ (Bang and Sørensen, 1999), ‘engaged citizen’ (Dalton, 2008), the ‘networking citizen’ (Loader et al., 2014). Therefore, further research is needed around the changing citizenship model and political education curricular needs of young people.

In terms of factors shaping youth civic and political activism, studies from Finland (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2015) and Belgium (Quintelier, 2015) show that in addition to schools, family and peer groups play a key role. Peer groups in particular shape discussions, debates, and examination of a range of different opinions and diverse identities in course of young people’s evolving political self-identities (Ekström, 2016; Quintelier, 2015). Structural inequities such as families’ socio-economic status, educational attainment and racial identity are found to impact youth activism. Kahne et al. (2016) find that when parents have a higher socio-economic status (SES), are White and have higher educational levels, young people are more likely to have civic learning opportunities, such as debating, simulations, and community service. However, research also shows that experiences of marginalisation can contribute towards youth activism. For instance, Islamophobia and misrecognition as a ‘suspect’ community and incursion of counter-terrorism policies into their everyday lives provides an impulse for social activism among young British (Pilkington and Acik, 2020) and Australian Muslims (Peucker, 2021). As such further research is needed to distinguish and understand political agency, political participation and civic engagements emerging from positions of power and powerlessness.

Another important change in contemporary youth political education and activism is the salience of technology. Research shows that technology-usage can improve young peoples’ civic education and engagements. In particular social media can both document experiences (e.g. of police violence) and magnify young peoples’ voices (e.g. BLM, AYCC) that are frequently left out of the political process (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016). The use of newer media platforms (e.g. Tik Tok and Twitch) doubles the odds of protest participation in general and triples the odds for right-wing protest participation (Boulianne & Lee, 2022). The BLM movement is a notable example of use of social media to mobilise not just a global campaign against police violence on racialized groups, springboard for calls for decolonizing of the curriculum, of wider educational institutions (schools and Universities) and reparative justice more broadly (Brennan et al., 2022).

However, in a time of unequal economic opportunities, it’s crucial for educators to be aware of the digital divide in access to technology as well as gap in skills and media literacy (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016). The issue of media skills and literacy is particularly important because social media platforms curate content to users based on their location, demographic characters, consumption behaviours, political attitudes, social biases and so on. Worryingly, Munger and Phillips (2022) claim that the algorithmic recommendations on these platforms favour right-wing content often mobilising political participation using misinformation. Our review leads us to suggest that educational institutions need critical approaches to media and digital literacy within their civic education curriculum to counter ideological echo chambers that may be detrimental to a democratic polity. So instead of viewing youth as the object of curricular reform, civic education must be expanded and redesigned together with the youth in the digital age (Brennan et al., 2022; Kahne et al., 2016).

## Curricular civic and political learning spaces

Our review suggests that educators and school staff often are put in challenging situations by constrictive federal and state policy frameworks which inhibit them to position young people as subjects (Dunlop et al., 2021). For instance, policy documents like the Teachers’ Standards and related accountability frameworks in England and Australia contain several policies and practices that prevent young people from comprehending and challenging the role of corporate power and that protects the fossil fuel industries from criticism (Dunlop et al., 2021). In other words, as outlined earlier the curriculum obstructs a critical understanding of neoliberal economic model and its central role in the global crises such as climate change, poverty, inequality and so on. Similarly,

the document for “Dealing with controversial issues,” in the NSW (Australia) government leaves out students’ actions, experiences, and voices, viewing them as relatively passive in relation to “controversial issues” that adults bring into the classroom (Brennan et al., 2022). As such there is no connection between students’ lived experiences (e.g. experiences of racism, homophobia, etc.) and the ‘controversial’ issues reflected in their curriculum. In the light of the fracture between *big P* and *small p* politics, Bennett (2013) says that effective civic education will address the shift in model of citizenship and motivate young people to further enhance democratic participation.

Civic learning opportunities are a collection of diverse approaches ranging from discussion of controversial issues to service learning, to simulations, to learning how a bill becomes a law or to understand the workings of social media and digital spaces. Civic and political outcomes range from knowledge-enhancement, to tolerance, to voting, to volunteering, to protesting. Because practices advancing one goal may not advance others, the impact of varied approaches on a range of different outcomes must be compared (Kahne, et al., 2013). Based on their six-country study, Peterson et al. (2022) identify four areas of critical civic engagement to understand youth political education and activism, through engagement, with:

- (i) Contextual understanding that moves “beyond factual knowledge, simplistic political messages” and requires an “appreciation and appraisal of key salient features of a given situation, on the basis of which young people decide whether to act” (or not) and “awareness of key historical and socio-political factors, the presence of ongoing and new social injustices” (ibid., p. 1097)
- (ii) Identity that recognises peoples’ intersectional and overlapping identities and experiences to “understand the complexity of prejudices faced, and action/inaction” (ibid., p. 1099).
- (iii) Groups where interrogation of “how power and activities are distributed within and between” groups allow a “critical engagement with differences between groups”, including the (historical and continued) conflicts involved, how to engage and deliberate with these differences, and how differences might be mediated in productive ways. The area of critical engagement with groups (ibid., p. 1001).
- (iv) Reflexivity or “the examination of one’s own feelings, motivations, actions” and how these influence our actions. Think of a reflexive self also lends one to conceptualise other as reflexive- individuals, groups, and communities. (ibid., p. 1002).

While Peterson et al.’s (2022) approach assesses and interrogates civic and political education, it does not explicitly emphasize the curriculum as a central element in this

context. To meet the educational challenges from the shift in citizenship models and need to create meaningful civic learning opportunities for young people, Brennan et al., (2022, p. 321) advocate for a curricular approach wherein “students undertake collaborative action-research—not just with other students but also diverse community actors, their teachers and academics on problems that matter for local–global futures”. This requires a perspectival shift in education policy and practice—from viewing students as the “object of curricular reform”, instead viewing them “as knowledge workers capable of analysing the dramatic shifts occurring in their lives and the implications for social futures” (ibid., p. 325). In such education praxis, “curriculum becomes a site of participatory-democratic pro-action on matters of ‘fervent concern’ (Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020).

### Critical literacy: questions of democracy and youth political participation

Overall, our review of literature has drawn attention towards the long-standing obstruction of progressive political education in Western liberal democracies such as the UK and Australia by a neoliberal education system. This prompts us to consider transformative activist curricular choices for political education of young people within these contexts. Paulo Freire’s scholarship on critical literacy can potentially help envision the content of these transformative choices. For Freire and Macedo (2005), critical literacy is an emancipatory project in which one not only reads the ‘word’ but also the ‘world’—a process of *conscientização*—becoming consciousness to unveil and decode ‘the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms such as television and film, in order to reveal their selective interests’. (Mayo, 1995, p. 363). These emancipatory pedagogies can be seen in Australia through the proposals of Paterson and Gavrin (2022), who envisage a democratic classroom as a space where ‘empowered teachers can empower their students’ (p. 106). They consider that the set up and the portability of the classroom furniture indicates whether a classroom is a democratic space responsive to its members’ needs or expresses the authoritarian tendencies of a school and/or a teacher. By proposing rearranging of furniture as an essential element of furthering democratic practices within classrooms, the authors/activists consider that democracy in schools can be taught and learnt throughout the whole educational cycle to help students finding their own individual and, more importantly, collective voices.

In the context of highly unequal societies engendered through the neoliberal economic model Goodman and Cocca (2014, p. 211) build on the Freirean tradition to propose ‘liberatory critical literacy—an educational praxis, grounded in local communities and encompassing broad-based, social

justice concerns, that develops young people's identities as empowered and democratic participants with agency and voice.' Ultimately all these critical scholarly traditions emphasize that education must enable young people to.

- (i) question socially and historically constructed power relations in the world through active engagement, and affirmations of selfhood and solidarity with others (Shor, 1980)
- (ii) to critique dominant ideologies and political systems (Luke, 2014) and
- (iii) to examine the 'discursive practices that actively produce and sustain patterns of dominance and subordination in the wider society' (Locke & Cleary, 2011, p. 121), and supports them in using 'language to exercise power to enhance everyday life' (Comber, 2010, p. 44).

This type of education can create socially justice focussed public spaces of thinking and action (Freire's praxis) for young people in schools and in community settings.

Burnett and Merchant (2019, p. 50) argued that critical literacy is needed to teach students 'how they were positioned and the quality and extent of their social, political, and civic participation'. It is also intended to support reflection on what else they might do through social media, and consider how they might cultivate identities, practices, and networks that would be advantageous to them socially, politically, or economically.

Writing for an online magazine, Amna Mukhtar, one of the pupils organising protests in Pimlico Academy - a secondary school in London - reflects on how the protests originally against an exclusionary uniform policy later culminated in the burning of the union jack during the 2020 BLM Protests. Mukhtar (2021)<sup>2</sup> says: "Then at the height of the BLM movement, the school decided to fly the Union Jack outside the school and conduct several assemblies on 'British values'. Our student body is incredibly diverse: a majority of pupils live in areas that are among the most socially deprived in Britain, and the proportion of those who are known to be eligible for free school meals is twice the national average. My friends and I found it strange that the shocking murder of George Floyd and the subsequent anger we felt about our own experiences of racism were completely dismissed.... When we voiced our concerns to a member of staff, we were told that they were important. So, in protest and out of the frustration of feeling ignored, the students of Pimlico burned the flag and made front-page news."

<sup>2</sup> <https://gal-dem.com/students-at-pimlico-academy-are-rising-up-because-they-know-protests-work/>

Mukhtar (2021) illuminates not only the lived nature of young people's political engagement. Her discussion reveals the ability to question existing power relations, to critique dominant ideologies and discursive practices of denial of racism in British society. Above all it illustrates the struggles faced by young people to be taken seriously as political actors. Whether we agree with the Pimlico academy students' method of protest or not, there is not denying that their protest shows a social justice praxis in action based on the principles of critical literacy. They also contribute to the strengthening of democracy and their place as citizens- a major concern for critical scholars.

Another useful example of youth activism based on critical literacy's tenets comes from the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC), which was one of the main organizers of the country's version of the recent 'School Strike for Climate' global events led by youth activist Greta Thunberg. Founded in 2006, AYCC has always been a youth-led coalition striving for climate justice. Hilder and Collin (2022) highlight that they have been using a range of political actions -such as peer-based educational initiatives, hybrid, experimental and local actions - which can be linked to the 'Freirean lexicon' of emancipatory and dialogic education (Knijnik, 2021).

These examples of young people claiming their citizenship status through activism highlight the role of critical literacy in the way students enact everyday 'p' politics. They also underline that on the one hand formal curriculum shapes young people's political attitudes but on the other hand their own lived experiences, peer-engagements, the presence of wider movements (e.g. BLM, AYCC, Incel movement) and relatable figures of resistance to perceived dominant power (Greta Thunberg, Andrew Tate, etc.) are essential in youth's civic participation. That means, while official curriculum plays a role in political education there are multiple other relevant sources influencing this learning.

As such the concept of critical literacy is key to think about political education of young people, because it doesn't depend on formal educational settings or on official curriculum.

## Final remarks: towards a critical political curriculum

It is clear that we are going through a sustained period of crisis of youth and a crisis of progressive neoliberalism. The intersection of these crises poses momentous questions about youth political education—its nature, content, and form in the Western liberal democracies. In Australia and England, the public discourses of 'democracy' continue largely to signify voting, entailing a narrowly passive and majoritarian version of citizenship. As such youth especially



school age ones, fall outside the definition of participatory citizens. The recent School Strikes for Climate and BLM protests in Australia and England show how the rights of young people to gather and voice their opinions as citizens are restricted by actions taken by educational and governmental authorities. This positions young people as subjects of governance including curricular reforms, rather than active contributors to shaping the future of society and the planet. Our research on curriculum, civic and political education in the last decades has shown that youth are currently more likely to engage with everyday 'p' politics than the range of topics related to the big 'P' politics represented by the traditional democratic institutions. Hence, curriculum content and support materials need to allow critical pedagogies where educators can scaffold activities towards educating for core civic capacities, such as investigation, dialogue, circulation, production, and mobilisation for youths' effective participation in democratic life. Above and beyond learning how to understand parliamentary activity and representative democracy, curriculum must develop skills for students to be active citizens in participatory democracies. In particular young people need to be offered civic learning and action opportunities through an activist curriculum responsive to their present and future interests.

We conclude this paper by identifying a range of questions that can form the blueprint for research on youth political education. *First* there is an urgent need to capture and document the impact of neoliberalism on the 'official' curricular political learning experience of young people at various stages of education. We found that existing literature fails to adequately address the process by which young people are politicized and exposed to political education, considering both official and unofficial curricula. Moreover, there is a notable lack of understanding regarding the effects of various political education pedagogies on the formation of political beliefs, affiliations, and subsequent actions. To bridge this gap in knowledge, as a *second element* of our suggested blueprint for research, we propose further exploration of the interplay between political education pedagogies and their outcomes. Furthermore, while exploring the subject, it becomes evident that the existing literature lacks sufficient examples of pedagogies that successfully harness the potential of the digital age. This will enable young people to develop a diverse range of abilities in inquiry and research and foster critical analysis. *Thirdly*, to fill this void, we suggest that additional research is required to identify and highlight effective pedagogical strategies that fully leverage the digital era while nurturing the growth and social consciousness of youth citizens. *Finally*, whilst there is a general belief that youth have a wide participation in online communities, civic education for youths requires a comprehensive overhaul and an expanded approach. This will entail reimagining

and transforming the ways in which young individuals are educated, ensuring their preparedness to engage actively in the civic realm, considering all possibilities given by the digital age and online participation. Given the transformative impact of digital technologies on society, an updated civic education framework becomes indispensable to empower the younger generation for meaningful and stronger civic participation. As discussed earlier, and connected to the first point of the blueprint, this reimagining of political education will need a critical interrogation of the hegemonic progressive neoliberalism with a view to offer a radical and transformative vision of society culturally and economically.

Therefore, instead of the traditional claims of "going back to the basics" in education that are common in many conservative, and even in a few "progressive" political circles which are strongly reverberated by mainstream media, a shift in national curriculum and subject requirements that call for the politicisation of education in countries like England and Australia is essential if we are to develop with the future generations their skills to augment democracy and save our environment. For example, the political dimensions of the challenges surrounding the extractive industries, sustainable development, energy resources, and climate change need to be included in subjects that deal with these topics for students informed participatory action.

Although social media may provide advantages that are consistent with democratic, participatory norms and have the potential to reduce inequality, young people do not always maximise such advantages. Therefore, we call for a curriculum that allows the opening of political education spaces and a larger policy context that invites and supports political debate in schools.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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