



## ARTICLE

### **Experience, Democracy, Community – Identifying with John Dewey through Youth activism in Scotland**

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## Experience, Democracy, Community - Identifying with John Dewey Through Youth Activism in Scotland

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to enumerate the theoretical and practical dynamics of young activists' learning and to elaborate on the efficacy of John Dewey for youth activism in Scotland. The paper reflects on experiences of young people involved in discrete community activities in the West of Scotland.

Though contested, the democratic possibilities in youth work are cultivated through informal education. Social and political action for young people is suggested as a mechanism for civic engagement and empowerment. John Dewey's significance for informal educators in community education potentially lies in a number of areas therefore.

- his belief that education must engage with and enlarge experience
- his exploration of thinking and reflection – and the associated role of practitioners
- his concern with interaction and environments for learning providing a continuing framework for practice.
- and his passion for democracy, for educating so that all may share in a common life.

These facets of his philosophy have been developed as a critical lense in this article. They assist the process of decoding a record of young activist's learning obtained in the context of participant appraisal interviews. It is this data that forms the basis of conclusions about the utility of Dewey's work and consequently about whether it resonates in 21st century Scotland.

**Key Words:** Dewey; Activism; Democracy; Youth; Community Education,

## Introduction

The conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind.

John Dewey (1916), *Democracy and Education*; Middle Works **9**: p.103

To provide some context for the consideration of activism in this article and to set up the connection in general terms to John Dewey, this section of the article traces a line of analysis that begins with community practice epitomised by the endeavours of those actively engaged in their geographic communities. The starting point is community education, a field of practice that embodies a set of dispositions and values for a methodology of education that is located *in* the community, *for* the community and *with* the community. Johnston (2000, p.14) defines the key values of community education as a commitment to social justice, greater social and economic equality, and a more participatory democracy. The synthesis of experience through participation, working in and for the community and working collaboratively as a basis for democracy, locates John Dewey's theorising as a central pillar on which such core values have been built (Wallace and Coburn, forthcoming 2017). Community education as service development found expression in Scotland by linking domains of educative practice in youth work, adult education and community development (Scottish Education Department, 1975) and is now largely taken forward under the Scottish Government programme for community learning and development (CLD) (Scottish Executive, 2002; Scottish Government, 2014). Informal education in community contexts is a central principle and policy frameworks reinforce values and ideals of empowerment, self-determination, participation, partnership, inclusion and equality (Scottish Government, 2014; 2016 & 2017; Education Scotland, 2015). In the community education profession and in governance of community learning and development, these ideals are realised through strategies for learning that invoke collaborative participation, in which dialogue is a foundation for practice and through which there is a concern to develop critically informed action by participants (Wallace & McIntyre, 2013). Though arising in a Scottish context, the phenomena outlined here echoes international analysis provided by authors such as Taft (2011), Cornwall (2008), Newman (2006) and Finn (2001) and therefore may reflect trans-national phenomena in activism, community development and community education.

This conception of community education as a social process is a fundamental component in participatory methods. In Scotland, as is the case internationally, the interest in public participation in community development and policy-making (Murray, 2012; Education Scotland, 2015; Cornwall 2008) is related to perceived benefits ascribed to enhanced

legitimacy in democratic decision making, drawing the interests of marginalised people into the process of policy and governmentality (Cornwall, 2008; Taylor, 2011; Taft, 2011).

As a consequence there is a premium in practice attached to activism expressed as an extension of these aspirations for participation, for active engagement and for active citizenship. Participatory strategies, capacity building programmes and community development narratives depend therefore on activation of citizenship, on the activist as a central player and on activism as the engine for community development.

However this participative, educative and democratic impulse is both contested and potentially on the wane (Arnstein, 1969; Martin, 2003; Craig, 2007; Tett, 2010; Giroux, 2011). Ten years ago in Scotland, a campaign took place around the critical question 'Whatever happened to learning for democracy?' (Martin, Shaw, and Crowther, 2006). Comprising a coalition of community education academics, practitioners and learners, the campaigners argued that opportunities to renew democracy through community education were undermined through state regulation and instrumentality. Following the circulation of an open letter, a national debate was initiated around the creation of a different vision of the kind of society we want to live in, concluding that 'education and learning in communities can contribute to making this vision a reality and that they are a rich resource for tackling significant problems in society' (Martin, Shaw, and Crowther, 2006).

This article seeks to revise these broad principles and aspirations by revisiting education for democracy in Scotland ten years on. It will draw on John Dewey to offer both a golden theoretical thread and a lens through which to view aspects of activism and young people's engagement as active citizens. Though this article is not concerned with institutional learning in school it necessarily stands as a counterpoint to dominant discourse about education as schooling. Dewey (1859-1952) argued that learning must be active and that schooling was both unnecessarily long and restrictive. He suggested that children came to school to do things and to live in a community that gave them real, guided experiences that fostered their capacity to contribute to society. For such a contribution to be meaningful however, requires an approach to education that goes beyond an instrumental process of learning as training and which is not bounded by the confines of school or other institutions. Fostering participation and engagement as educative processes in this way represent aspirations for a particular type of society, one in which democratic education is nurtured and cultivated. Drawing on Dewey (1938), Apple (1995) and Giroux (2001), this process can be connected to activism (in schools and in neighbourhoods) and asserts that education must be linked to empowerment. Further, in providing a catalyst for reflection and building on mutual experiences, this aims to promote societal improvement in the interests of all (Rosales, 2012). Education for democracy therefore seeks to ensure that making a contribution to society is central, a communitarian concern, a contribution that once enacted is both a principled

process and generative of capacity for further change. This in turn is reflective of open community education that takes place outwith the institution and away from the frameworks that provide for and regulate instruction (Coburn and Wallace, 2010) and appears therefore to be a corollary of such Deweyan sentiment.

Thus the educative process of activism epitomises education for democracy, provides the cornerstone of community development and lies therefore at the heart of movements for democratic renewal.

To say that the welfare of others, like our own, consists in a widening and deepening of the perceptions that give activity its meaning, in an educative growth, is to set forth a proposition of political import.

John Dewey (1922)

### **Research Aims and Objectives**

As argued above, activism is a core yet under supported aspect of community learning and community development. The literature critiques an emphasis in community learning policy and practice that increasingly leans toward delivery of learning for credentials and employability and away from social purpose democratic traditions (Tett, 2010; Martin, 2003; Ledwith, 2001 & 2011). Further, though the narratives of community development, democratic education and participative democracy place a premium on citizen engagement, there is an apparent gap in the literature about activists' learning for such communitarian dispositions.

Having identified both a critique of the practice area and a gap in the literature this research project was established as a means of exploring research questions about activists' learning and specifically about the role of young activists.

The aim of this research project is to engage with young activists to acquire an overview of their experience and to create the opportunity of narrating the learning lives of activists. The analysis of these narratives creates the opportunity to draw on John Dewey to interpret the degree to which his philosophies of education, experiential learning and democracy are reflected in young Scottish activists' experiences. It creates an opportunity to draw on these insights as a means of informing community learning practice and policy making.

### **Literature: Activism, community development and democracy**

Key to the methodology was a perusal of literature on activism and its place in Scottish practices such as community learning and development. It is to this material that we now turn. Representing an amalgam of discrete yet closely coupled educational practices - in youth work, community-based adult learning and community development work (Education

Scotland, 2015) - community learning and development forms part of a Scottish Government response to social justice and inequality. Underpinned by ideals of self-determination and empowerment (Scottish Government, 2016) community learning's social purpose is closely linked to democratic process (Martin, 2008, p10). Activating participation, learning is located with the lives and interests of community groups and is explicitly intended to be responsive to the cultural milieu of participants (Wallace and Coburn, Forthcoming 2017). It is this social and experiential engagement that is a cornerstone of community learning and development practice and it is this that appears to connect to what Dewey described as processes of trying and undergoing (Dewey, 1916). The core impulse in practice is one in which participation in activities explicitly builds from and extends experience. The legitimacy of such reflexive experience - the trying and undergoing – provides a means of developing really useful knowledge (Tett, 2010, p.98) articulating identity and agency as contestation of official and hegemonic constraints.

However, Shaw and Crowther (2014) in their analysis of the relationship between community-based adult education and community development, critically appraise what they see as contingent, contested and compromised educational community work. Their analysis echoes earlier work by Aggar (cited in Welton, 1995, p.153) that argued that ideological dominance in advanced capitalism is leading 'to the loss of people's dialogue chances' and to an undermining of democratic engagement. They complement a long-standing debate across the literature identifying epistemological battles and ideological tensions around educational work in the community (Tett, 2010; Martin, 2003; Ledwith, 2001 & 2011). Examining the parallels and connections that can be fostered between social-purpose adult learning traditions and the politics of community development, Shaw and Crowther propose re-engagement with a historical tradition of theory and in turn they key into the Deweyan principles of democracy, education and social change:

Democracy also means voluntary choice, based on an intelligence that is the outcome of free association and communication with others. It means a way of living together in which mutual and free consultation rule instead of force, and in which cooperation instead of brutal competition is the law of life; a social order in which all the forces that make for friendship, beauty, and knowledge are cherished in order that each individual may become what he, and he alone, is capable of becoming.

Dewey, 1987, p.417

Though activism is a broad term (Ricketts, 2012; Murray 2012) it has been usefully defined as a desire to act in the interests of creating change and making the world a better place (Taft, 2011, p.26). The impetus for activism is complex however and this simplified definition requires further elaboration. In particular the learning paradigm represented in activism requires effective articulation and calls for greater epistemological clarity if Dewey's influence

is to be deduced. The transactional basis of experience according to Dewey (1938, p.43) involves both the individual and the environment, in which experience is modified by the environment in a reciprocal relationship (Garforth, 1966 cited in Ord, 2012, p.60). Reciprocity is articulated by Dewey (1916, p.104) in the context of experiential learning as a mutually coupled 'trying' and 'undergoing'. Ord (2012) is instructive in bridging this theorising to activism, interpreting 'trying' as an outward expression of intent or action – through action an attempt is made to have an impact on the world. 'Undergoing; in this transaction (ibid) relates to the impact or consequence of the experience on the individual. A learning cycle of action and reflection is thus suggested.

Giroux identifies pedagogy as 'both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations' (cited in Darder et al. 2009, p.439) and discusses how we exercise forms of intellectual and pedagogical practice, the purpose of which is to act politically. In identifying with pedagogy and the role of transformative intellectuals he signifies the importance of a transformative strategy through learning toward democratic engagement and social justice (Ledwith, 2011; Martin, 2003). Dewey (1993) wrote 'Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife'. As a consequence the articulation of the democratic mission of educational practitioners, their agencies and organisations must be raised and examined. It is in this essential epistemological vigilance (Martin, 2006) that Dewey's philosophies resonate.

However, this is not to infer a simple or straightforward articulation between such Deweyan principle and the activism encountered in this research project. On the contrary, Dewey (1987) may indeed have been prescient in determining a necessary focus on the democratic mission of educational practitioners who may be delivering the populace to policy rather than delivering policy to the populace. For example a range of contemporary scholars (Martin, 2003; Craig, 2007; Tett, 2010; Giroux, 2011) identify with institutional and structural constraints on social purpose democratic education arising from combined forces that include:

- The era of lifelong learning, the predominance of economic concerns and unquestioned need for growth and competitiveness
- An instrumental and vocational bias in educational policy and commodification of learning
- Reduction in resources in the public sector
- Market rights conflated with democratic ones
- Active citizenship discourse as a response to the declining public welfare sector

Institutional forces such as the state therefore moderate activism and consequently impinge on the democratic impulse. The perils of co-option through participation are well rehearsed in

the literature and in analysis of practice (Shaw & Martin, 2008; Craig, 2007; Newman, 2006; Ledwith 2011). Dewey also recognised that representative democracy and its associated institutional forms and processes (like sanctioned consultation and participation) can be inwardly reverential but may not be advancing 'the democratic idea' (Dewey, 1991 cited in JRF, 2006, p115). However, as Dewey argues, democracy is primarily a mode of associated living, of 'conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey 1916, p.93). To become democratic he deduced, a society should facilitate the 'participation in its good of all its members on equal terms'. He went further however to suggest that readjustment was required of societal institutions (like schools and community learning and development agencies) and that this should be informed by and connected to the different forms of 'associated life' (Dewey 1916, p.105).

His conclusion was that democracy rested on the free circulation of knowledge to enable individuals to participate in public affairs (Dewey 1916, 354-5). He alluded further to the tensions and critical impulse that democratic engagement infers by concluding that a democratic society is 'no harmonious compound but a dynamic balance between individual and shared interests.' Though advocating democratic education, Dewey also recognised that democracy required critique and scrutiny, acknowledging in the process that democracy is not fixed but requires dynamism, knowledge creation and purposeful engagement so that it may be critically appraised and remade (Dewey, 1991 cited in JRF, 2006, p118). It may be deduced therefore that activism, in its communitarianism and association, represents not simply a contribution to democracy but a remaking of democracy.

### **Methods and Methodology**

Bracken (2010) correctly configures the historically bound and culturally contextualised nature of human interaction and makes a case that this is central to epistemological clarity in educational research. Framing the basis for an interpretive and critical epistemology on which this article is founded the rationale is located with an appreciation of John Dewey's significance for informal educators, and for those, like the author, whose professional roots are set down in community education. Dewey believed that education must engage with and enlarge experience – a central philosophy and value in community education (Tett, 2010; Wallace and McIntyre, 2013). Connected to this, Dewey's exploration of thinking and reflection - and the associated role for educators - has continued to be an inspiration (Ord, 2009). Third, his concern with interaction and environments for learning provides a continuing framework for practice – foregrounding situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and social practices (Papen, 2005). His passion for democracy, for educating so that all may share in a common life (Rosales, 2012), provides a strong rationale for social justice in the collaborative contexts in which community educators work (Wallace and Coburn, Forthcoming, 2017). These values and principles assist in weaving together an epistemological and ontological underpinning to the theoretical work and methodology in this article.



Similar studies have tended to adopt ethnographic or case study methodologies (Bracken, 2010; Banks, 2006). Given a concern however with locating and articulating the authentic voices of activists, aiming explicitly to encourage them to narrate their involvement in and experience of activism, phenomenology was adopted for this study (Norlyk and Harder, 2010; Van Manen, 1990). Interpretative phenomenology aims to access 'an individuals cognitive inner world' (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008, p5) and to explore meaning ascribed to experiences and interactions within a particular environment.

Davidson (2013) acknowledges that a whole family of qualitative research is informed by phenomenology. She further highlighted 'less essentialist' directions in phenomenology, reporting that this included interpretation of data, routinely in the form of interview transcripts. Further, the above epistemological and ontological positioning, provides a form of bracketing in which the author as researcher 'brackets' his or her own experiences in order to understand and interpret the experience of participants in the study (Cresswell, 2014, p.15). Though a critique of the methodology acknowledges that bracketing cannot remove bias in interpretation (Cresswell, 2013), interpretative phenomenology (Bigerstaff and Thompson, 2008) is useful in challenging structural or normative assumptions that may be present, if largely unacknowledged, in positivist methodologies.

Research objectives were subsequently established for the project relating to the identification, recruitment and interviewing of a group of ten young activists (Cresswell, 2014; Bryman, 2012). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research (Palinkas et al, 2015; Cresswell, 2014) assisting in the identification and selection of cases. Although there are several different purposeful sampling strategies, the criteria for selecting individual participants focussed on the phenomenon of interest and on those 'whose main credential is experiential relevance' (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p 93), meaning that they had direct experience of being engaged as young people in activism in their communities. To the extent that participants were recruited through professional networks or were known to the researcher this represents a convenience strategy (Palinkas et al, 2015).

A semi-structured interview, using a prompt sheet with a limited number of open topic questions, was utilised. This is an approach that allows research interviews to develop dialogically and responsively. The intent in the interview is for 'the person interviewed [to be] more of a participant in meaning making' (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006, p. 314). Interpretative phenomenology (Cresswell, 2013) employs this dialogical openness to illicit the participant's experience of the phenomenon.

In the first instance interviews were recorded, transcribed and the transcript read for global meaning. This aimed to retain the integrity of the phenomenological approach by engaging

with a narrative rendered directly from participant accounts. Biggersaff and Thompson (2008) identify a cyclical process with four iterative stages: First encounter with the text; preliminary identification of themes; grouping themes together; and tabulating themes. Following this procedure a fifth iterative stage was introduced by which themes were interpreted in the context of Deweyan analysis specifically on experiential learning, the role of thinking and reflection, interaction with environments and democratic learning.

Reading and re-reading the text allows notes to be kept of points observed by the researcher. Bracketing (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008, p10) is suggested as a means by which the researcher suspends critical judgement at this stage to concentrate on what is actually presented in the transcript data. Thematic interpretation then follows to enable exploration of the detail including the identification of themes that connect to other participant transcripts and to the core elements of Deweyan analysis. It is this final element of the process that provides for a novel perspective on phenomenology in that a secondary device (Deweyan themes) is drawn to assist in interpreting the data sets. Further it was at this stage that a sixth iteration was introduced following a reengagement with literature. Similarities in the data set (definitional reference points) suggested a common process underpinning youth activism that was consequently equated with Dewey's notion of trying and undergoing.

## **Discussion**

Four summaries are presented in this section of the article to offer an illustration of the stories being told by the young activists. The four are indicative of the ten who were interviewed overall in that each, though discrete, showed a similar range of experience and a similar emersion in activism. The sample of four is predominately restricted to fit with the article structure and to allow sufficient space for further commentary and analysis.

### **Emma (aged 15)**

'Through activism...to be honest I learned more than I did in school'

Emma lives in a large public sector housing estate in the south of Glasgow and participated in the research as a result of her engagement in a local anti-austerity group.

She described her growing sense of voice and agency that she first identified at the age of 12. On preparing for the move to high school she became concerned about a school uniform policy and identified with both a concern about power (the head-teacher enforcing this policy) and injustice (pupils not being able to comply, yet being penalised by the school).

*Trying:* The trigger for her was about finding ways to raise these concerns (directly with teaching staff; through student representative bodies; and through her peers).

*Undergoing:* An activist identity appeared to emerge from this activity in that her peers subsequently expected her to be a spokesperson and to be engaged in raising issues that were concerns of theirs.

She did not locate her activism with family traditions noting that her mum and dad ‘...just go with the flow.’ Emma alluded to experience that grew predominately out of concern for change, associating with others in a community and drawing on these experiences to develop a wider repertoire of engagement. In her own analysis she acknowledged that the uniform policy did not change, that she was up against a powerful system but that this experience was nevertheless educative. She subsequently was politicised by the Scottish referendum campaign in the lead up to 2014, attending hustings and debates held locally. Here, ongoing engagement as a member of a local youth organisation further created opportunities for her to engage with peers in taking an active and collective interest in campaigning for women’s voices to be heard. The process of engagement, her experiences within the community and her engagement with the democratic process were articulated by her as political engagement, feminism and activism.

#### **Alex (aged 20)**

‘Its really difficult to pinpoint learning...its not ‘learned’ - past tense -...just learning - ongoing tense...it’s easier to say what was acquired as a result of the process...’

Living in a small working class community in North Lanarkshire the impulse for Alex to become activist resided in bullying at school and the sense of injustice that nothing was apparently being done about it. Though gay, and a passionate advocate of LGBT matters, the problems he identified at the time were based on experiences of the whole community – issues in school, the lack of a skate park and environmental issues – these were recurring problems and no-one was responding to them. He felt strongly that he had something to say about the experiences of young people and about their lack of voice. Reflecting on his motivation then, he focussed on his awareness at the time that there could be a lot of people like him with a lot to say but ‘no voice to say it’.

*Trying:* He subsequently found out about the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP). When elections were coming up he put himself forward (following advice of a community learning and development worker), took part in school hustings and campaigned for election. However he was unsuccessful.

*Undergoing:* At this time he also became active in neighbourhood politics contributing to a campaign against environmental destruction in his home area caused by major road

developments. The combination of this experience gave him an insight into the political process and energised him after his election defeat. When a subsequent opportunity arose in a further election to the SYP, he stood again and on this occasion, as a 15 year old, he was successful. It was in the course of this term of office that he also became involved in party politics.

Indeed Alex qualified the activist label saying that it was really only when he (and peers) became involved in party politics (5 years previously) that they saw themselves truly as activists.

### **Susan (Age 26)**

'There had always been a sense of community spirit where I lived in the past ...then there were three murders in the space of a few months...this was the tipping point...we said let's make a change and bring back that community spirit.'

Susan is currently the chairperson of a community action group that represents tenants' interests and community concerns, taking action in their own area. Born and raised in a public sector housing estate in North Lanarkshire that has among the highest multiple deprivation indices in the area, Susan's impulse to become active in her community stemmed from a progressive decline in the housing stock, a rapidly changing demographic in the area and an increasingly negative cycle of crime. She articulated an impending loss of community in terms of fear, dwindling social networks and lack of community engagement. People no longer knew who their neighbours were and anti-social behaviour was increasing.

*Trying:* In interview she expressed surprise that at a relatively young age (late teens), she was able to articulate and experience such powerful influences. Nevertheless as a nineteen year old she engaged with a community learning and development worker, her best friend and her friend's mum and convened a meeting in her own home in 2009 to determine what could be done.

*Undergoing:* The initial focus for this group (subsequently joined by a eight other residents) was to initiate a local consultation event and to work toward the resurrection of a local Gala day – a social and celebratory community event that the area used to have but which no longer took place. The rationale for this, initially, was to provide a positive experience for residents, to create a positive story that may counter the increasingly negative profile the area had, and to build some sense of community organisation to begin to reclaim their community and campaign for improved services and amenities.

Susan characterised the most powerful learning in activism as learning about yourself – she had never attended a public meeting, chaired a meeting or challenged public officials before this process was initiated. The group were learning together to speak truth to power, to collaborate and stay focussed, to organise and to be assertive. Although she was inexperienced, the most important thing she noted was to get things done – to effect change – the agenda, minutes, partnership forums and public policy protocols were all challenges but means to this end and simply had to be accomplished for the good of the community.

### **Tam (Age 28)**

'I'm not activist. Not socialist or anarchist...I'm just Tam!'

The catalyst for Tam to become active in his community (a large housing estate in the south of Glasgow) was the independence referendum campaign that culminated in 2014.

*Trying:* Providing emphasis as to his particular journey, Tam said that until the 2014 plebiscite he had never voted or been interested in politics (local or party). He reflected on his persona before the referendum campaign and described how he '...thought he was that moral person...but when I look back I realise that I wasn't'. This political awakening was in part attributed to the feeling that the campaign in the referendum was the first time he had '...to really have my voice heard'. He also alluded to being an avid watcher of political comedy and in particular was drawn to the humour and analysis of George Carlin. Reflecting on this he realised, on revisiting material that he had already viewed, that he was now seeing and hearing a more nuanced comedy – one that was politically more potent than he had at first realised. He attributed this to learning about himself and about politics and to political awareness.

*Undergoing:* The Yes campaign in the referendum drew him into a local group involving neighbours and family who in the first instance wanted to promote a Yes vote. However they quickly realised that many of their neighbours and peers also did not vote and were not registered to do so in the referendum. Though the Yes campaigning continued, their main approach shifted to voter registration activity, routinely via a stall they ran at the local shopping mall. It was in the course of these activities that Tam realised many local people were on the same journey as him and for the first time in their lives becoming politically engaged, feeling that there was an opportunity for their voices to be heard.

When the referendum was over and the Yes campaign was defeated, the group reconvened and determined to keep up their campaigning work. Tam alluded to the contacts and trust they had established and to the insight into real poverty in the area. A cross-generational

community based anti-austerity group was consequently established and he remains heavily involved in it.

The ten young activists in the sample were drawn from a range of backgrounds and experiences. They were identified either through personal contact with the researcher or had been identified by colleagues in the field as being involved in some form of community activism (Ricketts, 2012; Murray 2012). All of them had in common an experience of engagement in their geographical community and their activism has been usefully defined as a desire to act in the interests of creating change and making the world a better place (Taft, 2011, p.26). In addition to localised concerns the activists were also engaged with Scottish and U.K. wide campaigns that were referenced in the analysis and that requires some elaboration for readership outwith Scotland: The referendum referred to is a Scottish referendum for independence that took place in 2014 and that energised political debate and increased electoral participation significantly. It is largely credited with a second wave of political activism beyond the referendum especially among young people and those who had previously not voted; the bedroom tax relates to a UK government change to welfare benefits which saw tenants in social housing have their benefit reduced by 14% if they have a spare bedroom or 25% if they have two or more. Reductions in benefit disproportionately impact on the most vulnerable tenants such as those with disabilities or chronic illnesses; and anti-austerity campaigning relates to the fiscal policy of the Conservative UK government which cut or severely restricted spending on public and other services, many of which were essential to the most impoverished communities.

Common characteristics among participants in the study are that all of them were under the age of 25 at the point of which their activism was initiated. Additionally, all of the activists were living in or from communities experiencing structural inequality in the West of Scotland. Eight of the ten were first generation activists in that there was not previously a tradition of activism in their extended families or peer group until they themselves became activist. Of the remaining two, one had a father who was politically active, initially through the UK miners' strike, the second had a parent who is an active trades unionist. In response to interview, most either alluded to parents or family members going along with the flow or, through body language, facial expressions or humour, expressed scepticism about parents as activists.

My family aren't really that interested in that kind of stuff (activism)...they just kind of go with the flow.

(Emma aged 15, activist for 3 years)

I'm definitely not the latest in a line of activists, the only thing my dad does actively is watch the tv!

(Alex aged 20 activist for 6 years)

In his pedagogic creed John Dewey (1897) conceived of education as a process of living and not preparing for future living, a potential exemplification of the modern phenomenon of mindfulness (Pagnini and Philips, 2015). He further states that all education proceeds by participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race and is exemplified in the following two extracts.

'My dad was my first influence, speaking to me as a child about radical politics and injustice. He influenced me and I influenced my pals at school...most of them are quite politically aware because of me! ... Some people avoid you because they expect politics but often they seek you out and are interested in sharing opinions and telling stories.

(We)...speak to people, working on the stall for the bedroom tax (and for the referendum)...and door to door giving out pamphlets and leaflets, giving information and recruiting, advocating and giving legal advice - encouraging resistance.'

(Patricia, aged 26, activist for 5 years)

'This is a working class housing scheme, hundreds of people who are down trodden, very beaten (down)..being an activist is me putting myself forward to try and speak for these people and to try to help people so that they realise they are not alone in this and it is not their fault.

..the anti-austerity group... its a classic example of something people can come together and join and they can start fighting for something..."

(Eddie aged 27, activist for 5 years)

In both of these extracts the underlying premise is one in which the activists are learning through engagement in their community and in which there is a ripple out effect. All of the activists revealed a similar process in which the initial impulse for the individual's engagement had translated into a network of relations in which the benefits for the whole community were raised above the individual or the personal. Connecting to two sides of education, Dewey further argued that the psychological and the sociological are inextricably entwined and 'organically related'. These traits and characteristics were evidenced across the activist stories. Indeed, though he was talking of the 'child' throughout the creed (which the author has translated here as the 'participant') the principle of the 'social individual' as a member of society that is an organic union of individuals, is central to the social purpose and social practice of activism as expressed by the participants.

...we're making a difference working together, we're not just doing the usual or the norm, we're actually getting involved, actively in something in the

community so we are not just like the old one (in the scheme) hanging about drinking and that. We are actually getting involved and making a difference...

...most teachers know you're involved and ask you to get applications (for small grants)...it's quite good... gives a sense of achievement...Aye they're thinking you're not just one of these weans.

They recognise youthbank as something that makes a difference and that's why they want to get involved with you.

(John, aged 17, activist for three years)

As a consequence, experiential education locates lived social experience at the heart of the educational process and cannot be subsumed as an abstraction solely of the psychological or cognitive. For Dewey, experience involves a dual process of understanding and influencing the world around us as well as being influenced and changed ourselves by that experience. Dewey (1916, p.104) referred to this reflective process of 'trying and undergoing' and it appears that this may represent a synonym for the activism represented in the four selected summaries of participant stories. Each of the ten activists' stories is redolent of experience and experiential learning. Ord (2012) understood the experience component of experiential learning as transactional; like these activists it is part of what it means to be 'in the world'. Significantly, this accurately encapsulates the experiences of all of the participants who connect to the history or historical position of their community – a connection through their experience with the past, taking in the present activities and projecting on to an improved (aspirational) future.

The educative benefits of such experience, according to Dewey (1916; 1938), is that it must be meaningful and it is given greater emphasis when it is dialectical through trying and undergoing. According to Ord (2012, p.68) such learning by experience is a two way process of engaging with the world. Though power relations are a significant determinant in society (as represented in these narratives by inequality and disadvantage) Ord (ibid) draws on Dewey to portray a process, akin to those outlined in the activist profiles, in that experiential learning is connected to efforts to change the way things are or are perceived to be - and at the same time 'being prepared to suffer or undergo the consequences and therefore in turn to be changed by the experience'.

As can be seen in the summary profiles of the activists, connections can be established between private troubles and public issues (Reisch, 2013, p.68) and it is these issues that John Dewey tells us are a legitimate educational concern. Indeed Shaw and Crowther (2014) identify activism as one of three pedagogical models that historically have been influential in



community development. However, as they also point out, there remains a need to build a synthesis that draws together the political impulse of community development traditions with the social democratic potential of adult learning. It is this impulse that moves us closer to the consideration of a bridging epistemology for activists' learning that has at its core John Dewey's philosophy, linking notions of experience, democracy and community. It is instructive however to note that only three of the activists were influenced or supported by youth workers, teachers or community workers. Each of them however revealed aspects of their engagement in which they themselves were realising organisational capital (Taylor, 2011) by adopting roles as facilitator, group-worker or mentor.

Waddington and Mohan (2004) refer to the development of political consciousness and confidence as political literacy. The participants in this study all revealed trajectories in their own learning that saw rising levels of confidence and deeper political awareness. Theories of community learning portray a process through which participants build knowledge – of self, of community and of politics - by which means the development of critical awareness becomes a foundation for informed action and positive change (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Though Cleaver (2004, p.273) correctly asserts that there are important limitations in theorising agency, it may be understood from the activists in this study as the ability to affect events outside of one's immediate sphere of influence (Ling and Dale, 2013) and as 'an 'a priori' condition to action (Dale, 2013, p.2). Activism for the young people often evolved into a networking or bonding association with others in their peer group or community. It may be conceived therefore as the expression of agency through a dynamic mix of bonding, bridging and linking ties (Newman and Dale, 2005). The belief that change is possible (an impulse at the heart of each of the activist stories) connects both to a process of agency and of empowerment (Bandura, 2000). All ten interviewees were prompted or motivated by the need for change and for improvements in their community. Ling and Dale (2013, p.2) argue that agency is the force behind social action and that actors make a difference through exercising it at an individual and collective level. Agency is conceptualised therefore as a latent energy requiring some catalyst to call it into being (Dale, 2013, p.3). The catalyst for each of the respondents was discrete – for Emma it was injustice at school; for Susan it was the decline in community and a need to foster a greater sense of community identity; for Tam it was the sense of being enfranchised through the referendum and the consequent uncovering of poverty caused by austerity policies; for Alex it was the reaction to bullying and the feeling that young people were not heard in the school or the community. The initial imperceptibility and deeply individualised nature of these characteristics may be problematic for practitioners when seeking to nurture activism but are nevertheless key to an appreciation of activists' learning.

Across the ten interviews it was clear that 'trying' and 'undergoing' were key facets of activism. A wide range of common attributes and characteristics similar to those identified by

Dale (2013, p.8) were replicated in this study vis: 1) a *strong sense of social justice*; 2) *empowering connections* – influence of peers, extended family, social media, supportive community networks; 3) *personal traits* – personal beliefs, being uncomfortable with hierarchical power dynamics, modelling the possibilities and desire for change; 4) *self efficacy* – ability to overcome barriers, seeking to strive and not yield, belief in the power of the collective to make meaningful social change. Recognising small steps being taken toward a larger aspiration for change; 5) *openness* – a desire to embrace diversity and tolerance, dialogue and debate; 6) *a sense of community* – belonging, diverse networks or the interest in creating networks and a strong connection to place – an identity shaped by their locus in the community; 7) *social capital* – collective efficacy as a priority, strong ties to diverse networks; appreciation of how to use the networks to mobilise support. Ability to build and bridge networks, intergenerational engagement; and finally 8) *leadership* – though often eschewing status as leader and down-playing their roles, subtle leadership was expressed through enacting organisational capital.

## Conclusion

The lessons, for practitioners and for policy-makers, are that the above are identifiable traits that may be uncovered, stimulated and nurtured. Engagement in this process of activism is often characterised for participants in terms of identity shifts and of developing agency. They all express a sense of place and belonging and an urge for solidarity with and among people in their community. Theoretical principles from Dewey, around experiential learning, liberatory learning, empowerment and social action (Rosales, 2012) are evidenced in the data collected from participants and exemplified in stories about voice and growing confidence, about developing skills, knowledge and understanding and about a quest for social justice. This appears to be assuaged in part by the social networking, energy and small successes of individual campaigning activities. Social purpose democratic education as set out by Martin (2006) draws on this Deweyan philosophy in exemplifying five core characteristics: participant learners are citizens and social actors; curriculum reflects shared social and political interests; pedagogy is based on dialogue rather than transmission; critical understanding is linked to social action and political engagement; and education is a key resource in a struggle for social change and social justice. Identifying with these these characteristics of practice should obtain greater emphasis in policy and practice if we are truly to enact government priorities for democratic renewal and community development.

Many young people are clearly political aware but like most of the participants in this study are sceptical about representative democracy, politicians and elections. These participants do not equate entirely with Farthing's (2010, p 190) representation of a retreat from politics as a political act. However, it is the case that these young activists raise issues that are important to them, and that are oppositional and critical of the mainstream. Through a variety

of means, including social media, they seek to connect to others in the interests of a more democratic response to social justice considerations.

There are a series of limitations to this study that relate predominately to inherent disadvantages in purposeful sampling and to the small scale of the sample. There may be some vulnerability to error in judgement by the researcher, a low level of reliability and some bias and, as a consequence, generalising from these findings may be problematic. Though research methodology is defended, bias in interpretation is difficult to fully eradicate and therefore subjectivity may be a problem. John Dewey, however, offers a rich theoretical tradition that helps to analyse and explain traditions of education and democratic life. The underpinning philosophy and critique he provides offers a central pillar for a particular field of practice in community based education. In reflecting on the experiences of young activists this paper set out in part to interrogate the utility of Dewey and to make an assessment of the place of activism in amplifying ideals of democratic living. In part the focus on young activists was an attempt to ascertain whether democracy was indeed being renewed through the engagement in their communities of a younger cadre of activists.

Arguably we are entering uncertain times in terms of the democratic condition in the UK. In response to a similar sense of crisis Dewey advocates an imaginative retrieval of democracy's participatory condition. For Dewey it is demonstrably a moral and social ideal, inspiring a way of learning and practicing politics (Morales, 2012, p.161). This aspiration is writ large across the responses and activities of the young activists in this study.

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