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Received: 6 May 2026 | Accepted: 11 June 2026

DOI: 10.1002/berj.70239

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

BERJ BERA

Children's food activism: Reflections on knowledge and responsibility

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Funding information
Scottish Universities Insight Institute

Abstract

Children as activists have become more prominent in recent years. Their activism is manifest in relation to conspicuously political topics such as Black Lives Matter, voting rights, being able to air their views or protesting against injustices related to race, culture and other identities. Less often, if at all, do children engage politically with issues related to food. In discussing questions of food activism, this article draws on reflections from the 'Food activism in the schoolyard' knowledge exchange project that prompted discussion amongst practitioners working with children across formal and informal education contexts in Scotland. Specifically, the article puts a spotlight on the topic of learning for sustainability to address the question of children's food activism. It does so by highlighting two key considerations that impinge on it being a prominent feature in children's lives educationally and more broadly: children's knowledge (or lack thereof) in relation to food, and the question of whose responsibility it is to be concerned about issues related to food. While food is a key component in school curricula, opportunities for interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral collaborations would prove useful. The article seeks to advance the conversation about children's activism, drawing the topic of food activism into focus.

This project was realised with funding from the Scottish Universities Insight Institute Sustainability Research Programme, 2019–2021.

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KEYWORDS
child activists, children's rights, epistemic injustice, food education, learning for sustainability

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This article addresses and problematises the question of food activism as an expression of children's rights.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper argues that a challenge to the idea of the child as activist is fundamental to ensure that food sustainability is not the responsibility of children alone. The article makes an argument for food activism to be part of learning for sustainability in schools, and provides a framework for teachers to address food activism as an integral dimension of children's rights.

INTRODUCTION

Food activism describes the activity of working to address the issues of inequitable distribution, insecure supply, and unsustainable production and consumption of food. Food activists work to grow, distribute, empower and educate, in community and charity-based activisms in both Global North and Global South contexts (Alkon & Guthman, 2017). Though the literature on activism has increased in recent years to profile the voice and participation of children and young people on a range of social and environmental issues, from voting rights, to being able to air their views and protesting against injustices related to race, culture and other identities (Clay, 2012), food activism, especially in the UK, is conspicuously absent. In drawing attention to this aspect, this article highlights some of the tensions in promoting activism in school-based settings, and draws into focus the particular challenges of positioning children's activism in relation to food, an issue that is traditionally addressed as a matter of individual consumption, as opposed to its significantly cultural and political implications (Gladkova, 2023), impinging on the capacity of schools to become active sites for action and decisions well-beyond the school (Collese et al., 2026). Using food activism as a focus, this article addresses the question: 'Can and should children be food activists?' By drawing from children's rights discourse, notions of epistemic injustice, and the ethics of responsibility, alongside the authors' own reflective experience, the discussion presented here further contribute to the limited work that critically questions child activism.

To help orientate the reader, we begin by outlining the knowledge exchange project 'Food activism in the schoolyard' that offered the context for the reflections and critique presented here. Since food activism happens within both the local community context and the legal and conceptual framework of international human rights discourse, we then examine the ways in which this discourse has evolved over the international human rights era since 1948. This is then situated in the UK food context before exploring food and the Scottish curriculum. This is not to suggest that the issues raised pertain only to Scotland. As one of

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only a small number of countries to have sustainability embedded in teachers' professional standards (GTCS, 2021), Scotland provides a good model for considering the issue more broadly. The discussion next positions children's knowledge about food as foundational to the question of children as food activists. This then enables us to draw upon our reflections from the project to further understand the place of food education within the specific national context of the Scottish curriculum and education related to sustainability. We conclude the article by advancing a series of critical reflections on the extent to which children can or should be food activists in relation to issues of knowledge and responsibility.

THE PROJECT

As a one-year knowledge exchange project, *Food Activism in the Schoolyard* offered the opportunity to explore ideas with adults working across sectors and to include children's perspectives, with the goal to develop a food activism framework to inform curriculum planning for teachers in schools and for practitioners in other settings. The project involved four planned phases: an initial workshop with community organisations, researchers and practitioners across formal and informal settings; a workshop with one class of 30 ten-year-old primary school children in Aberdeenshire and another of secondary school children in Edinburgh; and a final workshop to share findings and a Food Activism Framework. The work with secondary school pupils did not take place due to the Covid-19 lockdown so we drew on work from a previous food growing project led by the voluntary organisation One Seed Forward and two members of the team (Gray, Colucci-Gray et al., Gray et al., 2019). It is important to note that this was not a research project but responded to the call of the Scottish Universities Insight Institute for research-led partnerships addressing the most pressing issues of sustainability through cooperative actions between Universities and civil society. So, the rationale for our focus on food activism rather than food security or climate change was rooted in a broader conception of school education, which actively interfaces with issues in the community by opening opportunities for children's participation (Cassidy & Robinson, 2022; Colucci-Gray, 2023). As McGregor and Christie (2021) state, it is the concept of justice that is being prioritised, yet swathes of the population, and children especially, feel excluded from such actions or worse, do not understand the connections between activist concerns and their own material conditions. Arguably, the same can be said for food activism which hardly makes the headlines, despite the critical and fundamental connection between food and climate justice in a fossil-fuelled food economy (Cabello-Garrido et al., 2023). Moreover, the project was timely and to some extent anticipatory, as the Scottish Government had already adopted the discourse of a just and fair transition away from a hydrocarbon economy (Mattar et al., 2021), while Scotland has endorsed an internationally unique sustainability education approach termed Learning for Sustainability (LfS), which can be understood as

> … enabl[ing] learners, educators, schools and their wider communities to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable society. An effective whole school and community approach to LfS weaves together global citizenship, sustainable development education, outdoor learning and children's rights to create coherent, rewarding and transformative learning experiences. (Learning for Sustainability National Implementation Group 2016, 7)

Set against this background, the project was primarily a first and significant opportunity to advance a debate on the critical relationships between children and activism in relation to food, by testing the boundaries of the concept as they were conceived by people with different responsibilities for children's education. Over the course of the project, the team engaged with

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80 participants that comprised teachers, student teachers, academics, community educators, local policy makers, charities and non-governmental organisations including Glasgow Life, Glasgow City Council, Zero Waste Scotland, Youth Link Scotland, Learning for Sustainability Scotland and Scottish Government (Colucci-Gray & Cassidy, 2023). We also worked to involve children in the project and drew on previous initiatives involving primary school children led by some of the team members (Gray, Colucci-Gray et al., Gray et al., 2019).

As we carefully documented the different phases, in this paper we draw upon the structural tensions and the gaps that emerged when looking at children as food activists, and the opportunities—particularly in Scotland—for talking about food activism in schools. In our first workshop, we set the rationale for exploring the topic of food as a critical issue in the broader framework of education for sustainability. In addition to some tasks that prompted discussion amongst the participants, dialogue was stimulated by presentations from several community organisations in Scotland, working in food-related initiatives across formal and informal settings, and contributions from international speakers working with teachers and schools on food and education. The session was captured by a graphic illustrator through a series of vignettes which contextualise divergent perspectives to aid plenary discussions and subsequent reflection (Agostini et al., 2024). Specifically, the unequal positioning of children in relation to global issues, the size and relative positioning of 'represented participants' (including both human and non-human others) pointed to imbalances and tensions in terms of power, status and authority (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). This session both informed and was followed by the design of a second workshop with children in a primary school to explore their experiences of food growing and food activism in school, and to glean a sense of their knowledge and experiences in relation to food.

The children participated in a philosophical dialogue prompted by their questions arising from reading Emily Gravett's (2016) book *Tidy*, a story about a badger that concretes the forest floor to make it tidier, but it impacts negatively on the habitat and animals who share it. They also created posters stimulated by the dialogue and participated in a baking activity using locally sourced produce, such as oat flour and grated carrots to make breakfast muffins, and they included favourite non-local ingredients, such as blueberries and bananas. These activities were designed to offer opportunities for discussion amongst the children and with team members. During the baking activity, the children also spoke about their knowledge of food and the ways in which they engaged with food outwith school.

Due to the onset of COVID-19, the final workshop was held online. Two international speakers from India presented, exemplifying how the concept of food activism had been used to inform a whole-school-community collaboration involving children, parents, grandparents and teachers in growing, harvesting and processing food through their project in New Delhi (Varma Patil & Ravi, 2021). The speakers shared practical examples to illustrate how their approach enabled local communities to find ways of achieving greater cohesion and respond to the impacts of poverty, loss of both farming and cooking skills, and climate change. Over the course of the workshops, the team elaborated on the key dimensions for the design of a practice framework supporting learning for sustainability and food activism in formal education contexts. In what follows, we contextualise our reflections emerging from the planned workshops with children within a critical reading of the international literature on food education and children's rights, focusing on answering the political and educational question: 'can and should children be food activists'?

FOOD ACTIVISM

The concept of food activism has its roots primarily in the response of small producers in the Global South to decreasing levels of control over land, heavy reliance on oil-fuelled, intensive

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farming practices, and food access (Block et al., 2012). Similarly, the Global North saw the emergence of political consumerism, starting in the 1980s, through initiatives such as the Slow Food Movement, founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1989, which espoused similar aims, including preserving and promoting local food traditions, protecting biodiversity and advocating for sustainable food production. Ethical vegetarianism and veganism can also be understood as a form of personal food activism. Though numbers adopting this diet in the UK have remained steady with modest reductions in meat eating overall (Stewart et al., 2021), rates are highest amongst young adults 18–19, particularly women (Nezlek & Forestell, 2024).

With understanding the origins of food and the processes that lead to it comes the recognition that food represents the most intimate relationship that human communities establish with other living things and with the Earth. Hence, engaging in food activism is not only a means to secure the availability and fair distribution of food for human communities, but it means addressing the fundamental relationship between humanity and nature; whereby participation is not only a civic duty but is imbued with cultural and spiritual dimensions.

While attention to issues of global food production has increased in recent years due to the impacts of climate change, energy crisis and geopolitical tensions affecting market availability, food choices differ greatly amongst people living in low to middle-income countries (Popkin et al., 2020). According to Popkin et al.'s study, for children in particular, food preferences often gravitate towards sugary and starchy-rich foods. While parents may be tagged with the responsibility to introduce children to a varied and healthy diet, this is hard for low-income families for a complex variety of reasons, not least affordability. The Food Foundation (2025) reports a sobering statistic: 'The most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 45% of their disposable income on food to afford the government-recommended healthy diet—rising to 70% for households with children' (p.30). Furthermore, while evidence exists that in the UK, national school food policy may influence food choices in younger populations (van Kleef et al., 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2025), children are not well positioned to make any changes for themselves. While children have rights to express their views on matters that concern them under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), they have limited influence on their day-to-day experiences of food (Fernqvist et al., 2024).

As we will explore below, food activism as a concept extends beyond nutritional concerns pointing to the importance of building an 'intergenerational culture' '…that respects children as equals, that values children's perspectives, and that includes children as active agents in economic, social, and political life' (Taft, 2022, p.65). In this context, the key question revolves around the extent to which food as a fundamental human experience should or can be addressed with children in schools.

THE RIGHT TO FOOD, FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

There is no actual right to food in UK legislation, though the right to adequate nutrition is explicitly cited as a principle underpinning current legislation in Scotland (Good Food Nation Act (Scotland) S.2d). The right to food is implicit in both the UNDHR (1948) 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family' and more explicitly and comprehensively in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966) Article 11:

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions […].

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2. The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognising **the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger […]**.
   a. **To improve methods of production, conservation and distribution of food** by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge, by disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition and by developing or reforming agrarian systems in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilisation of natural resources.
   b. Taking into account the problems of both food-importing and food-exporting countries, to ensure an **equitable distribution of world food supplies** in relation to need.

(United Nations, 1966, emphasis added).

Over the ensuing decades, the concept of food security has overtaken the right to food in international discourse (Mechlem, 2004). While the initial focus was on food production and meeting the needs of a rapidly expanding global population, attention gradually turned to how individual access to food varies within any given context, as it became clear that unfair distribution was the cause of hunger, rather than the simple lack of food. As Amartya Sen observes in the opening lines of *Poverty and Famines*, 'Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat' (Sen, 1981, p. 1). Following the logic of this insight, the 1996 World Food Summit saw the emergence of a new paradigm, that of food *sovereignty*. Though the term 'food sovereignty' did not make it into the Summit's final declaration, nonetheless a shift towards an explicitly political understanding of the right to food had taken place. This is very visible in the final report of the Summit, which asserted that 'food sovereignty takes precedence over macro-economic policies and trade liberalization' and further, that '[f]ood cannot be considered as a commodity, because of its social and cultural dimension' (UN, 1996). Whereas Sen's thesis seeks to describe and understand the phenomenon of hunger in relation to legal entitlements, the tenor of the international community's consensus was normative and aneconomic. This approach marks the rejection by all key international human rights organisations of market-driven policies, and underpins a move in international discourse towards rights-based, democratic and responsive understandings of food (Gladkova, 2023).

So where do children come into this international discussion?

The first explicit mention of children in international discussion as something other than a responsibility for adults and as passive recipients of goods happened in 2007 in the Forum for Food Sovereignty. The Forum, a coalition of international environmental, farming and fishing, and women's organisations, issued a declaration which asserted:

> Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems… It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation.
>
> (Vía Campesina, 2007)

The significance of children's inclusion in food sovereignty started to emerge in the years following the Nyéléni Declaration. In 2018 the Forum observed that:

> The future of the struggles for the realization of food sovereignty and the right to food depends on how our children are aware of the challenges regarding how we produce our food, by whom and for whom it is produced.
>
> (Nyéléni Newsletter, 2018)

The focus on children's awareness and knowledge places this aspect of food sovereignty firmly within the domain of education, conceived both formally and informally. Though the explicit

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aim is for children to be 'agents of change', it is recognised that they need knowledge and understanding to achieve this (Vía Campesina, 2023). There is a firm tension between the aim of children becoming agentic and their 'carrying forward the movement's struggle' (Vía Campesina, 2023), in other words, requiring them to follow a course of action worked out and determined by adults. In this way, food activism emerged as a distinctive political form in which children could participate. The question however remains as to how and in what way this could be realised and accommodated in schools.

CONTEXT

Food in the UK

The form that food activism might take is determined by social, cultural and economic circumstances. In this instance, the context is that of a rich country with a complicated food story. While many people in the UK enjoy access to high quality and plentiful food, most people's diet does not meet government dietary recommendations, is heavily reliant on cheaper and ultra-processed convenience food, with Scotland holding a long-standing reputation for having the worst diet in the UK (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra], 2024). Government reluctance to restrict the promotion of highly processed and unhealthy foods is partly responsible for high rates of malnutrition in children who, as a result are becoming shorter and heavier (C3 Collaborating for Health, n.d.), though this year some regulations on television advertising have come into force (British Nutrition Foundation, 2025). The UK food supply is considered fragile with low resilience to supply chain problems because more than half of the food consumed is imported (Department for Environment, Food, & Rural Affairs [Defra], 2024). Only around a quarter of households surveyed in Scotland in 2017 claim to grow their own food (though our personal experience leads us to think that this may be an overestimate) (Greenspace Scotland et al., 2017). Historical patterns of land ownership, lack of intergenerational knowledge, and climate all play a part (Calo et al., 2024). Overall, as a country we have a mixture of inequality, cultural preferences, geographical features and a capitalist economy that mitigate against a healthy and positive relationship to food production and consumption.

Though all children have a stake in the quality and availability of food, for some children this is a more immediate concern. Children are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, where access to sufficiently nutritious food cannot be guaranteed, and sometimes fails (Gallegos et al., 2021). One quantifiable indicator of this in the UK is foodbank use. These voluntary and community-based organisations provide food parcels to people who are in financial crisis. Use of these services has risen steeply over the past 5 years, with around 8% of children in the UK relying on foodbanks in the previous 12 months (Francis-Devine et al., 2025). In our project, a small number of children spoke about sharing gardening experiences or cooking with parents/grandparents. These connections were important and meaningful to them, and they were able to speak knowledgeably about food produced on family allotments. Other children—more of the children—said that they were not permitted to cook at home for safety reasons and that they had limited choice with respect to meals at home. It seemed that many of these children may experience little connection to food before it hits their plate. As we note below, children have little say in what food is available, but for some young people there are ways of asserting control and making ethical choices, for example by refusing to eat what may be offered at school and at home as a form of resistance or protest (Chuck et al., 2016). We suggest

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food activism may comprise all these different forms as we go on to explore it in relation to legal and educational policy frameworks.

Scottish curriculum and food

The present article is situated in the Scottish context, making it important to explain a little about the formal Scottish curriculum, *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) (Scottish Government, 2004), and where food is the focus of learning. CfE is designed for children aged between 3 and 18 years old, with continuity and progression built into the developmental phases around which the curriculum is structured. It revolves around the principle that subject areas are interconnected and that interdisciplinary learning is valuable and possible within the curriculum structure. Currently, such emphasis has grown more strongly within the newly started Curriculum Improvement Cycle putting emphasis on quality and relevance to learners' contemporary needs (Education Scotland, 2026). This makes it ripe for children to learn about food.

The topic of food is principally located within the Health and Well-being section of the curriculum, one of the key contexts for learning and the third structural foundation on which the curriculum is built. Alongside literacy and numeracy, it is the responsibility of all teachers (Cassidy, 2017). The food and health component of the curriculum is organised around: mental, emotional, social and physical well-being; planning for choices and changes; physical education, physical activity and sport; substance misuse; and relationships, sexual health and parenthood (Education Scotland, 2026, p. 73). Food safety features as an element of personal safety, while a whole-school approach to food and health, *Hungry for Success* (Scottish Executive, 2003), is promoted, whereby children should receive:

> consistent healthy eating messages enabling them to make healthy food choices and to develop lifelong healthy eating habits…[and] practical food activities… so that [they] enjoy a variety of opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to plan and safely prepare dishes for a healthy balanced diet to meet their own needs and the needs of others. In this way they will gain an appreciation that preparing and eating food can be a pleasant, enjoyable and social experience (Education Scotland, 2026, p. 77).

The approach adopted by the Scottish curriculum is reinforced through the legislation on which the framework is based, the *Schools Health Promotion and Nutrition (Scotland) Act 2007*.

However, food does not reside in the well-being agenda alone. In the sciences, children will learn about food chains through their studies on biodiversity and interdependence, an area that also introduces ideas of agriculture and the impact of chemicals on food production. In social studies, they learn about Scottish produced foods and the environmental impact and sustainability of food production. In the technologies, food is paired with textiles as a topic, with the focus being on food production. Children are expected to learn about the connection between nutrition, health and physical activity, with a set of 'experiences and outcomes' dedicated solely to food and health in which it is clear that children will learn about: nutrition; food safety; food and the consumer, including ideas related to packaging, where food comes from, processing of food, the journey food has taken to reach the consumer; and that culture plays a role in some people's food choices. Some of the children involved in our project had experience of school gardens, sites designed to promote knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes towards growing and preparing food. Interestingly, the children we spoke with were clear that the garden was an experience they had enjoyed the previous year but that they had moved on, and that the children in the corresponding

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class to the one in which they had been in the year earlier, were now working in the garden. Having had the experience, it seemed to have been dismissed for new project work such as learning about the Vikings or the Romans. Bearing in mind that food education is the responsibility of all teachers, and that those in our project workshops were able to identify opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, the notion of a clearly defined ethical and political stance permeating the curriculum about food may be essential if children are to understand the importance of food in their lives, and in taking account of its global significance too.

While content related to food education exists, nowhere does activism related to food feature in the Scottish curriculum. There are suggestions that children will learn to make reasoned judgements about sustainability and the environment. However, this is always presented as something children will be able to do as *future citizens*, possibly in the very final stage of school, when they are around 17 years old. There are no mentions of activism or activists in the experiences and outcomes (Es and Os) or in the extended benchmarks to support teachers' planning that accompany the experiences and outcomes. One might assume that these Es and Os, as they are called, would appear conspicuously in social studies, when children learn about political figures and about food as a recurring feature of UK history. If activism fails to appear in social studies, it is easy to see that it will not appear in relation to learning about food. Interestingly, decision-making is linked with food, but as repeatedly stated in the literature, only in relation to children making good choices about food and nutrition, without necessary food literacy or agency to make better food-related decisions (Varela et al., 2024).

Education for sustainability

The importance of education's role in environmental and sustainability issues was initiated with the Stockholm Declaration at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, which, amongst many other recommendations involving education, stated that UNESCO and other international agencies should, 'after consultation and agreement, take the necessary steps to establish an international programme in environmental education, interdisciplinary in approach, in school and out of school, encompassing all levels of education and directed towards the general public' (United Nations, 1972, recommendation 96). The Stockholm Declaration set the scene for a series of initiatives on environmental education including the founding of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Environmental Education Programme (IEEP) and the Belgrade Charter Framework for Environmental Education, followed 2 years later by UNESCO's first intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education in Tbilisi in 1977.

A significant milestone amidst these developments was Agenda 21 arising from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. Agenda 21 specifically focused on sustainable development, with Chapter 36 concentrating on 'Promoting Education, Public Awareness and Training.' However, while there was a drive to implement and embed environmental education in schools, it was still not, by the end of the twentieth century, 'being planned or taught in a coherent and comprehensive way' (Palmer, 1998, p. 24). This led to a focus on education for sustainability, an approach that looked to the long term, away from what Tilbury (1995) described as 'the apolitical, naturalist and scientific work that was carried out under the environmental education banner in the seventies and early eighties' (p. 195).

Following the Earth Summit in 1992, the United Nations declared the period between 2005 and 2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, with the ambition that it would 'improve everyone's quality of life' (United Nations, 2015, p. 3), by stimulating positive action towards tackling these issues. In Scotland, the context for the present article,

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the Scottish Government's response was to establish the One Planet Schools Working Group (Scottish Government, 2012). As part of its remit, the group determined that the phrase 'Learning for Sustainability' (LfS) would be used in the curriculum context. LfS was understood to be a complex set of interactions between three distinct yet inter-related educational concepts: *Global Citizenship; Education for Sustainable Development; and Outdoor Learning*. The report's authors claim that these make 'an essential contribution to building the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and confidence needed to engage positively with the challenges our society and the world face' (p. 8). Within these three elements, it is important to note that LfS encompasses human rights education and social justice education; it reaches beyond scientific or environmental education (Clarke & Mcphie, 2016; Hunter & Cassidy, 2019), a focus that may be liable to miss opportunities to engage with the political dimension (see, for example, Buchanan, 2012; Green & Somerville, 2015; Evans et al., 2017; Tomas et al., 2017).

In an endeavour to reinforce the broad scope of LfS and support teachers, the project team developed a Learning for Sustainability Framework[1] drawn from the discussions within the project. Under the three principles: *inquiry, learning and social justice*, the Framework provides a series of questions that teachers might ask themselves when planning LfS. For instance, under the principle of *social justice*, the question headings include: power, ethics, inclusion, reciprocity, rights, diversity, attitudes and responsibility; under *inquiry*, the headings for questions include: perspective, problematise, alternatives, dialogue, evidence, change, tensions and challenge. Finally, the principle of *learning* has headings that include: content knowledge alongside experiential dimensions, approaches and social dispositions such as openness, inclusivity, collaboration, relationships and intergenerational. Taken together, questions arising from these headings encourage a transdisciplinary approach to the curriculum, considering for example,

- *Are my practices consistent with what I'm teaching? (Social Justice: attitudes)*
- *What information is needed to support the personal and collective inquiry? (Inquiry: perspective)*
- *Do I ensure that I use resources that are credible? (Inquiry: evidence)* and
- *Do I encourage learners to take the initiative in Learning for Sustainability?* (Learning: openness).

This resource was intended to be useful in supporting teachers towards understanding some of the issues in LfS and to provide opportunities for development in an area, such as food sustainability, where many lack confidence. Offering accessible resources to support teachers is important given their responsibilities to children and the enactment of curriculum. Indeed, the fourth and final phase of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education and Training, between 2020 and 2024, had 'a special emphasis on education and training in equality, human rights and non-discrimination, and inclusion and respect for diversity with the aim of building inclusive and peaceful societies' (United Nations, 2018). There was a clear intention on the part of the UN that the final phase of the Programme would align with their SDGs. It is because of these international drivers that LfS has become a key feature of school curricula.

The 'sustainability knowingness, attitudes, and behaviours regarding environment, society and economy' (Kalsoom & Khanam, 2017, p. 1302) have arguably elevated the socio-political issues found within LfS. Rights, democracy and social justice (Hunter & Cassidy, 2019), human rights education (Struthers, 2015), citizenship education (Reichert, 2016; VanderDussen Toukan, 2018) and social justice education (Thurston & Yelich Biniecki, 2017; Torres-Harding et al., 2018) offer just some examples of this change. Mulà and Tilbury (2023), examining the status and current practice of teacher education for

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sustainability, refer to an IBE-UNESCO (2016) study that analysed the national curricula of 78 countries and found that 90% of the frameworks contain Education for Sustainable Development themes. They observe that some countries, such as Scotland and Hungary, have embedded teacher education for sustainability into their professional standards for teacher education. The inclusion of LfS in professional standards lends weight to all its component parts. In effect, this demands a space that is conducive to children's participation and agency in matters that concern them.

Children's participation is, as a result of the UNCRC, an increasingly urgent concern. Part 1 of Article 12, seen as the key article in the promotion of children's participation, asserts that

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

This is not straightforward. The issue of children's capacity is a thorny one. It reveals assumptions about children that are usually founded along an age-determined developmental plane and raises questions as to which matters affect children. It is now recognised widely as the Article that promotes children's involvement in certain aspects of society, often referred to as 'children's voice', a notion encompassing both verbal expression and gesture, facial expressions and body language. (Wall et al., 2019). In addition to establishing what might constitute voice, it is also important to recognise, as Lundy (2007) asserts, that ''voice' is not enough'. Three other components, she argues, are required to realise Article 12: space, audience and influence. Space must be created, literally and metaphorically, for the expression of voice. Adults, for instance, are required to relinquish some of the space they occupy, recognise that children have something to say and ensure that they (children) are equipped with the tools and opportunities to engage. Complementing this is that children's voice must have an audience that takes them seriously. This may be their peers, but, importantly, adults also form the audience to which children might voice themselves, and they (adults) are expected to listen. Reaching beyond being an attentive audience, Lundy's fourth dimension of realising Article 12 is that children should have influence. This does not mean that children can determine what happens. It means that they should be taken seriously in the decision-making process and that their participation is not an afterthought, tokenistic or easily dismissed. Meaningful participation that recognises children's agency has to allow that they can contribute to society and have the potential to effect change.

Alongside Article 12 is Article 13. The first part of the Article states that:

> The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

In the same way that children can express their views and that voice might manifest itself in a range of ways, the right to express oneself freely can take various forms. The articles that constitute the UNCRC are indivisible; none is more important than the others and they all work as a piece. However, recognising that Articles 12 and 13 are interleaved is important, not least in the context of LfS. Acknowledging that children have something to say about matters that affect them and having the right to express their views is only one element of fulfilling children's entitlement to participation. They cannot do so without having information about the topic. This is not the same as saying that children's capacity might dictate the extent to which they can share

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their views. The point, here, is that children need to be informed about that which is under consideration. It would be unreasonable to expect anyone to have a view on, say, climate change without having some understanding of the concerns, though this apparently fails to stop some adults from doing so. Children are entitled to information that might support them in determining the views they may wish to share. Of course, there are topics that are too complicated for children, but the same is true for adults; the competency criteria for participation are not simple (Hunter & Cassidy, 2025). The point is that they have a right to access and receive information in a way that is accessible to them. Without this, Article 12, in reaching beyond the confines of children's immediate personal experiences, becomes even more challenging. Indeed, without being informed, participation becomes meaningless. This calls into question the very notion of children as activists.

POST-PROJECT REFLECTIONS ON CHILDREN AS FOOD ACTIVISTS

We noted above that the Nyéléni Forum in 2018 described children as 'agents of change'. It can be confidently asserted at the outset that children are not accountable for the consequences of choices that were made in the past; nor, in fact, are they responsible for any current choices. The present danger of drawing children into serious issues of the public sphere is that they are 'responsibilised' inappropriately and to their detriment. Cossman (2013) argues that we have seen a 'project of responsibilization' in which the focus shifts from governments to individual (adult) consumers who are encouraged to make 'lifestyle' choices to avert ecological disaster, commodifying the solutions into organic milk, electric vehicles and re-usable nappies. Thus, 'greening becomes a project of the neoliberal self' based exclusively on consumer choice (Cossman, 2013, p. 902). In this case, children are strangers in this zone of responsibility and can only 'naturalise' by becoming consumers themselves. As Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) observe, 'heavy burdens are put on the shoulders of the consumer as s/he is bestowed the responsibility for a morally virtuous handling of technological change and the liberalization of world trade' (p. 470). It is of very dubious advantage or benefit to anyone, and certainly not to children, to make this shift from rights to duties in pursuit of achieving an ideal and depoliticised agency.

In effect, children's agency around food is multi-layered. At the domestic level, they are likely to have little or no say over what food enters the house. However, anyone who has known a toddler will appreciate the intensity with which they can seek to exert control over what food enters their bodies. In desperation, parents often report capitulating to ever more exacting and rapidly changing 'rules' set by very young children about what they will or will not eat. It is important to recognise the appearance of agency within these dependent, non-sovereign relationships but outside this domestic food drama, in countries like Scotland at least, children's agential space is shrunk down to nothing as they typically have no involvement at all in any aspect of food production or procurement (Murphy et al., 2024). Unsurprisingly then, it seems that most children also *know* next to nothing about food. Surveys by supermarkets, charities, manufacturers and academics repeatedly suggest that many children have serious misconceptions and large gaps in their knowledge of food production (Schultz & Danford, 2016). Deficit-based descriptions like 'children don't know where milk comes from!' frame the issue in a way that positions children as ignorant (and laughably so). An alternative framing, 'adults forgot to tell children where milk comes from!' reveals more about where responsibility lies and points to what might be done to bring about change. Popular discourse is comfortable with positioning children as lacking – in ability, knowledge and agency – and hides adult responsibility behind a cloak of inevitability 'children are ignorant – what can you do?!'. Indeed, the children in the project that

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prompted the present discussion revealed a lack of general knowledge about sustainability issues during the philosophical dialogue. Despite the place of food in the curriculum, they struggled to comment on more than the need for animals' habitat to be preserved, and they never made the leap to notions of food let alone food activism. We were surprised at times to find that the anticipated levels of knowledge and understanding were wide of the mark, and the child participants did not have sufficient access to the vocabulary and understanding to participate in the planned activities and discussions without prompting and support. By contrast, adults in our workshop at the beginning of the project were knowledgeable and engaged. They spoke about food activism and what this might involve. Cooking, dietary needs, biodiversity, community, health and well-being and participation all featured prominently in discussions. This is not to criticise the children with whom we worked or to suggest that they represent all children as there will be some children—perhaps many children—who are confident and informed about food. However, the connectedness of learning for sustainability is important; children cannot be expected to make these connections without information and understanding. The tenor of the discussions at our event was that greater cross-sectoral collaboration was necessary to ensure children had the knowledge necessary to be able to access conversations and practices related to food. The question arises, therefore, about the extent of adult knowledge and their capacity to inform children; some of the original surveys on children's knowledge were conducted more than a decade ago so we can assume that some of the children questioned are now themselves parents.

The reality is that children rarely have unmediated access to information. Even if their adults know, and we cannot presume that they do, adults have the power to select, prioritise and filter information through parenting or pedagogical choices. Whether these choices are intentional and conscious, what children do not know and understand is fundamentally an adult responsibility. Children have a right to express their views on all matters that affect them (Article 12), and the implication of this may be that they have a concomitant right to information about all matters that affect them. Knowledge is an entitlement, recalling the unequivocal wording of UNCRC Article 13 which is discussed above.

But does the withholding of information from children necessarily constitute some kind of epistemic injustice? The concept of epistemic injustice involves having a significant aspect of experience excluded from public understanding (Byskov, 2021; Fricker, 2007). Either the words needed to articulate this experience to others do not exist, or cannot be understood by those outside the group affected. It is helpful to consider the five conditions identified by Byskov (2021) that must be met for a situation to constitute an epistemic injustice. Three of these five conditions are likely met in this situation since children are often unfairly excluded on the grounds of epistemic capacity (the prejudice condition and the social justice condition) and they are certainly affected by the situation (the stakeholder condition) as discussed above. But the remaining two conditions, the epistemic and disadvantage conditions, are more difficult to evidence. The epistemic condition requires that 'they must possess knowledge that is relevant for the decision that they are excluded from' (Byskov, p.118). The 'possession of knowledge' is, in part, an educational condition and a lack of knowledge may point to educational failings. The fifth condition, that 'they must suffer epistemic and/or socioeconomic disadvantages and inequalities as a result from the discrimination' (Byskov, p. 118), is not obviously met, though the absence of children's voices now may result in their disadvantage in the future. However, the principle of the child's best interests comes into play when we consider the possible impact of the information under consideration, as discussed below.

All rights are mediated by the stipulation that 'the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' (Article 3) and this means scoping what, if any, information and ideas may be harmful is an adult responsibility. This already happens in many contexts. For example, there are parental controls on digital devices, so that violent and sexually explicit content can

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be blocked (Gordon, 2021). There is also concern around children's exposure to distressing content, including news coverage of terrorism, wars, famine and natural disasters which can cause overwhelming feelings of 'unsafety, hopelessness, and helplessness' and lead to lasting adverse mental health effects (Leiner et al., 2016). Now, and increasingly, we hear about a new phenomenon which has been called 'climate anxiety' or 'eco-anxiety' (for example: Cossman, 2013; Pihkala, 2020). A recent large scale international study revealed high rates of anxiety and distress amongst children about climate change, and at a level that affected their daily functioning (Hickman et al., 2021). Many of the children surveyed reported feeling helpless and powerless, as, indeed, they were. Whilst being upset is not in itself enough to justify children being shielded from information, there is something perverse about making a point of imparting information to children whilst blocking the possibility of exerting agency. They are thus exposed to a 'harm squared': the ultimate existential threat to their future and the immediate harm caused by a burden of useless and distressing knowledge.

Hunter and Cassidy (2025) recognise that child activism is new on the political landscape, drawing attention to the organised nature of this kind of political participation. They identify well-known child activists like Greta Thurnberg, Malala Yousafzai, Thandiwe Abdullah, Bana Al-Abed, X Gonzáles and Vanessa Nakate, highlighting that such activists are rare and that 'the adults, rarely seen, are puppeteers, no matter how well-intentioned. Hiding behind the curtain like the Wizard of Oz, they set the scene, pull the levers and open or close the door to participation, sometimes even providing the script, thereby voicing the child actor' (p. 6). In so saying, they point to the need adults have that child activists do and say what adults cannot or will not say, though they must be politically aligned with particular adults' views if they are to be endorsed (Davidson et al., 2024). This somewhat tokenistic acceptance of child activism is problematic for children and adults. In encouraging children to activism, adults might be accused of reneging on their responsibilities. A further consequence of hurrying children towards activism may be that they could make decisions that they will consider in the future to be ill-founded and ill-judged, and resent the lack of adult activism that exposed them to this risk.

While it is evident that children and young people have views about a range of matters, be that the food they eat at school lunches, the wearing or not of school uniform, the Black Lives Matter movement, or climate change, their potential engagement is limited by two factors. The first is their knowledge of the issue, which impacts directly on the extent to which they can engage and the seriousness with which they are taken. As we saw when Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai spoke, they were well-informed and articulate. The second factor, however, is that the adults around them can either facilitate or block their ability and opportunities to act, to a greater or lesser extent. Spyrou et al. (2018) take a more ambitious and generous view than others in suggesting that attention should be paid to the relationships children have with the world, acknowledging that they are networked rather than being isolated individuals. Certainly, with the rise of social media, this is true, but often the control of children's access to social media is in the hands of those who look after them. Even the very politically active young people in the two cohorts (2011–13 and 2017–20) of Erpyleva's (2023) Russian study where they were interviewed about their participation and agency saw their participation as lesser than that of adults and that they were dependent on adults to enable their activism due largely to the (adult) narrative that children are immature and in need of protection, with the second cohort acknowledging this while seeing themselves as 'exceptional children', which is how they explained their ability to exert any agency. There is a tension, therefore, between extending children's views to fuller participation through action, and that tension is often tempered by Article 3 of the UNCRC.

Article 3 focuses on the best interests of the child. Part 1 of Article 3 states: 'In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child

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shall be a primary consideration'. The Article continues to express that those with responsibility for the child must ensure its well-being through appropriate care and protection and that this care and protection should be reinforced by 'competent authorities' that oversee the various 'institutions, services and facilities' that are established to meet children's needs. Children's activism becomes more challenging when the question of their best interests is taken into account. This, perhaps, is the argument that has run during the Friday Strikes (https://fridaysforfuture.org/), starting in Sweden and running to 125 countries, when children have refused to attend school on Fridays to protest against governments not doing enough to tackle climate change. Often parents and schools do not endorse this protest day, fearing that it is not in children's educational and future life interests to miss a regular day off school; therefore, they sanction children who strike. Whether the best interests of children are served better through attending classes or through political participation that drives towards wider global impact is an open question. It may be that those who seek to protect children's best interests are more content with some forms of activism than others, though there may be other issues that impede children's abilities to act.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 'Food activism in the schoolyard' project was the work of a team drawn primarily from Scottish universities with some representation from a community food initiative and an executive agency of the Scottish Government. The participation of teachers, children, and other stakeholders was testament to growing interest and concern about food and food education. The project team found that an integrated approach to teaching about food that is grounded in young people's direct experiences is needed and that an explicit connection needs to be made across the school curriculum between micro, meso and macro issues of food production and environmental sustainability if children are to feel that their own actions might matter in global concerns.

Knowledge therefore appeared as a central issue. Food activism in children is contingent upon their knowledge, understanding and connection to food production, quality, distribution and availability. This is not unusual or unexpected: UNCRC Articles 12 and 13 are interdependent. At a time when intergenerational knowledge transmission about food is less available to most children and young people in industrialised countries, it falls to formal education to bridge the gap and to teachers being equipped to do so. And whilst the Scottish curriculum strongly features issues of food consumption, agriculture, environment and sustainability, it is not known how many children and young people in fact receive education in these areas. Future research on pupil experience of this aspect of the curriculum is necessary.

An obvious possible barrier to realising the curriculum's potential is the knowledge base in the teaching profession itself, drawing further attention to the place of food education in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development. Further research to find out teachers' knowledge and confidence might provide useful context, but time is of the essence. One exciting example from a different national context is provided by Stapleton (2022) who describes an undergraduate class in education which covers many areas of food quality, availability, insecurity, waste, culture and identity. We were particularly struck by the requirement that students engage in an activist project as part of their class assessment; the hope or expectation that children might become food activists is surely somewhat contingent on the capacity of adults, including teachers, to realise this potential in themselves (Day et al., 2019; Varma Patil & Ravi, 2021). Equally, there is a need for greater involvement of teacher education institutions in enabling future teachers to address the ongoing question of education through growing food (Hancock et al., 2025), ecological farming and scratch cooking (Sabet & Böhm, 2025), as an element of education for sustainability promoting

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agroecological practices through school-community partnerships, as outlined in the second part of the practice framework we produced.[2] In UK universities we are currently witnessing stronger institutional commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, so the time is ripe to initiate curriculum change in this regard.

Nonetheless, we are mindful of the potential pitfalls of adult expectations of children's agency, particularly in the political sphere, because child activism of any kind treads a thin line between the dangers of manipulation and responsibilisation. We aimed, here, to advance some critical reflections on issues of child activism that, in the spirit of realising children's rights and participation may be overlooked. While knowledge is an empowerment right, too much adult guidance or leadership closes down important freedoms and whilst adults are recognising children's capacities and, to an extent, their agency, we should also be wary of imposing expectations that they will take on the burden and responsibility of 'putting things right' (Jessop, 2018). This is not reasonable or defensible and does not meet our own – adult – responsibility to protect children. Though many of the problems and challenges of food sovereignty stretch beyond individual spheres of influence, perhaps teachers can contribute *something* by considering their own agency and activism within the context where they find themselves, and this could make a world of difference.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was realised with funding from the Scottish Universities Insight Institute Sustainability Research Programme. We thank Jonathan Hancock—Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh and Laura Nisbet—City of Edinburgh Council, for contributions and support with grey literature review which informed the design of project workshops and the final project report.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was approved by the Moray House School of Education and Sport Ethics board, REF 2715, 10 June 2020.

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Endnotes

[1] Downloadable at this link: A Green Space-OSF Garden Schools; and Food Activism in the Schoolyard.

[2] Downloadable at this link: Food Activism in the Schoolyard.

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How to cite this article: Hunter, S., Cassidy, C., Colucci-Gray, L., Gray, D., Darling-McQuistan, K., Day, S., Leask, K. & Donald, B. (2026). Children's food activism: Reflections on knowledge and responsibility. *British Educational Research Journal*, *52*, 2408–2427. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70239

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