

Should Teachers Support a Pupil Strike?

Point – Counterpoint

Alan Lea

3 April 2019

Introduction

On the 15 Feb 2019 an estimated 15,000 pupils across 60 cities in the UK took part in a strike from school to protest the government's lack of action to combat the threats of Climate Change. The inspiration for the strike came from the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg who held solo protests outside the Swedish parliament in August 2018 which soon led to her being joined by hundreds of people every Friday.

As a science teacher, I find Climate Change to be one of the most interesting but also one of the most important topics that I teach. However, I also know the importance of pupils attending school. I therefore find myself in a dilemma as to whether I should support pupils wishing to take part in a strike for Climate Change. In this article I shall present what I consider to be key points on either side of the argument.

Point – Right to Protest

In schools we are not only tasked with teaching young people a wide range of subject knowledge, we are also expected to teach them Spiritual Moral Social and Cultural values (SMSC). Such importance is placed on these that they are defined in detail in the Ofsted inspection handbook (2016). It includes:

“acceptance and engagement with the fundamental British values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty.....”

One of the fundamental aspects of British democracy is the right to peaceful protest. The hypocrisy cannot be ignored if we then turn around to our students and admonish them for wanting to engage with the very values that we are teaching them. There is an equally strong case in terms of their moral development. We encourage young people to take an:

“interest in investigating and offering reasoned views about moral and ethical issues”

Climate Change is a prime example of a socio-scientific issue with a combination of environmental and economic impacts. However, in my opinion, it boils down to a very simple ethical question. Are we going to do the right thing? And if our politicians are reluctant to take action, then it is our responsibility to persuade them. Therefore, if our pupils have made an informed decision to strike from school and demonstrate their dissatisfaction to the government, then surely, we should support their moral fortitude.

As teachers we are expected to be role models for our students. This extends to modelling engagement within our society. Whilst we need to be careful not to show political bias, I always encourage my pupils to speak out on issues that are important to them. Teachers have on several occasions gone on strike over pay and conditions. If our pupils see us striking for what arguably could be considered selfish reasons, then how can we punish pupils for missing school to protest against a worldwide crisis? If we do not allow our young people to demonstrate attitudes that we are modelling, then our young people will lose trust in our society.

The Prime Minister Mrs May accused the pupils on strike of “wasting lesson time”. Yes, the pupils will have to catch up on work, but that misses the point of school. Young people attend school to learn *stuff*, but it is far more important for them to learn how to be a positive member of society. Furthermore, it appears that politicians have paid little attention to the protests of young people. Reports on 28 Feb 2019 of only a handful of MPs attending the first commons debate on Climate Change in two years sends a clear message to our young people that they are not being listened to. If Mrs May wants pupils to stop “wasting lesson time” by going on strike, then perhaps it is time a serious debate was held to solve the climate crisis.

Counterpoint – Impact of Absence

Pupils are expected to be in school every day during term time and are only permitted to miss school through illness or in exceptional circumstances with the school’s advanced permission. As such any unauthorised absences could lead to parents facing fines from the Local Authority. Some schools were willing to give pupils an authorised absence in order to strike, however with the pressure on schools to ensure their pupils are attending, other schools warned their pupils that their absence for the strike would be unauthorised.

The pressure on schools to focus on attendance is not without good reason. There is a clear link between attendance and attainment. The percentage of pupils achieving 5A*-C drops by 10% when attendance falls to 96% and drops 40% when attendance is below 90% (DfE 2016). Therefore, every day at school should be considered important. A lot of work goes into promoting attendance from our pupils on a day to day basis, so it is understandable that teachers and schools would be reluctant to support pupils wishing to take part in a climate strike. We instil in our pupils to value their education exceedingly highly.

Pupil absence also impacts on teachers. Having to catch one pupil up can be mildly annoying, however having to reorganise, stall, or completely change your lesson because half of your class is missing can be very frustrating. Especially when it comes to KS4 the time in lessons becomes precious in the run up to their exams. There is also a concern that by supporting the pupils' climate strike might set a precedent for the future. Will our pupils start going on strike for reasons of lesser importance? Yes, my lessons can be boring from time to time, but hopefully not worthy of strike action!

The final argument is perhaps the most important. Safeguarding. We have a duty of care when pupils come to school that they will be safe. The very fact that we know pupils are on the school grounds goes a long way to ensuring their safety. If we allow pupils to strike from school, and take part in protests where there is no supervision, then are we fulfilling our safeguarding commitment? Authorising absences for large numbers of pupils, including potentially vulnerable pupils, puts them at risk.

Final Word

Head Teachers will have to make the decision on whether to authorise absences to allow pupils to go out on strike. However, if a school decides against authorising absences then sympathetic teachers are left in a tricky situation. On the one hand they should be expected to reinforce the school policy, on the other hand they may want to show their support for their pupils taking action. It seems to me there is a sensible balance to be struck. If a pupil has made an informed choice which is backed up by the permission of their parent, then I feel the school should support their engagement in the climate strikes. However, I do not feel it is our place to encourage our pupils to be absent from school.

Perhaps the next time the idea of a pupil strike comes around we should think about what activities can be done in school to demonstrate to politicians what issues our pupils feel strongly about. It is vital to the country's continuing democracy that young people feel that they are listened to by the government. In the age of social media there are so many ways that we can engage in social issues. Our pupils are enormously creative when given the opportunity and capable of grabbing the attention of our politicians. Schools should reflect the "adult" world; it is important to teach our children that strike action should be the last resort, after all other methods of persuading our politicians have been exhausted.

Sources

School Climate Strike (15 Feb 2019)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47250424>

Greta Thunberg Strike (August 2018)

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/sep/01/swedish-15-year-old-cutting-class-to-fight-the-climate-crisis>

Ofsted SMSC Values

<https://www.smscqualitymark.org.uk/what-is-smsc/>

Climate Change Debate (28 Feb 2019)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/climate-change-debate-parliament-commons-global-warming-a8803291.html?fbclid=IwAR0wTVL2ODBbV7k7qu89P7tMFh2mxmwWPAGK7Na2EwkENhVEjav744Mefhg>

DfE attendance and attainment reports (2016)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/absence-and-attainment-at-key-stages-2-and-4-2013-to-2014>