



Economic
and Social
Research Council

University of
Kent

Educating for Social Good Final Report

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January 2025



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Executive Summary: Educating for Public Good

This project critically explores active citizenship education in England's primary schools. It examines how schools cultivate active citizenship engagement among children and proposes strategies for addressing disparities and enhancing outcomes. Through rigorous research, including surveys, interviews, and case studies, the findings underscore the transformative potential of primary education in fostering inclusive, democratic, and justice-oriented citizenship. Here we summarise the main findings from each section.

Part 1 - Current Landscape of Active Citizenship Education

Active citizenship education is widely embedded within school values and curriculums, primarily through contributory activities such as fundraising for charities and small-scale acts of kindness. While these approaches are prevalent, they often lack the critical depth needed to engage students with the root causes of societal challenges. Less common, but more impactful, are participatory and justice-oriented models that emphasise systemic understanding and action.

Key Findings:

- **Prevalence and Forms of Citizenship Engagement:** The majority of schools focus on charitable giving, but only a minority adopt participatory and justice-oriented approaches. These models, which involve children in planning and understanding systemic issues, have been shown to deepen citizenship learning.
- **Regional Disparities:** Geographic differences shape how schools approach active citizenship learning. Schools in London, for example, are more likely to emphasise activism and protests, whereas schools in the East of England have fewer opportunities for active citizenship engagement.
- **Inequities in Access:** Disadvantaged schools face greater barriers, including financial constraints and limited curriculum time, resulting in fewer opportunities for children to engage meaningfully in active citizenship activities.

Part 2 - Teachers' Perspectives on Active Citizenship Education

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering active citizenship learning. Their moral purpose and professional identity are closely tied to the belief that education should prepare children for active, socially responsible citizenship. However, systemic barriers often inhibit their ability to deliver this vision.

Key Findings:

- **Valuing Citizenship Learning:** Teachers see active citizenship education as integral to their mission, aiming to develop students into ethical, engaged citizens.
- **Barriers to Implementation:** High-stakes accountability, rigid curriculum requirements, and socio-economic disparities limit teachers' ability to prioritize citizenship education. Many adopt "quiet activism"—covertly embedding citizenship lessons into their teaching

Part 3 - Barriers to Active Citizenship Learning

Despite its benefits, active citizenship education faces numerous systemic barriers that hinder its consistent implementation across primary schools.

Key Findings:

- **Socio-Economic Disparities:** Schools in disadvantaged areas struggle with resource shortages and competing priorities, leading to reduced opportunities for experiential citizenship learning.
- **Accountability Pressures:** The national curriculum's focus on literacy and numeracy, driven by standardised testing, often sidelines citizenship education.
- **Cultural and Leadership Gaps:** The presence of supportive leadership significantly influences the integration of citizenship learning. Without it, teachers face difficulties embedding citizenship education into their practice.
- **Opportunities Amidst Challenges:** Creative teachers and proactive schools demonstrate that it is possible to embed

citizenship learning through cross-curricular approaches and community partnerships, even within constrained environments.

Part 4 - What Works and Why

Case studies reveal that fewer than 10% of primary schools consistently provide opportunities for justice-oriented, participatory, active citizenship education. However, where it is implemented, the benefits are profound for children, schools, and communities.

Benefits:

- **For Children:** Early engagement in citizenship activities fosters empathy, teamwork, critical thinking, and a commitment to social justice. These skills not only enhance personal development but also prepare children for lifelong citizenship engagement.
- **For Schools:** Schools with robust active citizenship programmes report stronger student-teacher relationships, improved academic outcomes, and enhanced community connections.
- **For Communities:** Children's active citizenship enriches local communities by promoting social cohesion, addressing local issues, and inspiring broader community engagement.

Core Components of Effective Active Citizenship Education:

- **Proactive Leadership:** School leaders set the tone for embedding citizenship values into the ethos and curriculum.
- **Whole-School Approach:** Integrating active citizenship learning across all aspects of school life fosters a cohesive, participatory culture.
- **Experiential Pedagogy:** Hands-on, justice-oriented activities enable children to engage deeply with social issues.
- **Child-Led Initiatives:** Empowering children to lead projects enhances their agency and responsibility.
- **Local Contextualisation:** Aligning citizenship education with local realities ensures relevance and impact.
- **External Partnerships:** Collaborating with organisations enriches citizenship learning and expands opportunities for action.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To address the challenges and disparities identified, the report calls for systemic changes to prioritize active citizenship learning in primary education:

- **Policy Interventions:** Support active citizenship education to be embedded within and across the curriculum within all primary schools, to ensure equal access across regions and socio-economic groups.
- **Reframing Citizenship Learning:** Shift from contributory to participatory and justice-oriented approaches to deepen students' understanding of systemic issues.
- **Empowering Teachers:** Provide professional development and resources to support teachers in delivering impactful citizenship education.
- **Strengthening Partnerships:** Expand collaborations with civil society organisations to enhance resources and expertise.

About the Authors

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This work was supported by the UK Research and Innovation Economic and Social Research Council, grant number ES/W001853/1 - Educating for 'Public Good': A critical study exploring how philanthropic citizenship is encouraged in primary education

Introduction

What does it mean for children to truly become active, civically engaged citizens? Are all children in England's primary schools given equal opportunities to develop their civic learning? And how is 'good citizenship' framed—through acts of kindness, or something more transformative?

This research tackles these critical questions, exploring the civic education landscape in England's primary schools. At its heart lies a concern: how well schools prepare children to engage with communities, voluntary action, democracy, society, and the complexities of modern life. Despite decades of debate on civic learning, persistent tensions between ideological goals and practical realities have left active citizenship education inconsistent, fragmented, and often misunderstood.

The late Professor Bernard Crick, a key architect of citizenship education, warned of a narrow focus in schools that equates civic engagement with charitable activities, neglecting its essential connection to political participation and democratic values. He championed an education that equips children to navigate life's controversies critically, ethically, and with moral clarity—an education that inspires them to engage in democratic dialogue and take meaningful action on the issues that shape their world. In this view, civic and active citizenship education is not just about fostering kindness or encouraging voluntary service. It is about nurturing critical thinkers, collaborators, and changemakers who can tackle controversial issues, engage in democratic processes, and contribute to policy solutions. This research explores whether our primary schools are delivering on this promise and considers how we can ensure that all children, not just a privileged few, can access this cornerstone of a vibrant democracy.

The Importance of Active Civic Engagement

From participating in charity events like Children in Need or Comic Relief to engaging in local community projects, children regularly take part in activities aimed at addressing public issues. These activities, which include volunteering, fundraising, social action, and advocacy, represent active civic engagement. Active civic engagement helps children develop the knowledge and skills needed to tackle social issues such as homelessness, climate change, or food poverty. Importantly, it also encourages the development of a civic identity, with research showing that early involvement in social action fosters a long-term commitment to social good.¹

Research on the impact of youth social action has grown over the years, notably with the launch of the #iwill campaign in 2013. This campaign, supported by all political parties, aimed to increase youth participation in social action by 50% by 2020. OFSTED recognized the benefits of social action programs, linking them to improved academic performance, higher expectations, and better school attendance.² Additionally, studies from the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues suggested that young people who engaged in social action before the age of 10 are more likely to continue engaging in such activities throughout their lives.³

¹ Arthur, J., Harrison, T., & Taylor-Collins, E. (2017). *A Habit of Service: The factors that sustain service in young people*. University of Birmingham.

http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf

² chrome-

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a805363e5274a2e87db92b8/How_social_action_is_being_applied_to_good_effect_in_a_selection_of_schools_and_colleges.pdf

³ Arthur, J., Harrison, T., & Taylor-Collins, E. (2017). *A Habit of Service: The factors that sustain service in young people*. University of Birmingham.

Gaps in Civic Education Research

Despite this growing recognition of the importance of active civic engagement, there remains a significant gap in research on how primary school children develop as civically engaged citizens. While much attention has been given to secondary education and youth involvement in social action, primary education has been overlooked. This is problematic because the early years of schooling are crucial in shaping children's attitudes toward civic engagement, as research from educational and psychological theories shows.

Although there has been growth in the opportunities for active civic engagement in schools, little is known about the pedagogical approaches used to cultivate these behaviours. Research into citizenship education in primary schools is scarce, and we lack knowledge about what good practice looks like, especially in terms of fostering civic learning at the primary level. This research project aims to address this gap by exploring how primary school children are encouraged to participate in charity, volunteering, and social action.

Policy Context and Developments

In the current educational landscape, citizenship education in primary schools is not statutory, meaning schools are not legally required to teach it. The existing guidance, although non-statutory, encourages children to engage in activities related to social responsibility, fairness, and community life. For instance, at Key Stage 1, children are encouraged to understand personal responsibility, participate in community activities, and learn about the environmental impact of their actions. At Key Stage 2, the focus deepens to include social justice, community interdependence, and the role of democracy and voluntary groups. These areas lay a foundation for future engagement in citizenship education, but they do not constitute formal, compulsory instruction.

The UK government's recent curriculum review, under the new Labour administration (2024), does not specifically mention citizenship education but highlights the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum that fosters active participation in society. The review emphasises social justice, inclusion, and the development of life skills such as respect and positive societal engagement. While these elements align with the goals of citizenship education, there is still no formal, statutory requirement for it in primary schools. The curriculum review also aims to strengthen transitions between key stages, our research demonstrates the importance of continuity in citizenship education as children progress through their schooling.

The absence of statutory citizenship education has led to debates about the importance of embedding it more deeply within the curriculum. There is growing recognition that the primary school years are vital for developing positive civic behaviours, yet schools often lack the resources, training, and guidance to provide effective civic learning opportunities. This research shows how citizenship education should be a priority within education.

Research Questions

How is active citizenship encouraged in primary schools in England, and is there equity in access to giving opportunities for children?

What opportunities are they afforded to children to develop their active citizenship, how are these ideas framed (i.e. how are they discussed and enacted) and is there equity in access to active civic learning opportunities?

Methods



The methodology for this study involved three key parts to comprehensively explore active citizenship in primary schools across England.

Part 1 (2021-2022) analysed data from an in-depth survey of 309 primary school teachers and TeacherTapp data from 1,906 primary school teachers. This data was examined against metrics such as FSM (Free School Meal) eligibility, OFSTED ratings, and teacher characteristics. The findings are detailed in our first report⁴.

Part 2 (2022-2023) conducted 102 semi-structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders across diverse contexts between January and September 2023. The sample included early career teachers and experienced leaders, ensuring varied perspectives. Complementary analysis included school websites, OFSTED reports, and social media reported data.

Part 3 (2023-2024) undertook in-depth case studies of nine purposefully selected schools showcasing diverse approaches to citizenship education. Activities included child-led school tours, focus groups with children and teachers, staff interviews, and observation of citizenship lessons and activities, engaging over 270 children. This multi-layered methodology provides a nuanced understanding of how active citizenship is integrated and experienced in English primary schools.

Active Citizenship Among Children in the Primary School Years

"It is time to recognise primary schools as the starting point for building a more inclusive, democratic, and just society." Teacher

Integrating active citizenship essential for a more equitable society: In this research we consider active citizenship as a dimension of citizenship behaviour, associated with intentions and actions that intend to produce social and/or environmental benefits, for example, volunteering, social action, charitable giving, advocacy, campaigning and activism. Active citizenship is more than just being part of a community, it's about actively participating in improving it. Imagine a world where children learn not just maths and reading as a norm, but also how to make a difference in the world around them. We argue, this is the kind of education we need to prioritise. Building on the work of Westheimer and colleagues, who identified three types of citizens—personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented—evidence shows us that integrating active citizenship, which embrace both participatory and justice-orientated approaches, into the primary curriculum is essential for creating a more equitable society⁵.

Schools are essential in nurturing active citizenship: Schools play a crucial role in nurturing this active citizenship in children, especially in primary education.⁶ Civic learning programmes often offer younger children their first experiences of collaboration beyond family, fostering inclusivity and community involvement.⁷ Research shows that active, experiential learning—such as service projects, role play, and community action—enhances children's

⁴ Body, A., Lau, E., Cameron, L. and Cunliffe, J., 2023. Educating for Social Good: Part 1 Mapping Children's Active civic learning in England.

⁵ Westheimer, J. (2015). What kind of citizen? Educating our children for the common good. New York: Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0-8077-5635-5

⁶ Body, A., Lau, E., Cunliffe, J. and Cameron, L., 2024. Mapping active civic learning in primary schools across England—A call to action. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(3), pp.1308-1326

⁷ Payne, K. A., Adair, J. K., Colegrove, K. S. S., Lee, S., Falkner, A., McManus, M., & Sachdeva, S. (2020). Reconceptualizing civic education for young children: Recognizing embodied civic action. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 15(1), 35-46.

civic capabilities and awareness.^{8 9} Studies also highlight the importance of helping children understand social injustices and explore solutions through practical engagement rather than abstract concepts.¹⁰ Engaging children in real-world civic activities builds their agency and ability to advocate for social change, emphasising the need for schools to provide hands-on opportunities for meaningful civic participation.^{11 12} Nonetheless, whilst research highlights the benefits of this education, currently, across England, opportunities for children’s engagement are unevenly dispersed.

Active citizenship education ambiguous, unequal and inconsistent: Our research at the University of Kent, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, has explored active citizenship in primary schools across England. Our findings reveal that active citizenship is deeply intertwined with children’s lived experiences within an ecosystem of communities, civil society, and social structures—many of which perpetuate inequality. Teachers often encourage civic engagement to address social issues while supporting children who directly experience these challenges.

Our research also shows that active citizenship education in primary schools is currently ambiguous, unevenly implemented, and inconsistent. For example, while we find active citizenship education is a key part of the UK primary curriculum, the majority of activity focuses on fundraising activities, such as donating money to national and local charities, with little real engagement with the cause behind that charity. This limits opportunities for children to engage critically with social justice issues and understand the root causes of charitable needs, with only 15% of primary school educators who believe that children have a genuine chance to critically examine the underlying social problems behind the causes they support.¹³

Disparities in active civic education: More troublingly, there are significant disparities between affluent and disadvantaged school communities in delivery of civic education. Schools in less affluent areas face over twice as many barriers to offering civic engagement opportunities and provide 40% fewer chances for participatory and justice-oriented approaches.¹⁴ Thus, children from the most privileged backgrounds are most likely to have early access to active civic engagement opportunities, and therefore are most likely to be equipped with the skills and sense of empowerment for this type of citizenship engagement pre-secondary school. The potential implications of this are that more socio-economic groups are more involved in active citizenship engagement more than others, increasing the likelihood of these voices being more dominant as they grow.

⁸ Body, A., Lau, E., & Josephidou, J. (2020). Engaging children in meaningful charity: Opening-up the spaces within which children learn to give. *Children & Society*, 34(3), 189-203.

⁹ Torres-Harding, S., Baber, A., Hilvers, J., Hobbs, N., & Maly, M. (2018). Children as agents of social and community change: Enhancing youth empowerment through participation in a school-based social activism project. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 13(1), 3-18.

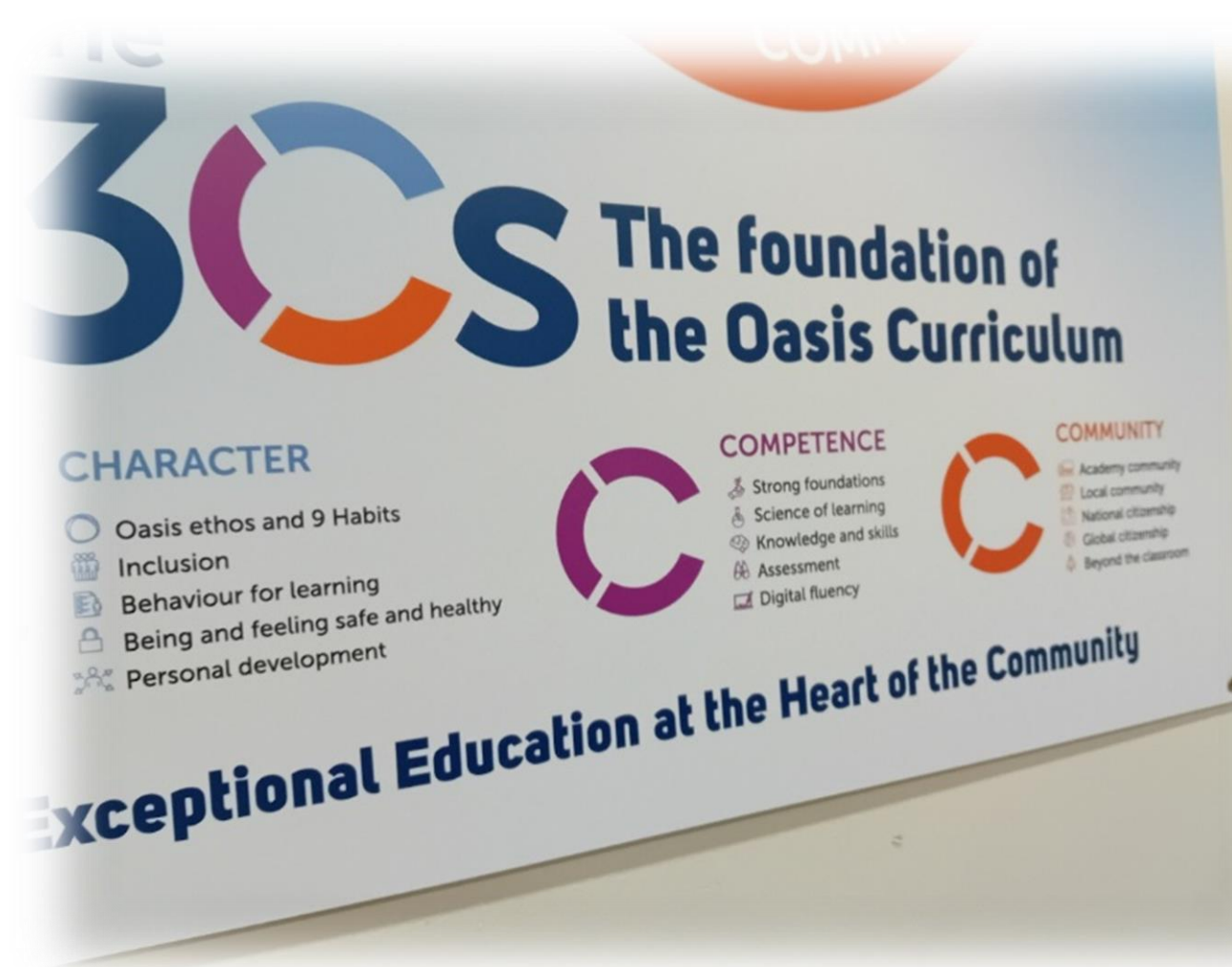
¹⁰ Swalwell, K., & Payne, K. A. (2019). Critical civic education for young children. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 21(2), 127-132.

¹¹ Eidhof, B., & de Ruyter, D. (2022). Citizenship, self-efficacy and education: A conceptual review. *Theory and Research in Education*, 20(1), 64-82.

¹² Torres-Harding, S., Baber, A., Hilvers, J., Hobbs, N., & Maly, M. (2018). Children as agents of social and community change: Enhancing youth empowerment through participation in a school-based social activism project. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 13(1), 3-18.

¹³ Body, A., Lau, E., Cunliffe, J. and Cameron, L., 2024. Mapping active civic learning in primary schools across England—A call to action. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(3), pp.1308-1326

¹⁴ Body, A., Lau, E., Cunliffe, J. and Cameron, L., 2024. Mapping active civic learning in primary schools across England—A call to action. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(3), pp.1308-1326



Statutory requirement for active citizenship education to address inequity in delivery and experience: High-quality active citizenship education combines participatory and justice-oriented approaches, where children learn about social justice and civic engagement and actively practice these skills in ways that resonate with their lived experiences (Body, 2024). Making active citizenship a statutory part of the primary curriculum is crucial for addressing these inequities. If we want to cultivate a generation ready to challenge the status quo and drive social change, we must ensure that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to learn, engage, and lead social change. **It is time to recognise primary schools as the starting point for building a more inclusive, democratic, and just society.**

Active Citizenship as a Fundamental Right

Active citizenship in primary schools is not merely an educational goal but a fundamental right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Articles 12, 28, and 29 emphasize children's participation in matters affecting them, the right to education, and the importance of education in fostering respect for human rights. Jerome and Starkey¹⁵ argue that these rights underpin children's agency, defining it as their capacity to act, make decisions, and contribute meaningfully to society.

¹⁵ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2021). *Children's rights education in diverse classrooms: Pedagogy, principles and practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

The UNCRC's principle of participation reimagines children as "beings" rather than "becomings," asserting their entitlement to citizenship now, not only in adulthood. Schools play a pivotal role in realizing this vision. Jerome and Starkey¹⁶ highlight that children's rights education (CRE) can transform schools into spaces that respect and cultivate agency. This involves integrating democratic practices into school life, such as student councils, peer-led projects, and inclusive decision-making processes. For instance, initiatives like student-led curriculum discussions and classroom cooperatives model a shift from traditional authoritative approaches to a more egalitarian and empowering pedagogy.

Several schools exemplify these principles in action. Rights Respecting Schools, accredited by UNICEF UK, embed children's rights into their ethos, demonstrating how respecting children's voices improves self-esteem and fosters a culture of active citizenship. Similarly, Freinet's¹⁷ cooperative classroom model emphasises collective decision-making and mutual respect, ensuring that children experience democracy firsthand. Jerome and Starkey¹⁸ argue that nurturing agency is both a right and a necessity. They assert that schools must balance the inherent power dynamics between adults and children by consciously creating opportunities for children to express views and influence outcomes. This aligns with Lundy's¹⁹ model, which emphasizes four dimensions: space, voice, audience, and influence. By championing children's active citizenship, schools fulfill their duty as "duty bearers" under the UNCRC. They not only empower children to become change-makers but also validate their present roles as citizens. Active citizenship, therefore, is an integral right that shapes equitable and participatory education systems.

Key Insights from Literature

• Importance of Early Civic Engagement

Civic socialisation in early childhood, including primary years, is fundamental for cultivating lifelong civic engagement, encompassing social action, volunteering, philanthropy, and democratic participation. Evidence shows that children engaged in civic practices are likelier to exhibit sustained civic behaviors as adults.^{20,21} Middle childhood (ages 4-11) has been identified as a crucial period where children develop political knowledge, empathy, and a sense of community, groundwork for civic and political literacy.²²

• Role of Educational Settings

Schools are pivotal for civic engagement as they reach nearly all children. Programmes focusing on participative and experiential learning have shown positive outcomes, especially when schools foster environments where children can actively participate, share ideas, and engage in decision-making^{23, 24}. Classroom activities like

¹⁶ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2021). *Children's rights education in diverse classrooms: Pedagogy, principles and practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

¹⁷ Legrand, L. (1993). Célestin Freinet. *Prospects*, 23(1-2), 403-418.

¹⁸ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2021). *Children's rights education in diverse classrooms: Pedagogy, principles and practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

¹⁹ Lundy, L. (2007). Voice is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927-942.

²⁰ Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Taylor-Collins, E. M. M. A., & MOLLER, F. (2017). A habit of service. *The Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham*. Available at: jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf Accessed 5/12/24

²¹ Body, A., Lau, E., & Josephidou, J. (2020). Engaging children in meaningful charity: Opening-up the spaces within which children learn to give. *Children & Society*, 34(3), 189-203.

²² Van Deth, J. (2017). Norms of citizenship. *Mind the Gap. Political Participation and Representation in Belgium*, 13-34.

²³ Payne, K. A. (2018). Young children's everyday civics. *The Social Studies*, 109(2), 57-63.

²⁴ Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237-269. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>

storytelling, role-play, and student councils help develop civic literacy and empathy among children, and when schools encourage this type of engagement, children's civic competencies and interest in social issues improve significantly.^{25,26}

- **Impact of Family and Community**

Family dynamics and parental involvement in civic activities play a significant role in shaping children's civic attitudes. Children whose parents volunteer or discuss civic responsibilities at home tend to mirror these behaviours.^{27, 28} Community programmes positively influence children's civic development led by role models and supportive leaders who foster a sense of autonomy and active engagement.²⁹

- **Children's Rights and Agency**

Recognising children as current citizens with rights is integral to meaningful civic socialisation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child underpins the notion that children should be heard and involved in decisions impacting them. Research advocates children's active participation in civic matters and the need to create spaces where they can lead discussions and actions on issues important to them.³⁰ Despite these frameworks, challenges remain in fully realising children's rights within educational settings, often due to adult biases or limited institutional support.³¹

- **Barriers and Socioeconomic Disparities**

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience fewer structured civic opportunities. Schools in affluent areas are more likely to implement civic and social action programs, whereas schools in deprived areas may lack resources to do so. This socioeconomic divide influences children's future civic engagement and social mobility, underscoring a need for equitable access to civic education.³²

- **Evolving Capacities and Developmentally Appropriate Engagement**

Developmental differences shape how children engage civically, making it crucial to align civic education methods with age-specific competencies. For instance, younger children benefit more from social and moral stories, while older children thrive in participative activities, like community service and social justice-oriented discussions. Tailoring activities to children's developmental stages enhances their understanding and engagement in civic matters.^{33, 34}

²⁵ Lunn Brownlee, J., Curtis, E., Spooner-Lane, R., & Feucht, F. (2017). Understanding children's epistemic beliefs in elementary education. *Education 3-13*, 45(2), 191-208.

²⁶ Lau, E., & Body, A. (2021). Community alliances and participatory action research as a mechanism for re-politicising social action for students in higher education. *Educational Action Research*, 29(5), 738-754.

²⁷ Bekkers, R. (2017). Do Two Eyes See More Generosity Than One?.

²⁸ Ottoni-Wilhelm, M., Vesterlund, L., & Xie, H. (2017). Why do people give? Testing pure and impure altruism. *American Economic Review*, 107(11), 3617-3633.

²⁹ Lynch, D., & Forde, C. (2017). *Social work and community development*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

³⁰ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2021). *Children's rights education in diverse classrooms: Pedagogy, principles and practice*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

³¹ Lansdown, G. (2009). The realisation of children's participation rights: Critical reflections. In *A handbook of children and young people's participation* (pp. 33-45). Routledge.

³² Body, A. (2022). Rapid Research Review into Civic Socialisation Amongst Pre-Secondary School Age Children.

³³ Scott, K. E., & Graham, J. A. (2015). Service-learning: Implications for empathy and community engagement in elementary school children. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 38(4), 354-372.

³⁴ Body, A., Lau, E., & Josephidou, J. (2020). Engaging children in meaningful charity: Opening-up the spaces within which children learn to give. *Children & Society*, 34(3), 189-203.

- **Experiential Learning and Action-Oriented Approaches**

Studies support experiential, action-based learning as effective for engaging children in civic activities. Programmes that involve real-world problem-solving or environmental activism enable children to learn by doing and foster skills such as empathy, teamwork, and responsibility. These approaches are particularly beneficial when embedded within curricula that allow for critical reflection on civic and social justice issues.^{35 36} Promoting civic socialisation in primary schools requires developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and participative approaches that account for children's rights and individual capacities. Practitioners should integrate experiential learning into school curricula and provide opportunities for child-led social action, especially in underprivileged areas. Collaboration with families and community organizations can support a holistic approach to civic socialisation, helping children view themselves as active participants in their communities. In this report we use our further research into these practices in a UK context to better understand and enhance primary civic socialisation.



³⁵ Westheimer, J. (2015). What kind of citizen. *Educating our children for the common good*.

³⁶ Body, A., Lau, E., & Josephidou, J. (2020). Engaging children in meaningful charity: Opening-up the spaces within which children learn to give. *Children & Society*, 34(3), 189-203.

Part 1 - What's Happening Across England

Our first report, 'Educating for Social Good – Part 1' investigates the state of active civic education in primary schools across England, highlighting distribution, equity, and pedagogical approaches that shape delivery of active citizenship is delivered and experienced across the country. With data from a large-scale national teacher survey and detailed questionnaires, we outlined the prevalence, geographic variation, and variations/trends in framing of active civic learning. Here we summarise the key findings as they provide important context for the rest of the findings discussed in this final report:

1. Prevalence and Forms of Civic Engagement:

Civic education is widely embedded in school values and curriculums, with a primary focus on charitable giving and fundraisers. This can be seen across our case study schools in the next section. Most activities centre on fundraising for school resources, national charities, and local causes. The data highlights that a predominant 'contributory' approach dominates teaching within schools, emphasising individual responsibility in community actions, like charity events or simple acts of kindness. Less common, but present, are 'participatory' and 'justice-oriented' models, which involve students in planning, critical reflection on social issues, and understanding systemic injustices.

2. Regional Differences:

Distribution of active civic opportunities varies significantly by region. For instance, schools in the Northwest are more likely to engage students in local community-focused activities, while schools in London emphasise national campaigns. Notably, students in the East of England have fewer civic learning opportunities, and London-based schools are more likely to engage students in protests and activism. An example can be seen in Case Study 6 in the next section. These differences suggest that regional culture and community resources play a role in shaping civic engagement approaches. See our previous report *Mapping Children's Active Civic Learning*.³⁷

3. Role of External Organisations:

Partnerships with civil society and charitable organisations are crucial, with over half of primary schools relying on such organisations for resources and support. Schools that actively collaborate with external partners are more likely to adopt participatory and justice-oriented approaches, as these organisations provide materials that encourage critical thinking and debate. In contrast, schools without external partnerships tend to limit civic learning to contributory actions.

4. Inequities in Access:

Access to civic learning is uneven, with students from affluent areas receiving more opportunities than those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Barriers in lower-income schools include financial constraints and limited curriculum time, leading to fewer civic activities.

5. Teacher Impact and resource constraints:

Teachers' civic engagement and demographic factors influence how civic learning is approached. Older and more experienced teachers, who are generally more civically active, tend to implement participatory and justice-oriented approaches. Teachers in less advantaged schools often face resource constraints that hinder the depth of civic learning, emphasising the need for policy support to standardise civic education across socio-economic divides.

³⁷ Body, A., Lau, E., Cameron, L. and Cunliffe, J. (2023) *Educating for Social Good: Part 1 Mapping Children's Active civic learning in England*. University of Kent.

Implications of Part 1 Findings for Practice, Policy, and Research

Findings from our initial report underscore several key implications for the future of active citizenship education in primary schools:

1. Policy Interventions for Equal Access:

The disparity in civic learning opportunities calls for policy reforms that guarantee equitable access. Current trends show that affluent students have greater exposure to diverse civic activities, which may lead to long-term civic inequalities. Policymakers should create frameworks to ensure all schools, regardless of region or socio-economic status, can engage students in meaningful civic education. Support for civic engagement should also be woven into national educational standards to prioritize justice-oriented civic learning from a young age.

2. Reframing Civic Learning Approaches:

Moving beyond contributory approaches, schools should adopt participatory and justice-oriented frameworks that encourage students to critically engage with social issues. By shifting the focus from charity to systemic understanding, students can develop skills in advocacy, activism, and social justice. Schools and teachers need structured support and resources to embrace these approaches effectively, which could be best achieved through partnerships with organisations that specialize in civic education and social justice.

3. Empowering Teachers as Civic Leaders:

Teachers are pivotal in shaping students' civic identities, yet they need support to navigate this role effectively. The report suggests rethinking teachers as co-producers of civic learning, working collaboratively with students to address social issues. Professional development programs could help teachers incorporate justice-oriented approaches,

fostering critical discussions and problem-solving skills among students. Additionally, recognising teachers as civic leaders may help standardise civic learning across diverse communities. Recruitment and Retention are both better in schools where teachers are empowered as civic leaders.

4. Strengthening Partnerships with Civil Society:

Civil society organisations play a significant role in facilitating high-quality civic engagement in schools. Expanding partnerships between schools and these organizations can provide teachers with tools, resources, and training to engage students in participatory and justice-focused learning. These collaborations can bridge resource gaps in less privileged schools, ensuring all students benefit from comprehensive civic education.

In conclusion, our initial report called for a comprehensive approach to civic education that begins early in a child's school journey. By ensuring consistent, justice-oriented civic learning across regions and socio-economic backgrounds, educators and policymakers can lay the groundwork for a more engaged, informed, and equitable society.



Part 2 – The Teacher’s Perspective

“Something that's really close to my heart is that understanding of social justice. It is so important to me that children have some understanding of justice and care about looking after each other.”

Part Two of our research process focused on engaging the voices of over 100 teachers from across England. We interviewed teachers from a range of career backgrounds, including early career teachers right up to senior leaders of multi-academy trusts. Specific attention was paid to ensuring our sample represented the diversity found within the teaching profession as much as possible, including factoring in gender, race, religiosity and age. These interviews were further supported by focus group discussions with school staff and observations within the case study schools outlined in Part 3 of this report.

Our findings reveal that educators in schools actively promoting active citizenship are twice as likely to express a desire to remain in the profession compared to those in schools where this is undervalued.

Key Findings: Our findings highlight that teachers value active citizenship within primary education, viewing it as a central component of their moral purpose in teaching and an important factor in the holistic development of a child learning. Nonetheless, in our interviews we asked teachers both about their lived experiences of facilitating active civic learning, versus what they felt should be happening, revealing, in the majority of cases, vast disparities between their experiences and hopes. In this section of the report, we outline both what teachers feel ‘should’ be happening in schools, and the significant challenges many are facing in making this a reality.

Teachers Value Active Citizenship as Part of Their Moral Purpose in Education

Our findings highlight that active citizenship resonates deeply with the moral purpose of education, which many teachers view as integral to their professional identity and motivation. This moral purpose reflects a commitment to equipping students not only with academic skills but also with the values and dispositions necessary to contribute positively to their communities.

"I am particularly drawn to the transformational nature of education because you're working through the children and through your community to build a brighter and better world."

"It is the impact that I feel that I can have day to day. It is teaching children strategies for managing themselves, helping them learn about themselves, understand themselves, understand others, understand the world. I guess, especially in primary cause before they go off into the big wide world and it becomes all about work, jobs and money."

"The privilege we have to engage and help develop these children’s social and cultural awareness, to give them experiences, to help develop them as people."

"For me, well it is basically helping these brilliant children be and become decent human beings."

Drawing on John Dewey's philosophy, education is fundamentally about preparing individuals to fulfill their roles within a democratic society. Dewey³⁸ argued that education must enable individuals to "play [their] proper part in the community or state," emphasizing the social and civic dimensions of teaching. Dewey's later works, such as *Democracy and Education*³⁹ advanced the idea of education as a "freeing activity" that liberates both students and teachers by fostering genuine engagement with ideas and the world around them. This stands in contrast to task-based, programmatic learning, which Dewey cautioned against, as it risks reducing education to mechanical processes devoid of purpose or creativity.

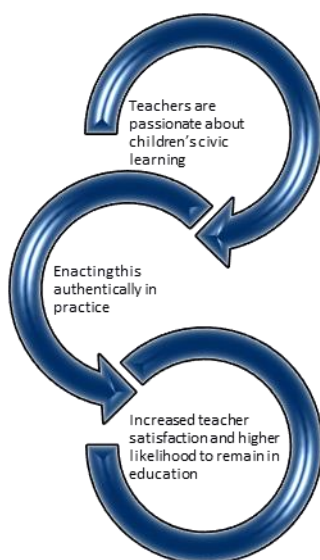
The moral dimension of teaching that Dewey described is vividly reflected in the experiences of teachers who prioritize active citizenship. For these educators, teaching becomes a vehicle for empowering children to grapple with ethical questions, engage critically with societal issues, and ultimately become agents of change. A headteacher in our study highlighted this vocational aspect, stating: "Transforming communities and empowering people. This is what this is about, and it's also like that feeling that this is not just a nine-to-five job. This is almost like a vocation in life". This view was echoed consistently across the teacher interviews.



Moral Purpose and Teacher Retention

Our findings reveal that educators in schools actively promoting active citizenship are twice as likely to express a desire to remain in the profession compared to those in schools where this is undervalued.

Active citizenship offers educators a unique avenue to practice moral creativity, a concept central to Dewey's work. Nussbaum's⁴⁰ idea of "narrative imagination" aligns with this, as it invites students and teachers alike to imagine life from diverse perspectives, deepening empathy and broadening their understanding of justice. Our findings suggest that aligning teachers' moral purpose and moral creativity, through the lens of active citizenship, offers a vital lifeline for teacher retention.



The new Labour government's commitment to recruiting an additional 6,500 teachers and implementing a 5.5% pay rise for teachers from September 2024 reflects a welcome prioritisation of education and recognition of the pivotal role of teachers in improving life chances for children. However, while increased pay and recruitment efforts are necessary steps to address teacher shortages, evidence suggests that financial incentives alone are insufficient to resolve the recruitment and retention crisis. Studies highlight that deeper, systemic issues tied to teacher identity, purpose, and professional fulfilment are at the core of why many leave the profession within the first five years.⁴¹

Teachers report that low pay and high workload are significant barriers, but factors such as insufficient training, professional development, and early career support also contribute heavily to

³⁸ Dewey, John, 1859-1952, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York, The Free Press, 1966

³⁹ Dewey, John. (1916) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*.

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, M. C. (2008). Democratic Citizenship and the Narrative Imagination. *Teachers College Record*, 110(13), 143-157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810811001312>

⁴¹ See, B. H., Morris, R., Gorard, S., & El Soufi, N. (2020). What works in attracting and retaining teachers in challenging schools

attrition.⁴² Addressing these structural challenges requires strategies that go beyond financial incentives to foster teacher well-being and sustain their engagement in the profession.

Our findings suggest that one such strategy is integrating active citizenship into teaching practice, which research shows can reinvigorate educators' sense of purpose and moral alignment. Teachers who felt they had freedom and support within their school to embed active citizenship in their pedagogy report higher levels of fulfilment and a stronger connection to their professional values, contributing to reduced burnout and greater retention.

Our findings reveal that educators in schools actively promoting active citizenship are twice as likely to express a desire to remain in the profession compared to those in schools where this is undervalued. This aligns with Ovenden-Hope and Passy's⁴³ research, which emphasises the importance of nurturing teacher passion and agency as critical elements in combating attrition. By embedding active citizenship as a core aspect of school culture, schools not only empower their children but also create environments where teachers feel valued and inspired, offering a sustainable solution to the broader retention crisis.

Teachers who experience this alignment often describe their work as a calling rather than a job. As one headteacher remarked, *"You have chosen to work in this school, which is in an area of need and deprivation. So, it's a very self-conscious decision that you are making, working for an organisation like this"*. This decision reflects a deliberate alignment between personal values and professional practice, demonstrating the transformative power of active citizenship for both educators and students. As one teacher concluded, *"It's not just about teaching children to pass exams. It's about teaching them to care, to question, and to take action. That's what education should be about"*.

Active Citizenship Enables Moral Creativity and Critical Conversations

Drawing on our research, this section explores teachers' conceptualisation of critical conversations, the barriers to facilitating them and their transformative potential.

Teachers value opportunity for creativity and critical conversations: Across interviews teachers highlighted how the freedom and ability to facilitate critical conversations was fundamental to developing active, critically conscious citizens who can engage with societal challenges and complexities. Diana Hess, educator and leading expert on civic education, highlights the role of such dialogue in equipping students with the tools to tackle difficult topics, navigate controversies, and foster meaningful dialogue.⁴⁴ These conversations challenge societal norms, nurture critical thinking, and empower young learners to become thoughtful, engaged citizens.

At their heart, critical conversations involve creating spaces where children can openly engage with contentious or thought-provoking topics in a meaningful and constructive way. This requires educators to recognise and act on teachable moments, seizing opportunities as they arise organically during the school day.

"I think it does depend on the teacher being able to pick up on certain cues and almost spotting those opportunities to have those in-the-moment discussions and seeing those teaching 'moments' that you can find. It does mean you need to come away from the lesson plan for a minute and discuss what has come up."

and areas? *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(6), 678–697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1775566>

⁴² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-strategy>

⁴³ Ovenden-Hope, T., & Passy, R. (2020). Exploring teacher recruitment and retention. *Contextual challenges from international perspectives*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁴ Hess, D.E. (2009). *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (1st ed.). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203878880>

Teachers explained how they felt such flexibility is essential for fostering an environment where these discussions can thrive. Rather than adhering rigidly to lesson plans, teachers ideally sought to embrace a dynamic approach that allows real-world issues to surface naturally, enriching the educational experience. For instance, during a whole-school project titled *Behind Bars*, one teacher used the theme to explore the transatlantic slave trade, while others approached it through the lens of restorative justice.

“We partnered with UNICEF, and the class wrote letters campaigning about slavery. It was empowering for them to see how their voices could make a difference.”

Projects like this demonstrate the potential transformative power of critical conversations, enabling students to delve into complex issues, explore ethical dilemmas, and become advocates for change. The approach mirrors Nussbaum's⁴⁵ concept of moral creativity, which emphasises the importance of engaging learners in discussions that challenge their assumptions and encourage them to envision alternative ways of living.

Teachers constrained by institutional and systemic barriers: Nonetheless, despite their importance, teachers often felt that critical conversations are often constrained by institutional and systemic challenges. Teachers reported operating within a tightly controlled framework of standardised curricula, limited classroom autonomy, and external accountability measures. This rigidity frequently limits opportunities for open dialogue, forcing educators to compartmentalise these discussions.

“I do ‘those discussions’ on a Thursday at 11am, and it finishes at 11:30. That is me ticking that box, rather than me thinking as a human that we should let those discussions run through everything we do. I wouldn’t suddenly say to my family, ‘We’re going to talk politics at this time.’ We should allow it to happen naturally and have dialogue like that through the day.”

Teachers reported that this procedural approach, common in many schools, reduces critical conversations to isolated activities, undermining their transformative potential. Moreover, many educators feel constrained by external pressures to prioritise academic outcomes over exploratory learning. This resulted in what several teachers referred to as a sense of ‘quiet activism’, where teachers followed ‘frontstage’ procedure, but enacted their own pedagogy in the classrooms, to allow for more open and critical discussions, even when they felt it was not necessarily supported by school, or academy, policy.

“So, it is always like I can control what is within my world and what is within my class. I say to the children, ‘This is my class. I cannot control the school, but I can control what’s in my classroom and what I impact.”

Restrictions particularly acute in disadvantaged areas: This sentiment highlights a tension between individual teacher autonomy and broader institutional constraints, as well as the challenge of balancing curriculum requirements with the need for critical engagement. Additionally, socio-economic disparities exacerbate these challenges. We found schools in particular that schools in more disadvantaged areas (noted as in those schools in the highest quartile for percentage of children on free school meals) most likely to report lacking the resources, time and freedom within the curriculum to facilitate such discussions - leaving teachers to navigate these challenges with creativity and resilience.

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, M. (2017). Education for citizenship in an era of global connection 1. In *The evolution of liberal arts in the global age* (pp. 213-225). Routledge.

Inspiring action: However, when teachers felt they could facilitate these critical conversations, they offered a space which was seen as inherently and positively disruptive. Such conversations challenge existing norms, encourage children to question societal injustices, and inspire action.



"To be a courageous advocate, you have got to shake something up, you have got to be brave and step outside your comfort zone. We want them to look beyond the school, look beyond our village, look beyond into the wider world."

These conversations, teachers felt, help children grapple with systemic inequities, develop empathy, and envision alternative futures.

"We can come in and just talk about what, what we do as a society, how we treat people in society, and why it is that the poorest in society are usually the ones in the criminal justice system. Why people steal, more than just the stuff you might read."

Teacher felt such discussions empower students to interrogate societal structures, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility. They also bridge the gap between abstract concepts and lived experiences, making the learning process both relevant and impactful. As one teacher explained, critical conversations are more than just a teaching tool—they are a pathway to cultivating thoughtful, engaged citizens. These dialogues encourage students to confront uncomfortable truths, explore diverse perspectives, and develop the skills needed to participate actively in democratic processes.



"We want them to understand not just their immediate surroundings but the wider world, to ask questions about justice, fairness, and their role in making a difference."

Embedding critical conversations into the classroom helps students develop critical thinking, empathy, and resilience—skills that are essential for navigating the complexities of modern life. Furthermore, these discussions create a foundation for active citizenship, preparing young learners to address societal challenges with confidence and creativity.

Barriers to Active Citizenship in Primary Schools

Our findings reveal a range of systemic barriers that teachers feel inhibit the implementation of active citizenship in primary schools, despite widespread acknowledgment of its benefits. These challenges arise from structural, cultural, and practical constraints, which significantly affect teachers' ability to prioritise and integrate active civic education into their classrooms and beyond the classroom walls.

- **Socio-Economic Disparities**

Socio-economic disparities are a prominent barrier to active civic learning. Schools in disadvantaged areas often face heightened challenges due to resource shortages, larger class sizes, and competing priorities. Teachers in these contexts report feeling immense pressure to focus on core subjects such as literacy and numeracy, driven by the

accountability demands of standardised testing.

“PSHE is something that gets squeezed out a lot. The curriculum is so packed...civic education is the stuff that goes off radar when it is put against literacy and maths.”

This pressure creates a dynamic where broader educational goals, including active civic learning, are actively deprioritised.

“It’s not a priority for us – it’s all Maths and English”

The lack of resources further exacerbates this issue, limiting opportunities for field trips, partnerships, and experiential learning projects that are often central to effective civic education.

- **High-Stakes Accountability and Rigid Curriculum Requirements**

The demands of high-stakes accountability also emerged as one of the most significant inhibitors to active civic learning. Teachers frequently cited the rigid structure of the national curriculum as a constraint that leaves little room for the creative and exploratory learning essential for civic engagement.

“Time that they might spend on what we could consider active civic learning...was often curtailed due to a pressure to get more academic learning completed”.

This focus on academic achievement often forces teachers to adopt innovative but covert strategies to integrate civic learning into their lessons. Referred to by one educator as “secret activism”, these efforts underscore both the dedication of teachers and the systemic challenges they face. However, such hidden approaches lack the systemic support needed to create lasting and impactful civic education programs.

- **Funding Shortages and External Pressures**

Funding shortages present another major barrier, particularly in schools already grappling with socio-economic challenges. Limited budgets restrict access to resources, training, and opportunities for civic initiatives, undermining teachers' capacity to deliver comprehensive programs. Additionally, external pressures such as moral panics—like those surrounding healthy relationships education—have created a climate of caution and controversy, discouraging schools from addressing certain aspects of civic learning.

Despite these barriers, some teachers and leaders have found ways to embed civic education into existing structures. One headteacher noted, “Some teachers are like, ‘No, the curriculum doesn’t support it; it’s too chockablock’ while others say, ‘If you look closely, you could put civic education in there, you could put it in literacy.’” This perspective highlights the potential for creativity and leadership to overcome challenges, even in constrained environments.

- **Cultural and Leadership Gaps**

The role of school leadership emerged as a critical factor in either enabling or inhibiting active civic learning. While some schools benefit from leaders who champion civic education as a core value, others, a significant majority, felt they lack the necessary vision and support. Without strong leadership, teachers often struggle to prioritize civic learning within the demands of a packed curriculum. Our research suggests that a supportive school culture, driven by



leadership that values civic engagement, can create the conditions for teachers to integrate these themes effectively. Schools that embed civic values across their ethos and curriculum demonstrate that it is possible to overcome systemic barriers, provided there is a shared commitment to these goals.

Opportunities Amidst Challenges

Despite the challenges, our findings highlight the resilience and creativity of teachers who remain committed to fostering active citizenship in their classrooms. Some schools have successfully embedded civic learning through cross-curricular approaches and whole-school initiatives. By integrating civic themes into literacy, history, and even science, teachers have found ways to make civic learning relevant and impactful without compromising academic priorities. We explore these in greater detail in Part 3.

The barriers to active citizenship in primary schools are deeply entrenched but not insurmountable, as our case studies demonstrate. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort at multiple levels, including policy reform, resource allocation, and cultural shifts within schools. By recognising and supporting the creativity and dedication of teachers, schools create environments where civic education thrives, equipping children with skills and values needed to participate meaningfully in democratic society.

The ‘civic teacher’ plays a pivotal role in cultivating active citizenship through their values, pedagogy, and engagement with students. A ‘civic school’ is committed to embedding active citizenship as a core part of its ethos and curriculum. Both are essential to foster active citizenship education.

Our findings highlight an interplay between individual educators and the broader institutional framework in fostering active citizenship education; that is they both need each other to thrive. This relationship underscores that meaningful civic learning occurs holistically only when teachers’ personal initiative and systemic support converge. To truly integrate active citizenship into education, the civic teacher, the civic school and the Education system must work in harmony.

The Civic Teacher

Our research highlights that the ‘civic teacher’ plays a pivotal role in cultivating active citizenship through their values, pedagogy, and engagement with students. Teachers who demonstrate civic-mindedness and embed democratic practices in their teaching inspire students to think critically and act responsibly. As our research shows, educators who actively model civic behaviours create environments where students are encouraged to engage with societal issues. However, the potential of a civic teacher is often shaped by their school context. Supportive leadership, adequate resources, and a school culture that prioritises civic values can either enable or inhibit their efforts.

“There was one Head who guided and facilitated it...They had the passion for it, and because they lived and breathed it, then it rubs off on everybody else”.

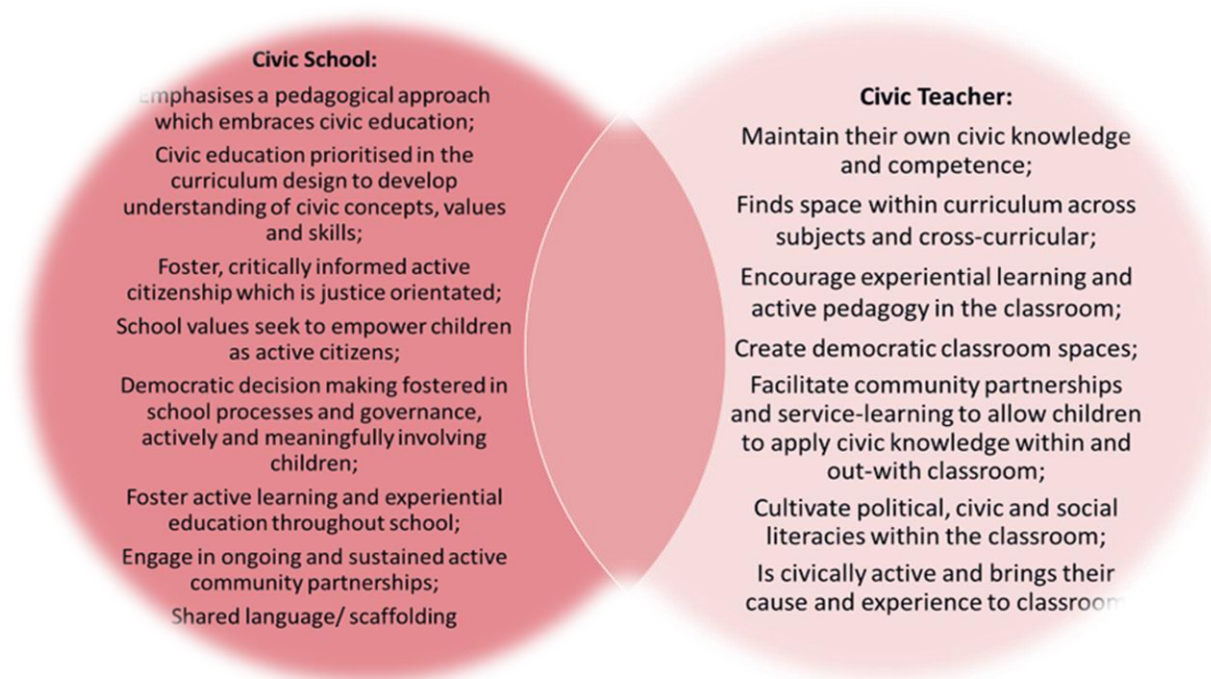


Figure 1 highlights what teachers and leaders felt needed to be embodied within both schools and teachers in order to support active citizenship.

The Civic School

A ‘civic school’ represents an institution committed to embedding active citizenship as a core part of its ethos and curriculum, ensuring it is not a standalone initiative but a shared value. This integration fosters a participatory culture where students, staff, and the wider community collaborate meaningfully. Strong civic schools are characterised by their ability to align school policies, leadership values, and partnerships to create an enabling environment for active citizenship education. Schools with such strong civic learning cultures ensure that this ethos is driven by leadership and reinforced through shared language and values.

“In our school, civic learning is across the curriculum because community is one of our drivers. It should come out in everything we teach, daily vocabulary, in assemblies, around school”.

Indeed, within the case study schools, which were particularly targeted for their work around active civic education, we consistently noted many of these traits in both school culture and teacher approaches.

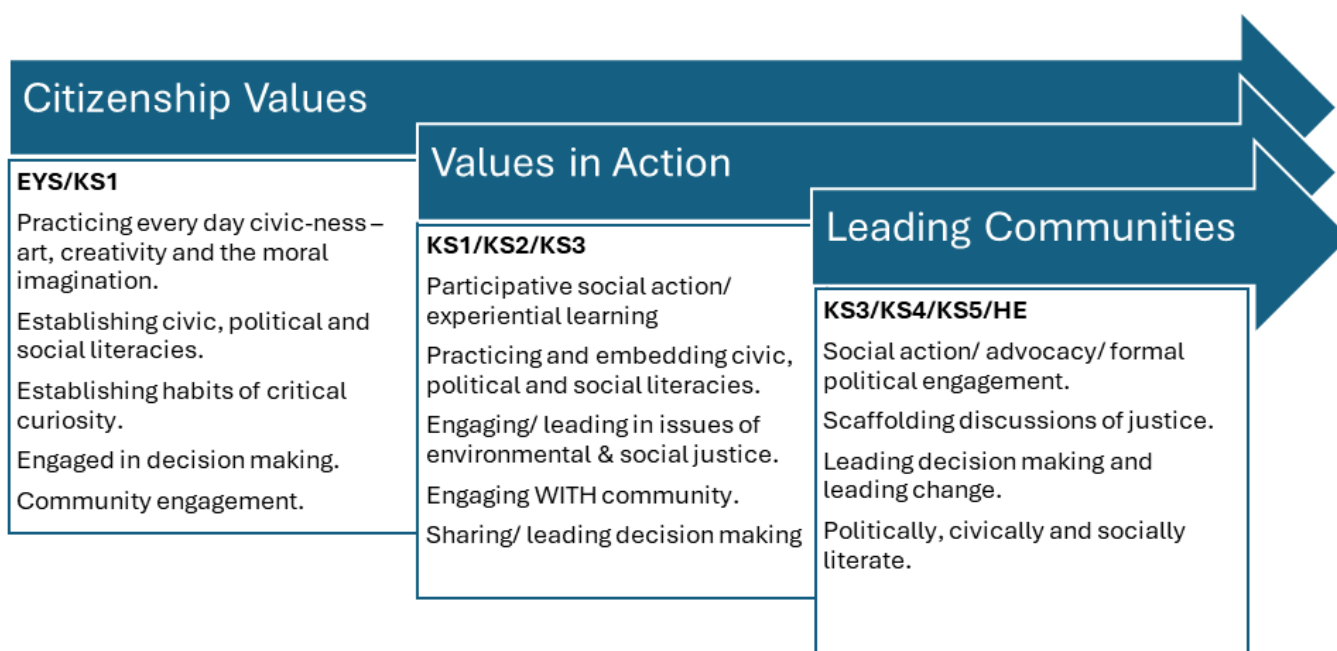
Symbiotic relationship between civic teachers and civic schools: The relationship between civic teachers and civic schools is symbiotic. Civic teachers bring active citizenship to life through their classroom practices, while civic schools provide the enabling environment for this work to flourish. Without a supportive school culture, even the most committed teacher may face barriers such as curriculum pressures or lack of time. Conversely, a school dedicated to civic learning relies on teachers to translate its ethos into daily practice. Having both a civic teacher and a civic school is essential for the sustainability and effectiveness of active citizenship education. Together, they

create an environment that nurtures students' capacity to engage meaningfully in civic life. This dual approach aligns with research emphasising that active citizenship requires the intersection of multiple enablers, including school culture, teacher agency, and external partnerships, as well as mitigation of inhibitors like policy constraints or resource shortages.

Towards a Progressive and Sustainable Approach to Civic Learning

Discussing with teachers what they felt 'should' be taught at different key stages gave significant insight into the idea of the 'Civic Journey'. The concept of the 'Civic Journey,' as depicted in the research, highlights the evolving understanding and commitment of teachers to nurturing children's civic and political literacies from Early Years and Key Stage 1, into Key stage 2 and beyond.

This journey is characterised by an incremental and purposeful progression, where foundational skills and awareness established in early years are deepened and expanded as children mature. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding this developmental process, fostering participative engagement that empowers students to become active, thoughtful citizens.



Building Civic Foundations in Key Stage 1

In Key Stage 1, teachers highlight the need to focus on laying the groundwork for civic and political literacies. This involves introducing children to concepts like fairness, community, and responsibility through age-appropriate activities. At this stage, within settings where meaningful active citizenship is established, children are encouraged to explore their immediate surroundings and understand their roles within these contexts. Teachers use practical examples, such as group projects, storytelling, or discussions about local issues, to nurture empathy and an initial sense of agency. Teachers view this phase as critical for instilling values and habits of thought that underpin later civic participation. By cultivating curiosity and a willingness to engage, Key Stage 1 was considered as 'fertile ground' for deeper exploration of civic themes as children progress.

Developing Participative Engagement in Key Stage 2

As children transition to Key Stage 2, teachers highlight the need for focus to shift to participative engagement, where children begin to apply their civic knowledge and skills in more meaningful ways. Teachers emphasised collaborative learning, encouraging children to work on projects that address broader societal issues. Incorporating cross-curricular approaches, integrating subjects like history, geography, and science to highlight the interconnectedness of civic topics was seen as central to achieving meaningful engagement and understanding. The case studies reveal that teachers use real-world problems to engage students in critical thinking and action. For example, one class studied ethical dilemmas in science and wrote letters campaigning for policy change, demonstrating how participative learning fosters both intellectual and emotional investment in civic matters. Another selected Fair Trade as a term topic, exploring and engaging in action on this topic across the curriculum. Such activities not only enhance understanding but also help students see the relevance of civic learning to their own lives and communities.

Preparing for Engagement in Key Stage 3 and Beyond

Teachers felt that a consistent, accessible and locally contextualized active citizenship offer was vital for all children, to ensure as they progressed beyond primary education, the associated skills, knowledge and learning were firmly embedded. Indeed, research indicates that this progression from literacy to engagement equips students for active participation in Key Stage 3 and later life. By the time students enter secondary education, they have developed a foundational understanding of civic principles and the confidence to engage with more complex political and societal issues. Teachers consistently reported that students who experienced a strong civic education in primary school were better prepared for critical debates and collective action in secondary settings. This cumulative approach ensures that civic learning is not a standalone effort but a continuous, integrative process that prepares students for lifelong engagement.



"I agree that active civic education can be brought into every subject...it's just about the depth you can go into. There is definitely the opportunity and scope to do so; it's just about being given the chance".

The Climate and Nature Crisis as a Unifying Cause

Throughout the research teachers emphasised the importance of high-quality active civic education being child led and locally contextualized. However, of all these cause areas, the climate and nature crisis was consistently raised by adults and children as a cause area important to all. Indeed, our research suggests that making climate change and sustainability central to primary school activities on active citizenship creates a powerful framework to address interconnected global issues while fostering a sense of shared purpose among children, parents, and communities. From taking part in litter picks, to planting trees, to organising campaigns for clean air or recycling projects, the climate crisis resonates deeply with children across socioeconomic and cultural boundaries, uniting them around a cause that transcends individual differences.

Teachers consistently highlight the value of embedding climate education within the curriculum, describing it as a unifying and accessible theme that enables children to engage critically with broader social challenges. For instance, framing food poverty through a sustainability lens provides a natural entry point for discussions about resource distribution and environmental impact, as seen in schools offering food parcels and clothing banks as both welfare support and sustainability initiatives. This approach positions schools as critical spaces where students can develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to navigate global complexities and foster collective responsibility for a sustainable future.

“In an ideal world, teachers should envision a progressive approach to civic learning that spans all key stages, with sustainability and climate change as central pillars.”

Engaging broader community in climate and nature crises initiatives:

Central to the success of this approach, the research reveals the unique capacity of primary schools to bring together children, their families, and broader communities around the shared goal of combating the climate and nature crises. Unlike other institutions, schools have the ability to engage a wide cross-section of society, reaching beyond the traditional ‘green bubble’ often associated with environmental activism. For example, this inclusivity ensures that families from diverse backgrounds are empowered to participate, creating a more representative and equitable movement for change.

Within both the teacher interviews and children’s focus groups, teachers and children discussed multiple opportunities for intergenerational learning, where children become advocates for sustainable practices within their homes, inspiring shifts in attitudes and behaviors among parents. Countless examples of these sorts of activities were offered throughout the research, with children leading on campaigns to promote cycling instead of driving, to promote less traffic and reduce air pollution, or campaigning for improved farming standard for animals, to organising litter picks, beach cleans and tree planting activities in their local communities. This dynamic transforms children into agents of change who influence not only their peers but also the adults in their lives, fostering a collaborative effort to address environmental challenges.

At the heart of these efforts is the belief that collective action can drive meaningful change. By engaging children in practical, hands-on activities, which are underpinned by critical discussions about the cause, schools help them see the tangible impact of their efforts, reinforcing their sense of agency. This empowerment extends to parents and community members, who are often inspired by the passion and commitment of young learners.

Multi-Dimensional Role of schools in Civic Spaces

The tripartite role of schools as sites of civic learning, civic support and civic action is critical in ensuring that schools not only educate but also empower.

Our final core findings from the teacher interviews reveal how teachers recognize and try to balance the complex interplay between schools as sites of civic learning (provision), as sites of civic support (protection) and as sites of civic action (participation).





Our research finds that teachers identify schools as sites of civic learning, support, and action when they fulfill these functions effectively. This framing reimagines schools as more than institutions for knowledge transfer, highlighting their potential as dynamic spaces where children’s rights to provision, protection, and participation coexist and interweave, fostering active citizenship. Drawing on our findings, this tripartite role is critical in ensuring that schools not only educate but also empower.

Schools as Sites of Civic Learning (Provision)

Teachers tended to view schools as sites of civic learning when they intentionally teach rights, responsibilities, and democratic values.

Teachers regularly discussed how they sought to foster knowledge of citizenship through structured lessons on democracy, justice, and rights. For instance, discussing real-world issues like climate change or equality connects theoretical knowledge to practical societal concerns, encouraging children to view themselves as global citizens. We found that this activity takes place in most schools, but was commonly limited to classroom-based discussions, rather than experiential learning and real-world experiences.

Our research, however, also highlighted that when these conversations were confined to the classroom, without participatory activity or allowing children to explore these concepts through lived experiences, there was a risk of “othering.” For example, discussing food poverty as children helping children poorer than themselves, without acknowledging that children in the classroom might have lived experiences of poverty, disconnects these issues from the realities of students’ lives. Such framing promotes what Jefferess (2008) terms a “politics of benevolence,” which situates children as charitable actors rather than empowering them as rights holders and agents of systemic change. To counter this, civic learning must actively engage with students’ lived experiences and recognize their capacity to relate to and address these issues meaningfully.

Schools as Sites of Civic Support (Protection)

Teachers also emphasise the role of schools as protective environments that support children’s ability to act as citizens while safeguarding their welfare. Our findings show how they create environments where children feel safe to express their views and engage in civic activities. This involves addressing power imbalances in adult-child relationships through transparent and respectful dialogue. Protective structures—such as anti-bullying policies, inclusive practices, and trauma-informed teaching—ensure that all children, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, have equitable opportunities to participate. This support extends beyond physical safety to emotional and psychological well-being, as well as meeting basic welfare needs, such as providing food, clothes, warm rooms, showering and washing machine facilities.

“Lots goes into supporting our own families in our community. We cannot ask for regular donations as we serve a highly disadvantaged community.”

“We have free food available to all of our families and often provide bags to get families through the weekend or holiday period.”

“Many of our families struggle daily and cannot afford to give even a little to charity. They’re actually the ones we’re supposed to be collecting for!”

Schools as Sites of Civic Action (Participation)

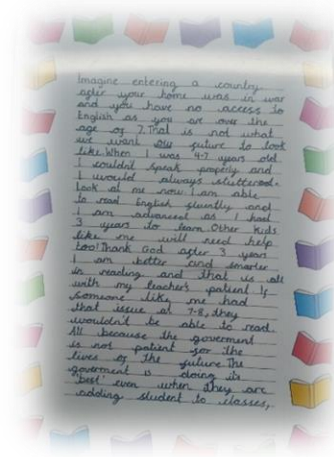
When schools fulfill their role as sites of civic action, they embody the principle of participation enshrined in the

UNCRC. Our research highlights how teachers facilitate children’s participation in decision-making processes, such as involvement in school councils, meaningful social action, campaigning or organising community projects, actualising their rights as active citizens. Schools that encourage civic action provide platforms for children to engage in real-world issues, from environmental activism to social justice campaigns. We expand on this within the case study examples in Part 3 of this report. These experiences reinforce children’s belief that their voices matter and that collective action can drive meaningful change.

“We have tried to move away from charitable giving towards social action. So, for example on Children in Need day we ran a Day of Social Justice in School and tried to help the children to understand that although charity helps, social justice can change things so that charity is no longer needed. We then put that into action.”

“We don’t teach our children to give to charity – they are more often than not the beneficiaries – instead we teach them why we need to challenge why charity even has to exist – and we campaign to help stop the need.”

Balancing the Interplay



Teachers in our study acknowledge the challenge of balancing these roles. They report navigating the tension between fostering agency and maintaining order, or between encouraging activism and meeting traditional educational expectations. However, our findings reveal that some educators integrate these roles seamlessly, using the curriculum to teach rights and responsibilities, creating protective environments that nurture participation, and empowering students to take tangible action.

More importantly, our research reveals a stark contrast in the aspirations of children depending on how their schools balance the roles of provision, protection, and participation. In schools that prioritise provision and protection only, often understandably due to the immense challenges faced by their communities, children's aspirations tend to reflect a desire to escape their circumstances. Common

examples include dreams of becoming a famous footballer, Olympian or winning a talent competition like Britain’s Got Talent. These aspirations, while valid, reflect an individualistic approach to success, shaped by a sense that opportunities lie beyond their immediate environment.

These schools frequently provide extensive welfare support to address the acute needs of their students and families. Warm banks, food banks, washing machines, and clothing banks are becoming part of an invisible curriculum—essential services that rarely appear in school documentation, websites, or inspections by bodies like OFSTED. While these efforts are vital and commendable, our findings show that when schools operate predominantly as sites of civic support, they risk perpetuating a “pedagogy of poverty,” where civic learning is framed around behaviour management and conformity, with low expectations for children's future active citizenship.

In contrast, schools that integrate participation alongside provision and protection foster radically different aspirations among their students. These schools place children’s lived experiences at the heart of their pedagogical approach and encourage them to engage with their communities as active citizens. For example, children in such schools spoke passionately about aspirations tied to community betterment: making local housing safer, creating green spaces, having somewhere to go swimming, or campaigning for a new leisure centre. These aspirations reflect not only a belief in their agency but also a commitment to improving the lives of others in their immediate environment. This difference stems from how schools conceptualise civic learning. In schools that embrace participation, children are involved in projects that directly connect learning with lived experiences, such as

collaborating with local councils, co-designing community initiatives, or engaging in activism. These practices transform schools into spaces of civic action, where students learn to see themselves as agents of change, working with their communities for social justice. For example, some schools actively campaign for improved local infrastructure or advocating for environmental justice alongside their students.

The contrast underscores the transformative potential of schools when they prioritise participation, alongside provision and protection. Schools that engage children in active citizenship not only empower them to envision a future where they are part of the solution but also nurture aspirations that align with collective well-being and systemic change.

Part 3: What Works and Why

Given the challenges outlined above, our research finds that fewer than 10% of primary schools consistently provide opportunities for active citizenship that integrate both participatory and justice-oriented approaches. While many schools focus on ‘provision’ and ‘protection’, addressing immediate needs through initiatives like food banks or clothing drives, ‘participation’ often remains limited to personally responsible citizenship, such as charity fundraisers or clean-ups. This risks reinforcing a “politics of benevolence”⁴⁶ where systemic issues are disconnected from children’s lived experiences. By contrast, schools that integrate participation in a justice-oriented way empower students to confront systemic inequities and envision change. For example, children in such schools move beyond helping at food banks to address root causes of poverty or expanding climate projects to advocate for policies benefiting marginalized groups. These approaches not only deepen civic learning but also position students as active agents within their communities, linking their immediate realities to broader systemic change.

Benefits to Children

As argued in our research, and demonstrated by the following case studies, fostering early civic engagement supports children’s development into engaged, responsible citizens, capable of contributing meaningfully to social good.⁴⁷

Active citizenship in primary schools holds significant benefits for children, providing them with early experiences in civic engagement, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Engaging children in civic activities from an early age fosters a lifelong commitment to social good. Evidence suggests that primary school is a formative stage for developing civic identity, where children learn empathy, teamwork, and responsibility, contributing to a foundation for active and informed citizenship.^{48 49}

Programmes that incorporate action-oriented and participatory approaches—such as social justice projects, environmental initiatives, or community service—empower children to recognise and address social issues around them. For example, schools that adopt participatory models allow students to plan projects and engage critically with topics like food poverty or climate change, helping them connect their learning to real-world applications.^{50 51} These experiences not only enhance civic knowledge but also build skills in democratic participation and problem-

⁴⁶ Jefferess, D. (2008). Global citizenship and the cultural politics of benevolence. *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices*, 2(1), 27-36.

⁴⁷ Body, A., Lau, E. and Josephidou, J. (2020) ‘The importance of teaching philanthropy: Educating children for social good’, *Impact*. Wiley. Available at: <https://impact.chartered.college/article/the-importance-of-teaching-philanthropy-educating-children-social-good/>.

⁴⁸ Body, A., Lau, E. and Josephidou, J. (2020) ‘The importance of teaching philanthropy: Educating children for social good’, *Impact*. Wiley. Available at: <https://impact.chartered.college/article/the-importance-of-teaching-philanthropy-educating-children-social-good/>.

⁴⁹ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2022). Developing children’s agency within a children’s rights education framework: 10 propositions. *Education 3-13*, 50(4), 439–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2052233>

⁵⁰ Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237-269. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>

⁵¹ Payne, K. A., Adair, J. K., Colegrove, K. S. S., Lee, S., Falkner, A., McManus, M., & Sachdeva, S. (2020). Reconceptualizing civic education for young children: Recognizing embodied civic action. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 15(1), 35-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197919858359>

solving, as students practice roles that contribute to their communities and society at large.⁵²

The impact of these practices extends beyond individual growth. Our research across schools showed that schools with strong civic education programs often see benefits like improved attendance, academic motivation, and community cohesion, indicating that active citizenship contributes positively to the entire school environment. Introducing active citizenship in primary education provides critical benefits by developing children's understanding of social justice and their roles in a democratic society.

Benefits to Schools

Our research shows that active citizenship in primary schools not only benefits children but also has substantial positive impacts on schools themselves. Schools that embed active civic engagement foster a cohesive, supportive environment, strengthen school-community relationships, and enhance student engagement and academic outcomes.⁵³ Our research highlights how schools that prioritise civic learning build an ethos of collective responsibility and empathy among students, which contributes to an improved school culture overall.⁵⁴

A school environment that emphasises active citizenship helps students understand their responsibilities toward their communities, reducing conflicts and promoting positive relationships among students and teachers. By engaging students in projects like community service or social justice initiatives, schools encourage a sense of belonging and shared purpose, which fosters a more inclusive school culture.⁵⁵ Schools with active citizenship programmes often report stronger student-teacher relationships and a culture of mutual respect, as students feel they are contributing meaningfully to school life and beyond.⁵⁶

Moreover, active citizenship initiatives can improve academic engagement and attendance. By incorporating experiential learning through projects, such as environmental campaigns or community events, schools provide students with hands-on applications for their learning, making subjects more relevant and engaging. These benefits underscore the potential of active citizenship to enrich academic life and create a more stimulating and purposeful learning environment.

Finally, our research shows how active citizenship helps schools form valuable partnerships with external organisations and enhance school culture, from local charities to national campaigns. Such partnerships not only bring resources and support to the school but also elevate its profile in the community. Schools that engage with external partners can offer students diverse opportunities for social action, critical thinking, and problem-solving, which contributes to a well-rounded education that prepares them for future societal roles.⁵⁷ These collaborations also help schools access materials and expertise that enrich the curriculum, enabling teachers to deliver more participatory and justice-oriented approaches to learning.

⁵² Body, A. and Lacny, J. (2022) 'Philanthropic tales: A critical analysis of how philanthropic citizenship is represented in children's picture-books – problems and possibilities', *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*. SAGE Publications, pp. 182-196. doi: 10.1177/17461979211061798

⁵³ Body, A., Lau, E., Cameron, L. and Cunliffe, J. (2023) *Educating for Social Good: Part 1 Mapping Children's Active citizenship in England*. University of Kent.

⁵⁴ Body, A., Lau, E. and Josephidou, J. (2020) 'The importance of teaching philanthropy: Educating children for social good', *Impact*. Wiley. Available at: <https://impact.chartered.college/article/the-importance-of-teaching-philanthropy-educating-children-social-good/>.

⁵⁵ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2022). Developing children's agency within a children's rights education framework: 10 propositions. *Education 3-13*, 50(4), 439–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2052233>

⁵⁶ Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237-269. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>

⁵⁷ Body, A. (2024) 'Raising Philanthropic Children: Moving Beyond Virtuous Philanthropy, Towards Transformative Giving and Empowered Citizenship', *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*. Wiley. doi: 10.1002/nvsm.1833.

Benefits to Communities

Finally, children’s active citizenship in primary schools brings substantial benefits to their communities, helping to foster a culture of inclusivity, responsibility, and social cohesion. Our research demonstrates how communities gain from children’s involvement in social action, as they bring fresh perspectives, creative problem-solving, and a strong sense of justice that can inspire meaningful community engagement.⁵⁸

One primary advantage is that children’s active citizenship promotes social cohesion by creating intergenerational connections and fostering community engagement. When children participate in community-centred projects—such as local clean-ups, social justice campaigns, or environmental initiatives—they engage directly with community members and often work alongside adults. This collaboration breaks down generational barriers, builds empathy, and nurtures a shared commitment to the community’s well-being.⁵⁹ Such activities help children feel rooted in their communities, encouraging long-term involvement and fostering a sense of shared identity.

Furthermore, children’s active citizenship can address local social and environmental issues in tangible ways. Community-oriented school projects, whether they involve advocating for environmental change, raising awareness about homelessness, or supporting local charities—allow children to directly impact and improve the community. For example, children’s participation in fundraising and advocacy projects often results in increased awareness and support for community needs. Such contributions make children visible participants in community life and can inspire adults to engage more actively as well.

Active citizenship also prepares children to become lifelong advocates for social justice, which benefits communities in the long run. Schools that emphasise justice-oriented civic education help children understand systemic issues, equipping them with the skills to address complex social challenges. As children grow into adulthood, these experiences instill values of empathy, responsibility, and activism, leading them to become engaged citizens who prioritize the common good.⁶⁰ Communities benefit as these future adults advocate for inclusive policies, support local causes, and take active roles in sustaining social welfare.

Our findings show that when primary schools cultivate children’s active citizenship, communities benefit from strengthened social bonds, increased advocacy for local issues, and a pipeline of responsible, community-minded future citizens. When children are engaged early, communities set the foundation for an engaged, vibrant citizenry committed to ongoing social improvement.

Core Components of Active Citizenship in Primary Schools

Analysing the nine case study schools, and drawing on data from interviews, and focus groups with children, we find six core components that characterise active citizenship in Primary Schools.

1. Proactive School Leadership

Proactive leadership in primary schools is crucial for fostering high-quality active citizenship education, as it sets the tone and direction for the entire school community.

In schools which were demonstrating participatory and justice-orientated approaches, teachers consistently

⁵⁸ Body, A., Lau, E., Cameron, L. and Cunliffe, J. (2024) ‘Mapping active civic learning in primary schools across England – a call to action’, *British Educational Research Journal*. Wiley, pp. 1308-1326. doi: 10.1002/berj.3975.

⁵⁹ Jerome, L., & Starkey, H. (2022). Developing children’s agency within a children’s rights education framework: 10 propositions. *Education 3-13*, 50(4), 439–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2052233>

⁶⁰ Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237-269. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>

indicated that effective leaders empowered and trusted them to initiate and lead civic conversations that promote critical thinking and social responsibility. Indeed, these schools themselves were modelled on democratic principles, with all staff and children actively contributing to decision making within the school. Thus, behaviours and values of active citizenship were modelled by the senior leadership team, making citizenship a visible and celebrated priority, focusing on social justice, courageously engaging with disruptive, controversial, or uncomfortable conversations to ensure that students are prepared to confront and challenge societal issues. The emphasis here was on empowering children rather than controlling behaviour, shifting the focus from compliance to active participation in the school community and beyond.

In each of our case study schools the senior leadership team was both champion and enabler, either leading civic action themselves or ensuring those teachers who had the passion for civic action were supported. Case Study 7 St Lawrence Primary school is an inspiring example. During lockdown members of the senior leadership team developed and designed their own social action programme and worked tirelessly with the rest of the team to ensure everyone understood its value and embed it throughout the curriculum.

2. A Whole School Approach

Our research shows that to foster active citizenship, schools need to adopt a whole-school approach that integrates active citizenship across the curriculum, extracurricular activities, governance, and community partnerships.

This allowed children to recognise their agency, practice their civic and social literacies within the classroom, and take initiative in addressing real-world issues, both locally and globally. In Key-stage 1, this often involved practicing civic and political literacies through play and storytelling, moving on to collective action and community engagement in KS2, where children led campaigns and social action on issues which impacted their local community, such as social housing issues, racism and pollution. In this way schools moved beyond teaching about democracy to making citizenship a lived, and embodied experience within the classroom, where children practice their civic-ness everyday (Payne et al., 2020).

Although each of our case study schools adopted a different approach to civic learning, a common finding across all settings was that the value of civic learning permeated across the school, in and out of the classroom, within school values, within the parent and carer community and within daily life. Good examples of this are Foundry Oasis Academy in Birmingham and St Lukes School in Glossop. At Foundry the core approach is the integration of community and school, and the school has literally removed boundaries with the community hub on the same site accessed by children and their families. At St Lukes their focus on democracy and voice is part of every school decision from deciding on class activities to what goes on the lunch menu. In these schools children, school staff and parents speak the same language and can articulate what their school is for.

3. Framing and pedagogy

An experiential, critical approach equips children with the tools and mindset to become active, empathetic citizens committed to fostering equity and justice.

Our findings show that effective active citizenship education in primary schools requires moving beyond theoretical knowledge to create a lived, embodied experience for children. This approach immerses students in real-world contexts that connect to their own experiences, allowing them to engage directly with principles of social justice, solidarity, and collective action. By centering education around these lived experiences, schools can foster a social justice mindset, encouraging children to critically examine power dynamics, privilege, and oppression, including their own. Within our Case Study schools, there was an active effort to shift children's mindsets as active citizens from kindness and benevolence to mindsets of allyship and solidarity. An example of this can be found in Case Study 2 Colmore Junior School where children talked about the way to turn a value into a virtue through action. Courageous Advocacy at both St Lukes, Case study 9 and Brabourne, Case study 1 also ensured children were confident in justice-oriented conversations.

We found Courageous Advocacy to be a crucial component because, while kindness involves small, general acts of goodwill, allyship and solidarity emphasise active, intentional efforts to challenge systemic injustices and support marginalised groups. This shift in emphasis encourages children to move beyond passive empathy, fostering deeper connections and a commitment to social change, equipping them to understand and address inequality and injustice more effectively. By participating in projects that address social issues connected to real life experience, such as food poverty, racism and the climate crisis, children not only learnt about justice but got to actively practice it, developing a strong sense of responsibility to their peers and society (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). In these examples, children themselves talked about their own role and the role of their community as agents of change – this was in stark contrast to children in other schools where social injustice was recognised but children did not consider themselves or their communities as part of the solution. Therefore, an experiential, critical approach equips children with the tools and mindset to become active, empathetic citizens committed to fostering equity and justice.

4. Authentically Child-led Approach

Our research findings reveal that active citizenship in primary education flourishes when adopting an child-led approach that is authentic rather than tokenistic.

This approach empowers students by giving them ownership and agency in their learning, which is crucial for developing true civic responsibility. When children are encouraged to take the lead, they are more likely to engage deeply with the content, express their perspectives, and make decisions that impact their learning environment (Torres-Harding et al., 2018). This sense of autonomy fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration—skills essential for active citizenship. Moreover, this research shows nurtures a sense of responsibility and empathy, as students learn to understand diverse viewpoints and the implications of their actions within a community. This matters because developing these competencies at a young age lays the foundation for informed, responsible citizens who are equipped to participate actively and thoughtfully in democratic processes, advocate for social justice, and contribute meaningfully to society throughout their lives.

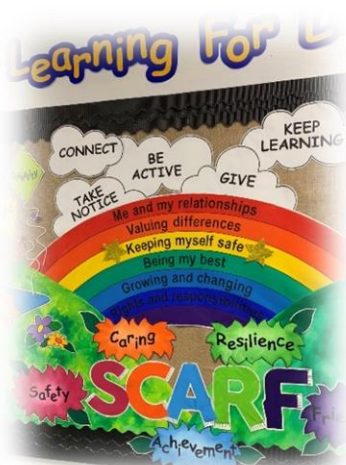
The Young Art Leaders and the Young Environment Leader in Case Study 5 Palm Bay Primary School were true examples of the legacy and impact children can have on the local community when they are enabled to lead their own projects and share their journeys with other schools and local groups.

5. Locally Contextualised

Civic learning is the most meaningful when it takes place in a localised way.

Our research findings show that it is crucial for active citizenship education to be locally contextualised for children, reflecting their real, lived experiences. When children engage with issues that are directly relevant to their lives, and the lives of people around them—such as privilege, poverty, racism, gender debates, climate change and structural inequalities—they develop a more profound understanding of civic responsibility. Addressing uncomfortable truths allows children to critically examine their communities, question unjust systems, and think about ways to drive meaningful change (Eidhof & de Ruyter, 2022). This approach ensures that active citizenship is not an abstract concept, but a lived practice rooted in reality. A stark difference here between how children discussed their own roles in the communities, was where children were actively involved in participative, social-just orientated active citizenship within their communities, they were much more likely to discuss success as improving the life of the community collectively.

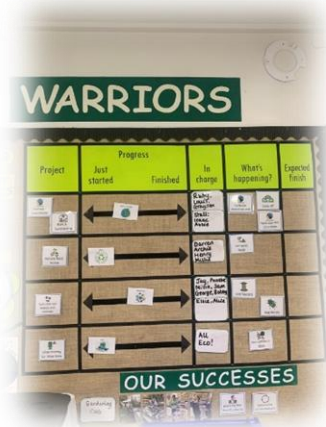
Within our case study schools you will see how the context differed across our study. In case study 1 you see a rural school community where volunteers step in and the children step out into the community on a daily basis leading to high levels of voluntary action. This is not possible everywhere, however case study 6 an inner city school shows how community come together in solidarity through campaigning. Pulling together as a community Surrey Square Primary School have campaigned to the local authority on many local issues. The main learning of the research is that civic learning is the most meaningful when it takes place in a localised way.



6. Utilise external partnerships

Our research shows that schools partnering with civil society organisations that emphasise a justice-oriented perspective can significantly enhance children's civic learning by encouraging participatory approaches and deeper understanding of social issues.

Unlike traditional fundraising activities focused only on donations, these carefully selected partnerships can promote long-term, ethically driven civic engagement that involves children in co-creating actions, debates, and solutions that address the root causes of societal challenges. Collaborating with external organisations and the wider community significantly enhances the reach and effectiveness of citizenship education by providing real-world contexts and opportunities for students to practice active citizenship beyond the classroom.



Take the huge impact Milton Road Primary School, Case Study 3 are having through their partnership with Citizens UK. By partnering with local organisations, schools can offer students hands-on experiences that encourage them to engage in civic action, understand diverse perspectives, and address community needs. These partnerships also position the school as a central part of the local community, highlighting the roles of parents and community members as vital partners in the educational process. Such collaboration fosters a democratic school environment where debate and discussion are encouraged, helping students understand and navigate complex social issues. Case Study 9, St Lukes Primary School in Greater Manchester, have become more connected to other schools through their partnership with national organisation, The Linking Network by taking advantage of its bespoke and innovative programme and links with the local authority. This interconnected approach not only broadens students' learning experiences but also empowers them to become active, informed citizens who contribute meaningfully to

their communities.

Conclusion:

By embedding active citizenship into the curriculum and daily practices, schools can foster a generation of informed, responsible citizens, equipped to challenge the status quo, advocate for social change, and contribute to a more inclusive, democratic, and just society.

To create a more equitable and engaged society, we must rethink and reprioritise active citizenship in primary education. This involves shifting from passive forms of civic learning, like simple fundraising, to more participatory and justice-oriented approaches that encourage children to engage deeply with social justice issues. Research shows that early, hands-on experiences in civic engagement build children's agency, critical thinking, and understanding of social inequalities, which has lasting impacts both on them as citizens as now, and for the future. A whole-school approach, with proactive leadership, facilitating authentic child-led learning, that is linked to the local context and utilises partnerships with justice-oriented organisations are key to this shift. We must all ensure that all children, regardless of background, have meaningful opportunities to participate in civic action that addresses real-world issues.

Case Study 1: Brabourne Church of England Primary School, Kent

The school at the heart of the community: civic learning and voluntary action

Brabourne Church of England Primary School has a strong connection with its rural village community. The school itself is surrounded by a beautiful garden and vegetable patch that is attentively tended to by local volunteers, always supported by children from the school. This small village school feels very much like an extended home for the families in the village. Assemblies and story time are led by volunteers from the village church, school clubs and extracurricular activities led by parents, carers and the wider community. The school is small with only 100 children across the school and smaller than average class sizes. This means that there is strong student voice and representation. The school's approach to the curriculum leaves room for project work and space for thinking about the sustainability of the whole community.

Impact on children

Child-led charity and community projects are run across the school with high participation from all children and their families. The school provides a powerful example of what community can look like when it has that close connection with the school. The children all participate in a school initiative called 'Stepping out of the door' where they lead changes in their community including litter-picking, donating pocket money, helping at the local hospice or creating artwork to brighten

someone's day. Children could articulate the key elements of planning a community action project, they talked about publicity and gaining support.

School ethos and pedagogy

- The school's pedagogy is linked to the CoFE faith and **courageous advocacy** is used as language to articulate the way children should care for their peers, their families and their community by standing up for causes as well as supporting them. It recognises that standing up for someone could be difficult in the face of opposition.
- The school's Citizenship awards look for children who have decided independently to take action on a cause. The school aims to support social action but also reward them for deciding to take action.

Evidence of Active citizenship

- *"At school we made some beeswax sandwich wraps, and we raised we raised about 70 pounds when we gave it to the Cats Protection. Beeswax sandwich wraps are used to wrap around food, so you didn't need plastic. It has got a double purpose." KS1 Child*
- The children interviewed a person that had left Hong Kong because of the restraints on democracy and fled to the UK. Left with a strong impression, this sparked off a conversation about freedom in the UK

Case Study 2: Colmore Junior School, Birmingham

Character Education as a catalyst for social action

At Colmore the character education framework has become an essential pedagogy and language used to underpin the idea of turning values into action and this is embedded across the curriculum and within all parts of school life. At Colmore class topics and school activities are meaningfully located within character driven school values. A key aspect of Colmore's ethos is that every value is twinned with an action. This ensures the active element of civic learning is embedded within the school curriculum. The Colmore children's 'social action group' rests on children's agency and ownership of projects. Just as school values are chosen by students in school, the social action group is child-led requiring them to also consult and feed in the ideas of the whole school community.

Impact on children



During a school tour children took us to a bake sale organised by their classmates for the families of Gaza. These are regular events at Colmore, *you just have to tell the teachers what cause you want to do it for and they'll let you set it up*. Children at Colmore were confident and proactive at finding ways they could take action on issues they cared about.

School ethos and pedagogy

Colmore embed their ethos of being 'locally and globally aware' and this is articulated by senior leaders and all staff, space is given in lesson to discuss this. Teachers feel comfortable talking about the ethos and talk about having time in class to explore important issues in depth.

Our headteacher is absolutely so authentically involved in character education. They believe that we are preparing children for the wider world and are prepared to make bold decisions and let staff make bold decisions in order to get those messages and encourage that prosocial behaviour that we feel is missing and is in fact part of what a teacher does. So, it's driven top down, it's about being an advocate for becoming involved in your democracy, becoming interested in democracy and what it can achieve.
Teacher, Colmore Primary School.

Evidence of Active citizenship

A conversation about the Equalities Act provided a critical space to talk about legal protection, but also people's everyday experience of unfairness. Using the school value 'Rule of Law' students were encouraged to think about how their own everyday actions could protect equality and inclusion

School staff, parents and carers and children volunteer together at the school allotment that supplies food for the school. Children also lead regular fundraising activities within the school voting on causes and activities

Teachers explicitly refer to the school values in reflective moments during classroom learning. In a PSHE children critically explored how leaders were showing their values of being 'globally aware' and how their actions could ignite change.

Case Study 3: Milton Road Primary School, Cambridgeshire

Voice, choice and agency through the Curriculum: Learning to be changemakers

Milton Road have refocused their curriculum through the idea of children as active, present decisionmakers and social actors. The ethos of civic learning is placed in the hands of the children, who form their own ‘crews’ and decide what they would like to change within the school or community and how they are going to take responsibility for that. These crews can take on projects in or outside school, supported by responsible adults. The school believes every learning experience should be an adventure, and the school uses the wide opportunities available within its local area of Cambridgeshire to embrace this. There are strong partnerships with local councils, universities in the local area and city museums.

Impact on children

Partnerships with local universities and research departments were evident in the ways Year 1 children articulated how we are damaging the earth and climate action that we could all be part of.

‘Do more of what you like as long as it is not causing evil to the earth or to each other. Plucking flowers and taking too much from the ground causes climate change’ Year 1 Child

The children in this school were able to talk through the steps of creating a campaign using their experience of in-school action lobbying against traffic. They all advocated walking or cycling.

School ethos and pedagogy

- The school’s curriculum design is founded upon their ethos of values-based education and applies ideas from the Organisation Economic Cooperation and Development Learning Compass. This framework is designed around what children will need to

thrive in the future including agency, well-being, and competencies including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values.

- Milton Road does not have rules, it has an agreement that each child is invited to sign when they start. This agreement is based around the idea of care – care for yourself, care for each other, care of your learning, care of school, community and world, care for the future.
- Project work is embedded within the curriculum for every subject and across every year group at Milton Road

Evidence of Active citizenship



- A group of dedicated children from Milton Road represent their school within the Cambridge Citizens UK group, which collaborates to make change. This group ran the first Young People’s Assembly in 2023 discussing local issues of traffic
- Children created a day of action in their school to highlight the dangers of traffic after learning that over 645 people had been badly hurt in road accidents that year which made the local news.

Case Study 4: Oasis Academy Foundry, Birmingham

The intersection of civic learning and civic support: school-community welfare

Oasis Academy Foundry is an example of the transformational difference a primary school can make not only to a child's educational journey but also as a powerful space where families are not only supported, but advocated for. This school, part of the Oasis Academy chain, understands the way primary schools have become unique safe places for communities in areas of deprivation. Using the school as an access point, the Oasis model has developed a hub within the school grounds, a space where families can access a range of essential services such as food, training opportunities and social activities, as well as advocacy and advice on housing and financial issues by paid support workers.



'At Foundry we aim for the integration of community and schooling, rather than seeing as two separate things, we try to link the two things together wherever possible.' Headteacher, Oasis Academy Foundry.

Impact on children

Learning at Foundry's civic is founded in the local community, 'community' being one of the school values, and the realities of community regeneration. School is a place of pride for these children.

During the school tour the children led us to their awards board first. The school is a School of Sanctuary, it has the Inclusion Flagship Award and has won awards for Parenting Partnerships and Diversity. These accolades have had an important impact on children:

'We want to start our school tour here so you can see how wonderful our school is. Everyone knows how wonderful our school is and that we have won awards for inclusion and diversity.'

School ethos and pedagogy

- PSHE activities are focused around positive, safe choices and applying the school's nine habits within their daily life, their learning and their approach to giving
- One of the key parts of the Oasis Education Charter is to create *'a harmonious climate for learning where all young people can flourish and thrive'*
- The Oasis charter is rooted in an ethos of restorative justice. When managing behaviour, the school explores the idea of the harm that behaviour can cause and the ways children can repair that harm with their classmates, school culture and the community
- The curriculum introduces an Oasis Global Focus in Geography, a place or heritage and this is embedded across the curriculum in all subjects ensuring children gain a deeper knowledge of place and people from a range of perspectives

Evidence of Active citizenship

- Children spend time in the hub with their families, join in with community gardening activities, benefit from breakfast for everyone, activities offered by the hub and a universal sports club for all children
- The children worked alongside the Hub to prepare backpacks for the homeless during the winter



Case Study 5: Palm Bay Primary School, Kent

Art as activism: Using children's creativity to campaign on local and global issues

Palm Bay Primary School in Kent is a school where children's voice and community action is at the heart of the school's ethos and pedagogy. A strong partnership with a local art gallery and the many art organisations in the area ensures that all children's creative work has a clear campaigning message focused on local and global issues. The Young Art Leaders, an extra-curricular group, create their own artwork to fundraise for their school's 'Artist in Residence' programme – where local artists use the school site as a studio space for their own work and run workshops with children. Climate Change explored in Science and Geography are communicated through creative exhibitions which, again, capture student voice. Creative activities are used across the school for children's wellbeing and to support children within the school's SEN community.

Impact on children

Children talk confidently about their roles and responsibilities in the school and in the wider community:

'Our school is an eco-school. Within the [eco]committee you have different levels and then we have different groups. I voted for the best reason, and we voted for someone who cared about the environment. The teachers support us, we always chat to them about what we are doing but we are the ones that make the decisions.

They are supported to lead projects and encourage others to get involved. There is a strong peer modelling throughout the school associated with the Young Art Leaders and Eco Leaders, with any children younger in the school talking about the leaders.

School ethos and pedagogy

- The strong creative focus in the school permeates across the curriculum, playing a part in every subject and is used as an outlet for children to speak out and act on the issues that are important to them.
- *The children have a real kind of civic responsibility in the sense that they have organised, you know, they've set up something as simple as a litter picking station in the school field and playground and they manage it. Teacher, Palm Bay.*

Evidence of Active citizenship

- The school's community action has an impact on other schools in the wider community. Young Art Leaders resources are available via the gallery for other schools to download and use art to make a difference.
- Over the last five years the Young Art Leaders Auctions have raised thousands of pounds for art activities in the local area for children.
- Parents and carers lead community projects with local gardens tackling food waste and creative campaigns, as well as school volunteering and fundraising.
- Children across KS1 and KS2 participated in art sessions including a photography project taking photos of their local area highlighting the problems they identified with pollution and disused space.

Case Study 6: Surrey Square Primary School, London

School, families and children as advocates on local issues: an inner-city London school

Civic learning at Surrey Square Primary (SSQ) is inextricably bound within the civic action and advocacy that the staff team, including a designated Family and Community coordinator, are leading on behalf of the families within the school. When it comes to social issues, the children are often participating in campaigns for better housing and better action from the local authorities. Outside the classroom, the team at SSQ campaigned for faster responses to the issue of pests within many of the homes of the school population. From this action, advocacy and campaigning have found their way into the civic learning in the classroom.

Impact on children

One of the key parts of Surrey Square's civic action is listening. SSQ is aware of the important need to listen to the children in its community, where families can feel unheard.

Allowing children space to talk about the issues that matter has led to the school and children acting on a number of community issues.

We listened to the children find out what it is they were worried about. And in year three, it worked out they were worried about housing, housing was the thing that came up. And they were able to create a real tangible thing in terms of they wrote letters to some other council obviously explored the problem they wanted to condition in the housing stability on being moved around... So they might not solve all

the issues with the housing, but they were listened to, and they saw that they had made a small difference. We saw how they felt about the fact that they were listened to, and something happened changed because of that. Year 6 Teacher, SSQ.

School ethos and pedagogy

- Pedagogically, their action is framed by their school values – 'Build a better world' takes a

justice-orientated approach and recognises social inequality. It requires students to challenge the status quo, using criticality and creativity to think about how to solve the problem.

- The curriculum asks children to think about where they can be an advocate for themselves and others.
- The school frames sensitive conversations around the very real barriers families can face.

Evidence of Active citizenship

- The school staff, parents and carers and children in the school led a campaign about pest control in local housing by writing letters in the shape of rats within the school and posting them to the local authority. As a result, members from the local authority visited the school to discuss the issue
- Year 6 debated and presented schoolwide the issues that most matter to them before creating campaigning videos
- The school and community have campaigned against citizenship fees for children, which they believed were pushing families into poverty. The school contributed to a class action against the Home Office, and the fees were eventually deemed unlawful.

Case Study 7: St Lawrence CofE Primary School, Essex

School ethos and pedagogy

- Agents for Change is also an example of actions that fit within the faith school's Christian values Courage, Community and Compassion that have key principles based on agency, advocacy and responsibility for the wider, global community.
- Co-constructed between staff and the senior leadership team, the school's Agents for Change comprises of a menu of actions that can be implemented in school as part of learning or extracurricular activities or at home with parents/carers and within the wider community

Finding space in the curriculum – active citizenship in and out of the classroom

The curriculum at St Lawrence C of E Primary School is underpinned by an Agents for Change project that was developed by members of the school leadership team. Within the curriculum and the term topic, as well as across school activities, there are opportunities for children to take action and shown they are a leader for change.

Pedagogic language framing the actions around justice and community is used by teachers, senior leaders and children themselves as they start to understand what it means to be an agent for change. Parents and carers also have an opportunity to be participants in Agents for Change, which enables a strong home-school partnership.

Impact on children

The Agents for Change framework has equipped children at St Lawrence with an understanding of social action and the part they can play:

For social action ... I did a little drawing of a stickman with a litter picking stick and a bag in his hands and under that another stickman with a raffle raising money and to the side I have written 'doing something socially to help the place you live in' Year 4 Student.

Evidence of Active citizenship

- The children's campaigning on the environment and for care of wildlife has earned them letters of recognition from David Attenborough
- Child-led actions from the Eco team ensured that fundraising activities across the school paid for five acres of rainforest
- Locally the children regularly volunteer their time organising litter picks with other schools, collecting for the food bank and fundraising for local charities
- Their curriculum map, which is displayed in the classroom, also asks them to get involved in action related to their learning



Case Study 8: St Luke CofE Primary School, Derbyshire

- St Luke's ethos is founded in line with its faith values, believes in nurturing children to be productive members of the community
- Their curriculum is designed to encourage children to think critically, independently and creatively
- There is a strong teacher commitment to providing democratic learning and opportunities and this is enabled by strong endorsement from the senior leadership team

Building political literacy and understanding decision-making: school democracy in action

As a school in a small market town in the Peak District, a community can feel miles away from Westminster, decision-making and national policy. The team at this small school are on a mission to make sure that children growing up here understand the way decisions are made in England and the UK, that they recognise the importance of democracy and know how they can use their voice. Political literacy is not just taught here, it forms part of the daily decision-making and systems of the school. Voting and building consensus is seen in every classroom, even when deciding on lesson activities. The student council is voted in every year after passionate debate and campaigning. Across the curriculum they debate important and topical issues that mirror the issues debated in the Houses of Parliament and critical spaces are built into their classrooms and school assemblies.

Impact on children

Children here debate and build consensus articulately and confidently; their discussion has a strong justice-orientated understanding.

It is important to give to charity because some people have an illness or disability, and they have had to retire early, and they can't afford everything they need. I think the government should be doing more to help people with illnesses or disabilities because it is not their fault they ended up in need. KS2 Child.



Drawing by a KS2 child. The building represents charity, each different colour layer represents a level of poverty, the child explained that there are many levels of poverty in the UK and charities have to meet all that need.

Children learn to disagree respectfully, accept different perspectives and always have the opportunity to change their mind. They are encouraged to think about social inequality.

School ethos and pedagogy

Evidence of Active citizenship

- In history KS2 investigated the names behind their streets and whether they should be changed if they had links to colonial legacies and slavery
- At the local level children's voice is elevated with students representing their school at the High Peak Council debating issues of pollution and school gates parking
- Each year students who have spoken on these councils join their teachers on a trip to the Houses of Parliament, where they see for themselves how decisions are made
- A school partnership with a local food bank and clothes charity sees children and their parents volunteer to help sort donations weekly, raise money with the charity as a regular visitor in the school

Case Study 9: St Luke's CE Primary School, Greater Manchester

Building Courageous Advocacy for inclusion and community cohesion: Nurturing connections across schools

Underpinned by their Christian values St Luke's in Greater Manchester has school values that promote understanding and inclusion and show a commitment to tackling some of the issues that exist within divided communities. Courageous Advocacy plays a large part in anti-bullying movements within the school, which are child-led and centred on speaking out if you see someone being treated without respect. The school's partnership with national organisation The Linking Network fosters a meaningful connection with another local school where the partnered schools work on community action alongside each other. Workshops foster trust and respect and aim to show how, despite difference, we all have the same values and dreams for our local area. Linking Network's mission to build social cohesion is aligned to the child-led ethos of the school, which embeds everyday citizenship within its school values.

Impact on children

Children lead anti-bullying campaigns; the

walls are full of posters designed by the children challenging discrimination and encouraging peers to call out bullying. Children showing us around described the actions their school takes to make sure it remains inclusive.

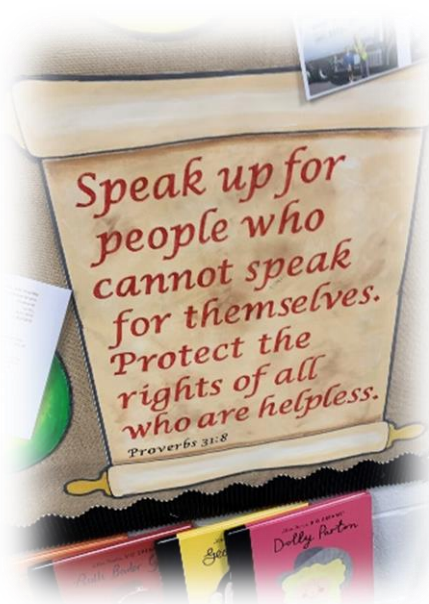
School ethos and pedagogy

- Courageous Advocacy is used as a language to create an active culture of justice and responsibility. The school's report used examples of the anti-bullying and community action led by the children embedded in the curriculum to show examples of where this responsibility is demonstrated across the school.

Evidence of Active citizenship

- Different cohorts from the school are matched annually with a local school through the Linking Network Programme. The first touch point is a theatre visit and book reading. Children engaged with the idea of reducing waste in the future and protecting the earth. This forms part of each school's community action

- Linking schools meet several times over the year and the same cross-school peer groups participate in creative workshops that allow space for discussion, collaboration and project work
 - Children created their own short videos on the topics of bullying, discrimination and exclusion. These films were shared widely with other schools and highlighted the ways in which school culture can call out cultures of discrimination.



Part 4 - Active Citizenship: Focusing on Community

Active citizenship, when effectively embedded within primary education, holds the potential to transform children’s understanding of democracy, community, and justice. However, our findings reveal that without systemic support and resources, schools are struggling to sustain this work, particularly in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Our research underscores the value of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the principles of UNICEF’s Rights Respecting Schools agenda as powerful frameworks for understanding the intersection of children’s rights and their role in active citizenship, highlighting schools’ multifaceted functions as sites of **provision, protection, and participation**. Viewing active citizenship through the children’s rights framework not only illuminates how schools contribute to civic education but also reveals the challenges schools face in balancing these roles within a context of increasing societal pressures.

Schools as Sites of Provision and Protection: Addressing State Failures

The findings from our research, particularly the initial survey data and teacher interviews, highlight a critical reality: schools are increasingly stepping into roles traditionally fulfilled by the state, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Over 80% of schools engaged in this research report providing food parcels, clothing banks, or other welfare services to support families facing financial hardship. While this work highlights schools’ remarkable commitment to their communities, it also underscores systemic failures in addressing poverty and inequality.

“We never thought we’d be running a food bank, but we had no choice. Our families rely on us.” Head teacher

This shift into welfare provision has direct implications for active civic learning. Teachers report that these additional responsibilities stretch already limited resources, diverting attention from participatory and justice-oriented civic education. For many children, schools become the primary site where issues like food insecurity and housing instability are not only discussed but addressed. While such initiatives can foster empathy and solidarity, they risk reducing civic education to charity-based models of citizenship, focused on benevolence rather than systemic change. This raises an urgent question: how can schools balance their protective role with the need to nurture critical, justice-oriented citizenship?

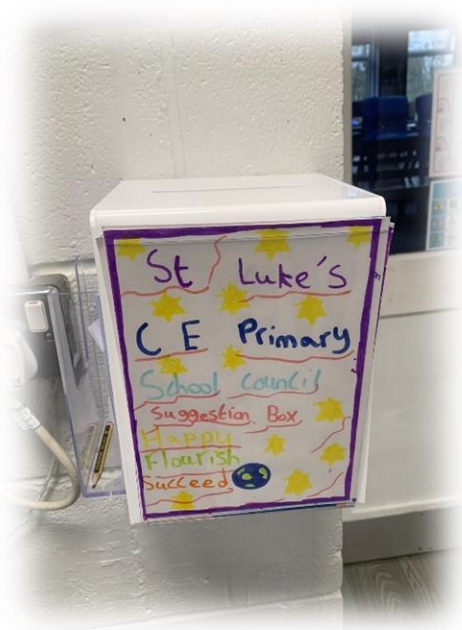
Participation: The Transformative Power of Active Civic Learning

Despite these challenges, schools remain uniquely positioned to empower children as active participants in their communities. Effective active citizenship education combines experiential learning with critical engagement, enabling students to explore not only what actions they can take but also why these actions matter. Our research highlights schools that have adopted participatory and justice-oriented approaches, where children are encouraged to address root causes of social issues. For example, one school evolved from food parcel distribution to including child-led campaigns advocating for policy changes on food security.

Teachers consistently emphasised the transformative potential of involving children in real-world civic projects.

“When children see that their actions make a difference, they feel empowered. They start to believe they can change the world.”

Such participatory models align with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and UNICEF’s Rights Respecting Schools agenda, which stress children’s right to be heard and involved in decisions affecting their lives.



Systemic Barriers and the Need for Support

While the potential of active citizenship education is clear, our findings also reveal significant barriers. Schools in disadvantaged areas face resource shortages, larger class sizes, and external pressures to prioritise academic outcomes over civic learning. These constraints often force schools to adopt reactive, rather than proactive, approaches to civic education. Moreover, the current lack of statutory requirements for citizenship education in primary schools perpetuates inconsistencies in how active citizenship is implemented.

To address these challenges, systemic support is essential. Policymakers must recognise the dual burden placed on schools as both educators and providers of civic support. Increased funding and resources are critical to ensure that schools can sustain their welfare initiatives without compromising the quality of civic education. Furthermore, national frameworks must be developed to standardise and support active citizenship education, ensuring that all schools, regardless of context, can

offer meaningful opportunities for participatory and justice-oriented learning.

Toward a Holistic Approach: Provision, Protection, and Participation

The success of active citizenship education depends on balancing the three pillars of provision, protection, and participation. Schools need to continue to provide safe and supportive environments in light of welfare state failures, however this needs to be alongside empowering children to engage critically with societal issues. This requires a shift from viewing active civic education as an isolated subject to embedding it across the curriculum and school culture. For example, integrating active civic themes and participatory opportunities into subjects like history, geography, and science can help students connect their learning to real-world challenges.

Nonetheless, schools should not be expected to shoulder this responsibility alone. Partnerships with civil society organisations, local governments, and community groups can provide valuable resources and expertise. These collaborations not only enhance the reach of civic education but also position schools as hubs of community engagement.

“Our school is at the heart of the community, but we need others to join us in this work. It’s not sustainable otherwise.”

Recommendations and Conclusion

Active citizenship education is a cornerstone for fostering inclusive, democratic, and just societies. However, for its full potential to be realized, schools must be equipped with the necessary resources, frameworks, and partnerships to deliver high-quality civic learning. Drawing on the findings from this research, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Develop a National Framework

A comprehensive framework for active citizenship education could be established to provide clear guidance and consistency for schools across England. This framework should align with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), emphasising participatory and justice-oriented approaches that recognise children as current citizens with agency. The model provided by UNICEF’s Rights Respecting Schools offers an effective foundation, showcasing how integrating children’s rights can transform schools into spaces of provision, protection, and participation. This framework should:

- Ensure active citizenship education is embedded into the curriculum from Key Stage 1 onwards, progressing into deeper participatory and justice-oriented models as children mature.
- Prioritise inclusive practices that give all children, regardless of background, the opportunity to engage meaningfully with social justice issues.
- Encourage critical dialogue and experiential learning to help children understand systemic inequalities and their role in addressing them.

Without a cohesive national strategy, the current inconsistency in provision—where disadvantaged schools are disproportionately impacted—will continue to deepen civic inequalities.

2. Increase Funding and Resources

Targeted funding should be allocated to schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities, to overcome systemic barriers such as resource shortages and curriculum time constraints. Research findings highlight how financial challenges prevent schools in underprivileged areas from offering participatory and justice-oriented activities, limiting children’s opportunities to engage critically with real-world issues. To level the playing field:

- Funding should support experiential learning initiatives, such as community projects, environmental campaigns, and partnerships with civil society organisations.
- Resources must be allocated to ensure welfare provision—such as food banks and basic needs support—does not overshadow opportunities for civic action.
- Schools should have access to grants for professional development, field trips, and extracurricular programs that enable meaningful civic engagement.

By addressing these disparities, we can ensure that all children, regardless of socio-economic background, have equal access to the benefits of high-quality active citizenship education.

3. Support Teacher Training

Teachers are pivotal to delivering active citizenship education, yet the research highlights how many feel constrained by rigid curricula and accountability pressures. To empower teachers as facilitators of justice-oriented civic learning, sustained investment in professional development programmes is essential. These programmes should:

- Equip teachers with skills in critical pedagogy, enabling them to foster classroom environments that encourage critical conversations, debate, and participatory learning.
- Provide training on integrating active citizenship into existing subjects such as literacy, science, and geography, ensuring it is not confined to isolated activities.
- Address the emotional and cultural dimensions of active citizenship education, helping teachers navigate controversial topics and connect learning to children's lived experiences.

Supporting teachers' professional development will not only enhance the delivery of active citizenship education but also contribute to teacher retention by aligning their moral purpose with classroom practice.

4. Strengthen Partnerships

Collaboration between schools, civil society organisations, philanthropic funders and local governments is crucial for enhancing the delivery and impact of active citizenship education. Partnerships with justice-oriented organisations offer schools expertise, resources, and opportunities to engage children in participatory action projects that address systemic challenges. To strengthen these collaborations:

- Schools should be supported to build long-term relationships with organisations that emphasise advocacy, social justice, and environmental action.
- Local governments must facilitate opportunities for schools to engage with community-led initiatives, ensuring civic learning is locally contextualised and relevant.
- Networks of schools, charities, and government agencies should share best practices and co-create programmes that empower children to become active changemakers.

By fostering stronger partnerships, schools can bridge resource gaps, connect classroom learning with real-world contexts, and equip children with the skills and knowledge to address pressing societal issues.

Conclusion

Active citizenship education is vital for community betterment, preparing children to critically engage with the world around them. However, schools cannot shoulder this responsibility alone. By developing a national framework, increasing funding, supporting teacher training, and strengthening partnerships, we can address systemic challenges and ensure all children—regardless of background—are equipped to lead and contribute to a more inclusive, democratic, and just society. Schools, as sites of provision, protection, and participation, hold the key to empowering children as active citizens now, not just in the future. It is time to prioritise this essential aspect of education and ensure every child has the opportunity to make a meaningful difference.



This work was supported by the UK Research and Innovation Economic and Social Research Council, grant number ES/W001853/1 - Educating for 'Public Good': A critical study exploring how philanthropic citizenship is encouraged in primary education.