

Educating for Public Good:

A critical exploration of active citizenship and children's agency in primary schools

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Introduction



Photos courtesy of Led by the Wild C.I.C

- ESRC funded project –
 - How do primary school children learn to be active, engaged citizens?
 - What opportunities do children have to engage in social and environmental issues?
 - What agency do they have in these processes?
- Rooted in a children’s rights and participation discourse.
- 3-part, 3-year research project:
 - **Year 1 – What** - Survey mapping of ‘what’ is happening in primary schools across England (See Body et al., 2024 & Body, 2024).
 - **Year 2 – How** – Interviews with 100 primary school teachers and leaders across England.
 - **Year 3 – Why** – In-depth analysis of 10 case study schools focusing on children’s lived experiences.

We’re
here!

Active Citizenship

Children leading on responding to social and environmental issues, that matter to them...

“A dimension of citizenship behaviour, associated with intentions and actions that intend to produce public benefit for example volunteering, campaigning, social action, charitable giving, advocacy and activism.”



‘Education should not shelter our nation’s children from even the harsher controversies of adult life but should prepare them to deal with such controversies knowledgably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally’ Bernard Crick, Education for Citizenship and Teaching Democracy in Schools, 1998.

What kind of citizen?

The Individualised Citizen (Contributory/Character)

- Acts responsibly in his/her community.
- Obeys rules and follows laws.
- Recycles, gives to charity, gives blood, etc.
- Volunteers to 'lend a hand' in crisis.
- Gives to a food bank.

The Participatory Citizen (Participatory)

- Active member of community organisations and/or improvement efforts.
- Organises community efforts to care for those in need.
- Engages in collective tasks.
- Organises a food collection.

The Justice Oriented Citizen (Justice orientated)

- Critically assess social, political and economic structures to see beyond surface causes.
- Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice.
- Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change, for example challenge food poverty.

Methodology

PART 1

- In-depth survey of 309 primary school teachers.
- TeacherTapp data from 1906 primary school teachers.
- Analysed against FSM data, OFSTED rating and teacher characteristics.
- Whilst we witness strong correlations, statistical significance is not as clear, suggesting more is going on than simply discussion about deprivation.

Findings published in 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.

PART 2

- 102 semi structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders across the country (January to Sept 2023)
- Special attention paid to inclusion of diverse voices representative of the education sector
- Teachers ranged from ECT's to experienced senior leaders
- Analysis of school websites, OFSTED reports and social media

PART 3

- In-depth case study analysis in 9 schools (purposefully sampled for range of approaches to citizenship education).
- Focus groups with children
- Child-led tours of school discussing citizenship
- Focus groups with teachers
- Interviews with teachers and support staff
- Observation of citizenship lessons, assemblies and citizenship activities in school
- Over 270 children engaged

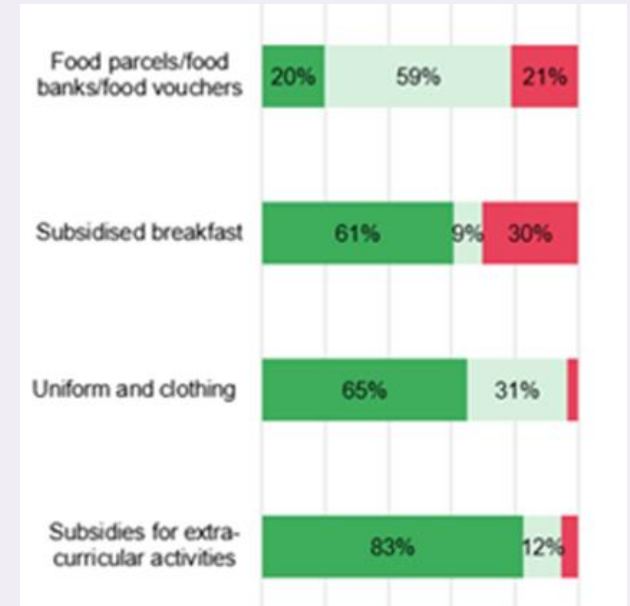
Increased Pressure



- Tightening of school budgets
- 52% primary schools in deficit in 2022/23
- % predicted to increase this year



- Over £1bn cut in youth service support since 2010
- Reduction in local authority community support services
- Reduction in early help services (45% drop in spending since 2010)



- Cost of living crisis
- Schools are on the frontline (NFER, 2024)
- Increasingly turning to voluntary action/ fundraising to support (Body & Hogg, 2020)

Mapping

Active Civic Learning Activities in Primary Schools:

- Majority of children in primary schools engage in active civic learning through a focus on in-school fundraising activities.
- Fundraising for school funds, national campaigns, and local charities are the most common activities, while community social action projects, volunteering and campaigning are less frequent.

Pedagogical Framing of Civic Activities:

- Fundraising activities are primarily framed within a contributory discourse, emphasising giving rather than exploring cause.
- Only 31% of teachers report children debating issues of inequality and social justice during fundraising activities.
- Quality of these engagements varies hugely.

Children's Agency in Civic Learning:

- Half of teachers report that children sometimes lead in deciding which causes to support, mainly through school councils.
- These systems most frequently privilege certain children over others.
- Quality of this participation varies.

Equity in Access to Civic Opportunities:

- Active civic learning opportunities are not equally distributed across schools.
- More affluent schools provide more opportunities for active citizenship, such as social action projects and fundraising for charities, while less affluent schools focus more on fundraising for school funds and supporting community (welfare).

Barriers to Civic Learning:

- Schools with higher levels of deprivation and lower OFSTED ratings report face more barriers to engaging children in active civic learning.
- Financial constraints, time, moral panics, concerns about children being beneficiaries of charity, and curriculum-related challenges are key barriers reported by teachers.

The 4 Big Themes.....



1. Active civic education positively impacts children, schools and communities

2. Active civic education positively impacts teacher satisfaction and retention



3. Key enabling factors mean some schools can embed active civic learning more than others

4. Civic learning, civic action and civic support are intrinsically linked



1. Active civic education positively impacts children, schools and communities

Our findings show that high quality active civic education has positive impacts on:

- **Children** – feel empowered, confident to discuss social issues, critically conscious and link this to wider learning and citizenship, engaged and part of a community (local and global).
- High levels of political, social and civic literacies.
- Wider research shows positively linked to attendance, attainment and behaviour.
- **Schools** – create a sense of community, shared values, culture of hope, engaged staff and parents.
- **Communities** – places school at heart of community, provides direct support to the community, brings about local change to positively impact the community (from litter picks to campaigning for policy reform).

"Charity is important, but it shouldn't be as important as it is now. It's only that important because the government is failing" (year 6 child)

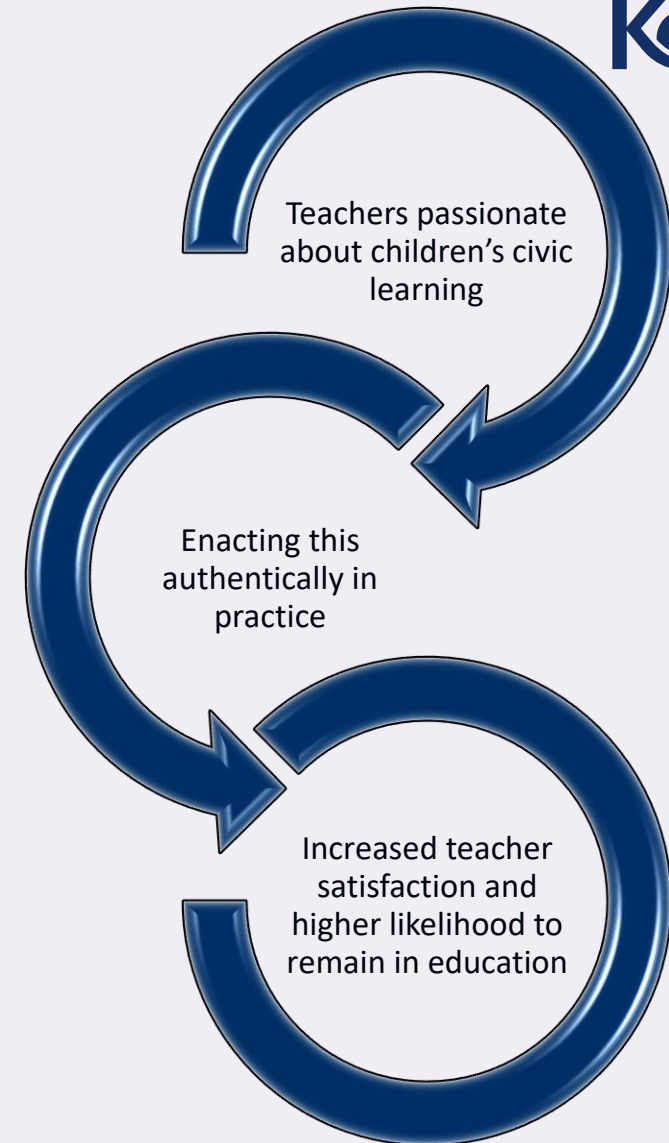


2. Active civic education positively impacts teacher satisfaction and retention

“Something that's really close to my heart and growing up is that understanding of social justice. It is so important to me and for the children in our school. It's really important to me that they kind of have some understanding of their own privilege and care about justice and care about looking after each other.”

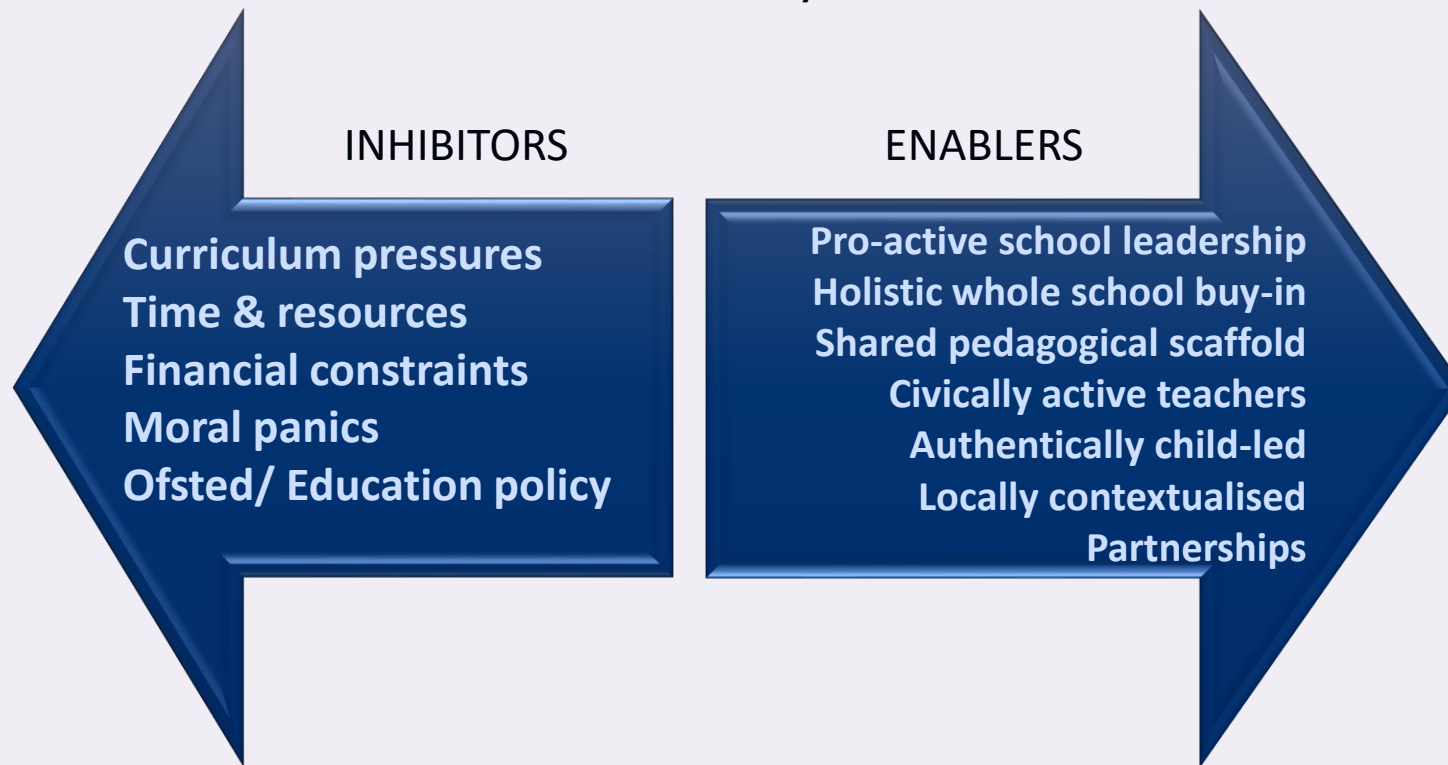
“And giving back and putting others before you and just building relationships. And so, I think that's kind of the way that I was brought up but also, I just love it like I love working with children they're fantastic.”

“I think it (civic education) depends on you as a teacher personally and your own sort of moral compass and how you feel you want to teach ... and I think it does come down to age and experience, whether you can be a bit maverick and have the confidence to say I'm not going to just do this issue in PSHE, but I am going to go off on a tangent in geography to make sure we get this in. If someone questions me I'm going to stand up and say I did it and I'm not worried but another younger, less experienced teacher may be worried about the fallout.”



3. Key enabling factors mean some schools can embed active civic learning and active citizenship more than others

- Whilst deprivation was a strong indicator of levels of activity, it does not explain all activity within schools. Interviews and focus groups with teachers and senior leaders revealed a distinct set of factors which were perceived as enablers of high quality active civic learning within schools.
- Inhibitors were almost universally discussed across state schools.

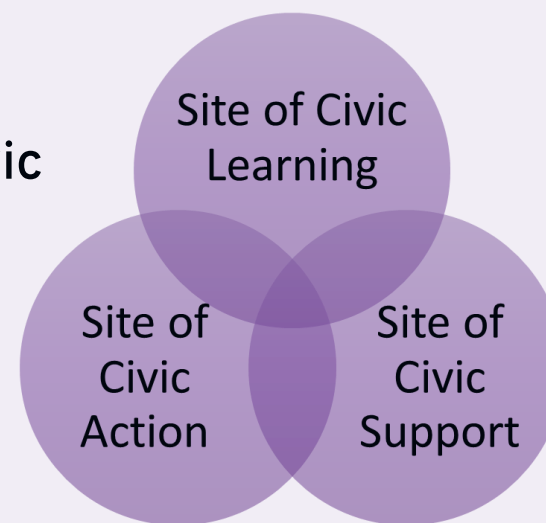


“Transforming communities and empowering people. This is what this is about, and it's also like that feeling that this is not just a nine to five job. This is almost like a vocation in life. You have chosen to work in this school, which is in an area of need and deprivation. So, it's a very self-conscious decision that you are making working for an organisation like this.”

4. Civic learning, civic action and civic support are intrinsically linked

- In some schools, particularly those supporting the most deprived communities, the civic (welfare) support they offer directly transforms civic learning, placing pupils lived experiences at the very heart of the school values and pedagogical approach, resulting in schools becoming spaces of civic action, directly campaigning for social justice WITH children and the community – active citizenship. This becomes an empowering space.
- In others, a visible ‘pedagogy of poverty’ stifles civic learning, framing civic learning around ideas of conformity, teacher centred and low expectations of children’s future citizenship. Children less likely to talk aspirationally about their community.

“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.”



“We want to inspire and educate our children to be changemakers, you know to feel like they can tackle anything in the world – but if they’re turning up to school every day cold, hungry and ill due to mould in their social housing, well our starting point had to shift!”

Civic School:

Emphasises a shared language and pedagogical approach which embraces civic education;

Foster active learning and experiential education throughout school;

Civic education prioritised in the curriculum design to develop understanding of civic concepts, values and skills;

School values seek to empower children as active citizens;

Foster, critically informed active citizenship which is justice orientated;

Democratic decision making fostered in school processes and governance, actively and meaningfully involving children;

Engage in ongoing and sustained active community partnerships;

Supported & modelled by leadership

High Quality Active Civic Learning

Civic Teacher:

Maintain their own civic knowledge and competence;

Finds space within curriculum across subjects and cross-curricular;

Encourage experiential learning and active pedagogy in the classroom;

Create democratic classroom spaces;

Facilitate community partnerships and service-learning to allow children to apply civic knowledge within and out-with classroom;

Cultivate political, civic and social literacies within the classroom;

Is civically active and brings their cause and experience to classroom

Want to know more...

- Report 1 published – Educating for Public Good: Part 1. January 2023
- Book – Children as Change Makers (Alison Body) due September 2024 informed by this research

Educating for Social Good: Part 2 (plus briefing papers) – 1st October 2024

- Effective Civic Education in Primary Schools – What Works

Educating for Social Good: Part 3 (plus briefing papers) – 5th November 2024

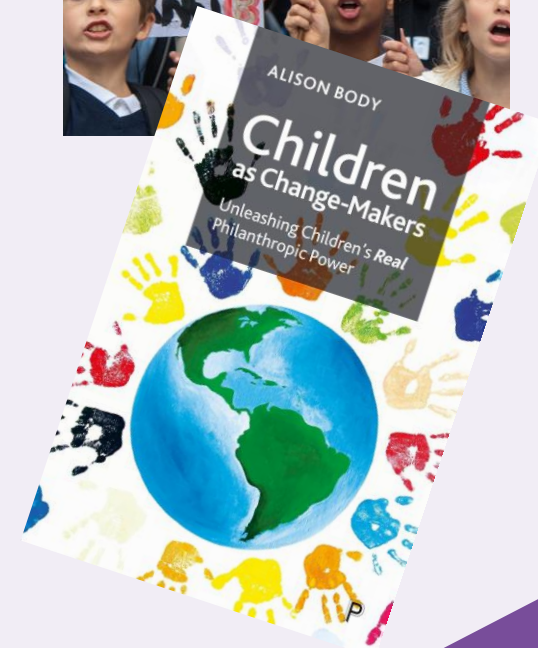
- Empowering Young Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning on Society, Schools, and Community Development

Website: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/children-as-philanthropic-citizens/>

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University of
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**Thank
you.**

