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Mapping Active Civic Learning in Primary Schools across England – A Call to Action

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging children to become 'good citizens' who positively contribute towards society through charitable and philanthropic action as part of their civic participation has become a core focus of policy and practice. Yet the opportunities afforded to children for active civic learning within primary education remains under-researched. This article presents findings from a multi-survey study that seeks to unpick 'what' and 'how' active civic learning is happening in primary schools across England. By mapping active civic learning across the country, we find that these opportunities are unequally dispersed. Specifically, from an early age, children from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to be prepared for active civic engagement, orientated around ideas of social justice, than those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This raises significant challenges for education policy and practice and calls for greater attention to be paid to civic learning for all children in early and middle childhood.

Key words: Active citizenship; Civic Education; Primary Education; Fundraising; Social justice

Key Insights:

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the nature of children's participation in active civic learning activities, the pedagogical framing employed by teachers, the equity in access to opportunities, and the barriers to active civic engagement in primary schools in England. It questions current practices and identifies factors influencing access to opportunities for children.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Children's active civic learning is dominated by engagement in fundraising, pedagogically framed in an individualised discourse with limited exploration of social justice issues. Children's agency is limited and there is unequal access to civic learning opportunities based on school demographics, with schools in areas of disadvantaged facing more barriers.

INTRODUCTION

This exploratory paper seeks to map active civic learning opportunities for primary school aged children across England. We consider active civic learning as a central tenet of citizenship education, wherein children are afforded opportunities and are supported to act on issues of social and/or environmental concern, such as climate change,

poverty and homelessness. We contend that this is an under-researched area of activity, particularly in terms of primary school aged children. Nonetheless, we suggest the choices schools and communities make about the type of active civic learning offered to children have real and lasting consequences for the type of society we create and thus require our attention (Body et al., 2020 & 2021). In addressing that gap, we offer this paper as a 'conversation starter', mapping active learning in primary schools across England and serving as a call to action for more research and attention to be paid to younger children's civic learning, wherein we are making recommendations of fruitful and productive lines of enquiry.

BACKGROUND

The civic culture within England, and indeed the wider UK, revolves around ideas of community action, social solidarity, philanthropic support and voluntary action (Birdwell et al., 2013). Our children are regularly socialised and engaged in this civic culture, commonly through supporting charities such as Children in Need, Comic Relief or participating in local community projects. They regularly contribute towards this civic culture through giving of their time, such as volunteering and social action; talent, through the sharing of knowledge and skills; and treasure, through donating of goods and/or money, most commonly through school (Body et al., 2020). Nonetheless, debates surrounding the implementation of active citizenship in schools have persisted nationally and internationally, reflecting the ongoing tensions between idealistic aspirations and practical feasibility. This tension is particularly strong when thinking about global citizenship (Dower & Williams, 2002) and highlights a lack of clarity regarding civic learning and citizenship education (Hayward & Jerome, 2009). The late Prof. Bernard Crick, a prominent scholar on citizenship education, expressed concerns throughout his career that active civic engagement in schools often focused solely on voluntary actions for the purpose of "doing good," without adequately connecting it to children's social and political learning and democratic participation. According to Crick, education should not shield children from the controversies of adult life but should instead prepare them to understand and navigate such controversies with knowledge, sensibility, tolerance, and morality (Crick, 1998). We share this view, considering active civic and citizenship education as crucial components of a healthy democratic society. Democracy goes beyond kindness and voluntary involvement; it requires critical thinking, collective action, and political engagement. It involves grappling with contentious issues, engaging in democratic conversations, and working collaboratively to consider policy responses (Body et al., 2020).

Early engagement in active citizenship activities is important for the civic socialisation of children (Astuto & Ruck, 2010) and has garnered increased attention from practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in recent years. Notably, there has been a focus on "high-quality social action," which refers to young people taking practical actions to serve others and create positive social change that benefits both the wider community and themselves (Tejani & Breeze, 2021). This renewed emphasis on participatory social action programmes in schools across England has been influenced by the launch of the #iwill campaign led by Step Up to Serve in 2013. With cross-party support, this campaign aimed to increase the number of young people aged 10-20 engaged in social action by 50% by 2020 in England. The concept of high-quality social action was further supported by The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) in England, which recognized the positive impact of such programmes on

academic standards, raising expectations, and improving attendance. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conducted research that strengthened this notion, suggesting that young people who engage in youth social action before the age of 10 are more than twice as likely to continue their commitment to social action (developing a "habit of service") compared to those who start after the age of 16 (Arthur et al., 2017).

The concept of the "civic journey" was then introduced by the House of Lords select committee on citizenship and civic participation in 2018. The committee argued that to effectively navigate the complex landscape of citizenship and civic engagement, it is crucial to examine the journey that everyone in Britain undertakes (House of Lords Select Committee 118, 2018). Their conclusion emphasised the need for a smooth transition facilitated by central and local government, providing individuals with a framework to benefit from and contribute to society, while also addressing barriers to engagement. Unfortunately, early years and primary education have received limited attention in these discussions, as the focus has been on adolescents, neglecting the role of civic learning during early and middle childhood (pre-secondary school), a gap this paper seeks to address.

Nonetheless, over the past 25 years, data indicates a decline in youth civic participation in the UK and Western societies. Limited access to political education, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged youth, hinders political engagement (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). This decline is evident in reduced formal volunteering, charitable giving, and participation in political processes as demonstrated by the Community Life Survey 2021/22 (UK Government, 2023). Only 47% of young voters aged 18-24 cast a vote in 2019, a 7% decline from 2017. However, caution is advised when interpreting Community Life Survey data, as it provides a simplified view of youth civic engagement (Lau & Body, 2021; Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Cha et al., 2018). Young people often engage through non-formal avenues like social action and online campaigns, motivated by cause-related actions rather than party affiliation (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Cha et al., 2018). Perceived youth apathy may obscure the actual barriers they face (Mohan, 2023), including labour market precarity, declining trust in formal organisations, and pressing social issues. Education plays a crucial role in shaping socially aware citizens (Brasta et al., 2019; Kerr & Hoskins, 2023; Weinberg, 2022). Schools serve as key spaces for teaching democratic participation and fostering classroom debate. However, in England, performance-driven policies have led to a narrowing of curriculum diversity and pedagogical approaches (Ball & Junemann, 2012; Hargreaves et al., 2023; Wyse et al., 2008). This creates a significant gap in understanding active civic learning in primary education, as most research focuses on secondary education. To address this, this paper presents findings from the ESRC funded "Educating for Social Good" project. The study explores how giving and voluntary action are integrated into active civic learning, both formally within school and informally through citizenship education.

The article is divided into four parts. First, we review existing research on children's civic learning, focusing on primary schools and teaching methods. Second, we introduce our research questions and describe the surveys used. Third, we present our findings, highlighting significant disparities in civic engagement opportunities for primary school children in England based on Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility. We also address how these opportunities relate to social and political learning, as well as democratic participation. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion on the implications for active civic engagement in primary schools and issue a call to action for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early and middle childhood as a critical age for Civic Learning

The existing body of literature on adolescent and adult civic engagement is extensive and comprehensive (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). However, it is widely acknowledged that there is a notable dearth of research and evidence-based literature concerning children's civic socialisation and learning (Body et al., 2021, Power & Smith, 2017). In contrast, educational, social, and psychological theories and research consistently highlight the significance of middle childhood and the primary school years (ages 4-11) in the development and normalisation of civic behaviours (Arthur et al., 2017; Body et al., 2021; Duong & Bradshaw, 2017; Taylor-Collins et al., 2019; van Deth et al., 2011; Wörle & Paulus, 2018). These studies emphasise that the early and pre-secondary school years are equally important as secondary and higher education in fostering children's civic behaviours.

Researchers commonly agree that the brain experiences its most rapid growth during the earliest stages of childhood, defined here as the first five years (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Consequently, this period holds great importance in terms of learning and development (Schleicher, 2019; Spiteri, 2020; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020). An experimental study by Warneken and Tomasello (2009) with children aged 14 to 18 months suggests that even at this young age, children exhibit a natural inclination towards altruism and assisting others, irrespective of receiving rewards.

Several factors related to social cognition and emotional aspects contribute to the development and manifestation of prosocial and civic behaviours. Within psychology, researchers have emphasised the role of emotions such as empathy, sympathy, and guilt, as well as cognitive abilities like perspective taking, in shaping children's pro-sociality and civic-mindedness (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Sierksma et al., 2014). Additionally, research suggests that in the absence of proactive involvement in civic education, children can form discriminatory and prejudiced worldviews from a young age, as indicated by studies conducted by Oberman et al. (2012) and Ramsey (2008). Furthermore, psychological research and theories on child development provide evidence that children's empathy, sympathy, and perspective taking skills begin to develop around the age of 4 and continue to advance throughout middle childhood, particularly when encouraged (Ongley et al., 2014; Weller & Lagattuta, 2013).

Although limited, there is evidence suggesting that during the primary school years (4-11 years old), children demonstrate an interest in engaging in philanthropic and civic behaviours (Body et al., 2020; Lau & Body, 2021; Power & Smith, 2016). Worle and Paulus (2018) conducted experiments to explore children's normative expectations regarding the fair distribution of resources. They discovered that ideas of charity and giving are deeply ingrained in children aged 3 to 6 years old, with older children (5-6-year-olds) actively seeking fair distribution by prioritising resource allocation to those they perceive as less wealthy. Similar findings have been reported by Paulus and Moore (2012), who suggest that prosocial behaviours such as comforting and helping others are displayed early in life, with their frequency and complexity increasing throughout the primary school years. Moreover, studies investigating sharing tendencies indicate that children aged 3-4 and 7-8 are willing to share items such as toys and food, but the

number of children who engage in sharing and the quantity of resources they give tend to increase with age (Fehr et al., 2008).

In terms of political literacy, numerous studies highlight that even younger children possess political knowledge (Abendschon & Tausendpfund, 2017; Gotzmann, 2015; van Deth et al., 2011). A panel study conducted by van Deth et al. (2011) in Germany, involving 700 children in their first year of school (aged 6-7 years), revealed significant findings that are likely applicable to similar educational contexts. The research challenges the conventional belief that political orientations and competencies primarily develop during adolescence. Instead, the study suggests that children form political and social orientations at much earlier stages, enabling them to express political opinions and attitudes. These findings indicate that even young children possess fundamental political knowledge and orientations that serve as prerequisites for political involvement and participation. Consequently, the period of middle childhood, spanning from ages 4 to 11, emerges as a critical age for civic learning (Dias & Menezes, 2014).

School as a Site for Civic Learning

Most children and adolescents attend school meaning that schools are considered one of the best places to reach younger populations to foster civic engagement (CAF, 2013; Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Hogg & De Vries, 2018; Peterson et al., 2021). Consequently, the role and type of civic learning programmes within schools has generated increased attention in scholarly literature. Primary schools and early years settings often serve as the initial institutional experience for children to regularly interact with individuals outside their families and immediate communities (Payne et al., 2020). Payne et al. (2020) conclude that when classrooms and teachers grant young children greater agency, their civic capabilities expand, enabling them to act on behalf of and alongside their communities. Rather than simply instructing children about democracy and citizenship, the authors advocate for an embodied, experiential approach to civic education for young children.

Within studies conducted in school environments, the adoption of experiential, active learning is consistently emphasised as a crucial component of civic education. Multiple studies have demonstrated that, while discussing civic issues such as equality, environmentalism, and poverty may raise awareness, it has little correlation with children's actual engagement in civic activities. On the other hand, participative civic learning activities implemented in classrooms, such as service-learning experiences, community service, interactions with civic role models, political simulations (e.g., student council elections), role play, and storytelling, have been shown to contribute positively to children's civic engagement (Body & Lacny, 2023; Brownlee et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2020; Torres-Harding et al., 2018; Westheimer, 2015; White & Mistry, 2019).

Focusing upon the philanthropic behaviours of children, several scholars, including the authors of this paper, have emphasised the significance of schools as primary spaces where children initially encounter concepts of charity, giving, and voluntary action (Body et al., 2020; Power & Taylor, 2017; Silke et al., 2018; Simpson, 2017). Research consistently emphasises the vital role of schools in fostering philanthropic behaviours, as nearly all children engage in charitable activities in some form within the school environment, whether through donating money or goods or volunteering their time (CAF, 2013; Silke et al., 2018; Power & Taylor, 2018). Indeed, encouraging philanthropic acts, including

giving to charity, volunteering, and engaging in social action, has gained increasing prominence in the field of education and society at large (Body et al., 2020; Power & Taylor, 2018). A study conducted by Body et al. (2020) involving 150 primary school children in the UK revealed that parents, schools, and communities make concerted efforts to encourage, support, and engage children of all ages in philanthropy and charitable giving, thereby fostering a strong enthusiasm for helping others. However, the study found that less than 20% of the children were aware of the causes they were supporting, and even fewer, just 8%, had meaningful involvement in decisions regarding the charities they supported. Nonetheless, following six weeks of participatory and active research involving children leading the exploration of charities, just over 33% of the children independently chose to engage in charitable activities including fundraising, giving and advocacy, even after the facilitated support had ended. These findings call for a greater emphasis not only on teaching children to be civically engaged but also on how and to what extent schools and communities engage children in discussions about civic engagement as active citizens (Body et al., 2021; Simpson, 2017; Westheimer, 2015). Body et al., (2020) argue that civic opportunities could be leveraged to assist children in critically examining and forming their own perspectives on charity and associated virtues, rather than merely training them to be "good citizens". The research urges teachers and facilitators to move away from promoting transactional engagement and neutral consensus attitudes, even at an early age, and instead foster children's voices within the complexities and debates surrounding charity and giving (Body et al., 2020). Finally, engagement in social action has also been found to have positive effects on academic achievement. In a meta-analysis of social and emotional programmes in the United States that included community learning, considered as opportunities to positively contribute to their class, school, and community (Durlak et al.,2011).

Approaches to Active Civic Learning

In more contemporary conversations surrounding citizenship education, the term 'active civic learning' encompasses not just the essence of citizenship itself, but also denotes a form of experiential, hands-on learning. This implies that for students to truly embody active citizenship, their education in citizenship must offer chances for them to engage in dynamic, participatory experiences (Peterson & Knowles, 2009). Several theoretical frameworks have emerged which can be applied to active civic learning (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Sociopolitical development highlights how children and young people can challenge structural and societal marginalisation to support themselves and their communities (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Whilst other approaches emphasise educating for critical consciousness (Pope, 2011 & 2014; Seider & Graves, 2020; Watts et al., 2011) and justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Westheimer, 2015), focusing on how children and young people can enact change which promotes justice and equity.

In recent years policy and practice has focused on development of civic virtues within a character education framework (Arthur et al., 2017; Kirkman et al., 2016; Kisby, 2017; Lamb et al., 2019). These programmes have shown to be effective in cultivating "habits of service" (Arthur et al., 2017). For instance, randomised controlled trials conducted by Kirkman et al. (2016) demonstrate that children and young people who participate in social action initiatives in the UK exhibit significant improvements in their skills for both work and life. They also develop a greater interest in future volunteering compared to non-participating groups. Similarly, a meta-analysis of character education

programmes in the United States conducted by Brown et al. (2022), reveals similar positive effects of character education. However, character education approaches face considerable criticism. The central critique revolves around the concern that these approaches place the responsibility for social outcomes and labour market success solely on individuals and their capacity to develop their own human capital, rather than focusing on the overall well-being of individuals and society (Taylor, 2018). Even within the field of character education, scholars have acknowledged the limitations of a purely character-focused approach to civic learning, particularly when proponents adopt a more individualistic stance on moral and political issues (Lamb et al., 2019). Nevertheless, most scholars recognise the importance of character while acknowledging that it may not be sufficient as a standalone approach. They advocate for the integration of character and citizenship education to effectively support children and young people's civic engagement (Body & Lacny, 2023; Jeynes, 2019; Lamb et al., 2019; Peterson, 2019; etc.). Peterson (2019) suggests that engaging in communities and deliberating with others is central to developing individual character virtues, alongside recognising and challenging structural injustices. Whilst political scholars and educators focused on democracy have sought to explore avenues to shift from our current climate of polarisation towards fostering critical thinking, communication skills and an understanding of diverse perspectives to tackle controversial issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Muddiman, 2017).

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) described three models of citizenship and civic engagement for children and young people. The personally responsible citizen follows community laws and possesses personality characteristics such as honesty, reliability, empathy, compassion, and self-discipline. The participatory citizen is an active member of civic, social, or community organisations or movements that work for community enhancement. The justice-oriented citizen possesses an understanding of the processes systemic, social, cultural, economic, and political forces as they impact community life and social problems; critically analyses social problems and injustices; and considers collective strategies to address root problems of social ills (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).Westheimer (2015) argues that school programmes hoping to develop the personally responsible citizen, which are often framed within a 'character education' framework, often fail in increasing children's participation in local and national civic life. Equally, Westheimer's qualitative and quantitative data shows that programmes that emphasise participatory citizenship, do not necessarily develop children's skills to critique root causes of social problems. Furthermore, programmes which focus on critiquing the root causes of social problems, without participatory involvement, are unlikely to increase civic engagement. Westheimer argues that it is a combination of participatory and justice orientated programmes which are most likely to support active civic engagement.

Considering these various approaches, the focus of this article is on *how* philanthropic behaviours are encouraged within primary education in England as part of active civic learning. It offers analysis of 'what' is happening in schools across England, exploring what opportunities are afforded to children, to assess (a) the types of activities children can participate in, and (b) what type of citizenship (drawing on Westheimer and Kahne's definitions as discussed) teachers perceive is promoted through the activities.

METHODOLOGY

Informed by existing literature and research (see the previous sections in this article) we focus on four core research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What active civic learning activities have children participated in at school at least once in the past year?

RQ2: How are these activities pedagogically framed by teachers?

RQ3: Is there equity in access to opportunities for children?

RQ4: What are the barriers to active civic engagement in primary schools?

Findings are based on two surveys conducted between January and July 2022, capturing both quantitative and qualitative information.

Survey 1: In June 2022, we used the online survey tool Teacher Tapp to collect data around six key questions looking at school approaches and activities related to civic learning opportunities. Teacher Tapp is a daily survey app that asks teachers questions each day and reweights the results to make them representative. Raw data from 1,906 primary teachers in England was analysed to gain a wider picture of what civic and philanthropic learning activities were happening across the country, teachers' perceptions on the value of learning about civic activities, barriers and opportunities within the curriculum and wider activities of the school.

Of the 1,906 respondents, 1592 reported that they were female (84%), with 297 males (16%) and 17 cases who didn't specify. 270 (14%) were in their 20s, 610 (32%) in their 30s, 644 (34%) in their 40s and 368 (19%) over 50 with 15% having less than 5 years teaching experience and 26% having over 20 years. These teachers were drawn from a range of governance structures: LA community schools (25.2%), large multi-academy trusts (large MAT – 21%), LA non-community school (14.2%) with a handful (less than 9% of the total) split evenly between small MATs, stand-alone academies, and independent schools. 15% of schools were OFSTED outstanding, 63% were good, 11% required improvement or were inadequate, with 11% not providing an OFSTED rating. Where the information was provided, the schools were evenly split into free school meal quartiles. 34% of teachers did not report information on free school meal quartiles and therefore were removed from analysis for RQ3 and RQ4.

Survey 2: To gather more in-depth qualitative responses and teacher's perspectives, an online Qualtrics survey collected data from 309 primary school teachers from schools based around England between January and July 2022. Of the 309 respondents who completed the survey: 84% were female; 56% had worked in education for over 15 years, with a further 33% having more than 5 years' experience; and 6% identified as Black and Minority Ethnic. The survey was designed with a total of 30 multiple choice, likert scale and open questions with opportunities for follow up. The survey was distributed through social media networks, school emails and through partnership organisations. The survey included questions on the types of civic activities facilitated in schools including fundraising for national charities, social action projects and working in partnership with local charities, the way these activities were facilitated and resourced including partnership work, as well as gathering data about which children participated. While containing a quantitative set of questions, there was also considerable space available for qualitative comments on each of the themes covered, with 7 different free text boxes that most respondents added detailed text too.

Ethical approval was secured from the University of Kent's Ethics Committee. In line with the British Educational Research Association's guidelines for educational researchers (2018) teachers were provided with clear information regarding the research, were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and given a link to the research project's webpage to provide further information on the overall project. BERA (2018) guidelines offer that informed consent ensures that respondents are made fully aware of the nature of the research, the methods employed, and the research questions, why they have been asked to participate in the study, how the work will be disseminated, and what their participation will involve. All responses were anonymous and no personal, identifiable information was collected for analysis. In accordance with Husband's (2020) recommendations regarding coercive participation, participants were also given full information about the right to withdraw without giving reason: clear information about withdrawal ensures that participants cannot be coerced into participation.

All quantitative data reported is from Survey 1, all qualitative data reported is from Survey 2.

Data analysis: Data analysis was completed by a team of academics, the authors of this paper, which include three social scientists and a social psychologist, three of whom specialise in qualitative analysis and one in quantitative analysis. A range of analytical approaches were adopted including descriptive statistical analysis of key variables carried out using the software package R for Survey 1 (quantitative data), and thematic analysis of Survey 2 (qualitative data). Descriptive statistical and thematic analysis inform the findings for RQ1 and RQ2, outlining the 'what' is happening. RQ3 and RQ4 data has been analysed alongside socio-economic factors of each school (using Free School Meal (FSM) data as a proxy indicator for socio-economic status of the school community), geographical location at regional-level, and specific school characteristics such as school type, governance and OFSTED rating. Results are presented on a descriptive basis for FSM quartile and by OFSTED rating only, as no differences were found across the other dimensions. This also aids interpretability to this exploratory work.

As with all research there are caveats in interpretation of the data, and it is important to establish these at the outset. We are reporting on teachers' perceptions of what happens in their schools, from their perspective. We consider this the most reliable way of gaining access to wide-scale mapping of active civic engagement activities but acknowledge that our findings are based on teachers' subjective experiences. Further limitations must be acknowledged including self-selection and social desirability bias in the completion of surveys. Self-selection bias can lead to a skewed sample that may not accurately represent the broader population of teachers. Teachers who choose to participate may have unique perspectives or experiences that differ from those who opt not to respond. As a result, the findings of the survey may not be generalisable to all teachers. Furthermore, social desirability bias refers to the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner they believe will be viewed favourably by others or in line with socially acceptable norms. In the context of teacher surveys, this means that educators may provide responses that they believe align with what is considered socially desirable or acceptable, rather than expressing their true opinions or behaviours. Utilisation of separate surveys and questionnaires, each containing multiple, but similar, questions to answer our central research questions helps ensure robustness of the analysis.

FINDINGS

For each of the core questions identified, this section presents statistical data drawn from Survey 1 and qualitative data from Survey 2. The main purpose of this article is to ascertain, 'what' is happening in active civic learning in terms of encouraging philanthropic behaviours and what factors impact which children have access to these opportunities.

RQ1: What type of active civic learning activities have children participated in at school at least once in the past year?

We wanted to understand what sort of active civic engagement opportunities children are encouraged to participate in within school, under the banner of charitable activities, community engagement, social action, campaigning and advocacy. Utilising the quantitative data from Survey 1, Figure 1 below highlights that the most common forms of active civic engagement activities within primary schools across England is participation within fundraising orientated activities, with 67% of teachers reporting children engaging in fundraising for school funds, 66% saying children engage in national fundraising campaigns, for example Children in Need and Comic Relief and 53% reporting children raising funds for local charities. Children engaging in community orientated social action projects, such as litter picking and community volunteer programmes, is less common with around 44% of teachers reporting their children participating in these activities. Less common still is participation in campaigning (including organising online campaigns and/or advocacy such as writing to an MP) (16%) or protests organised by the school within school hours (3%).

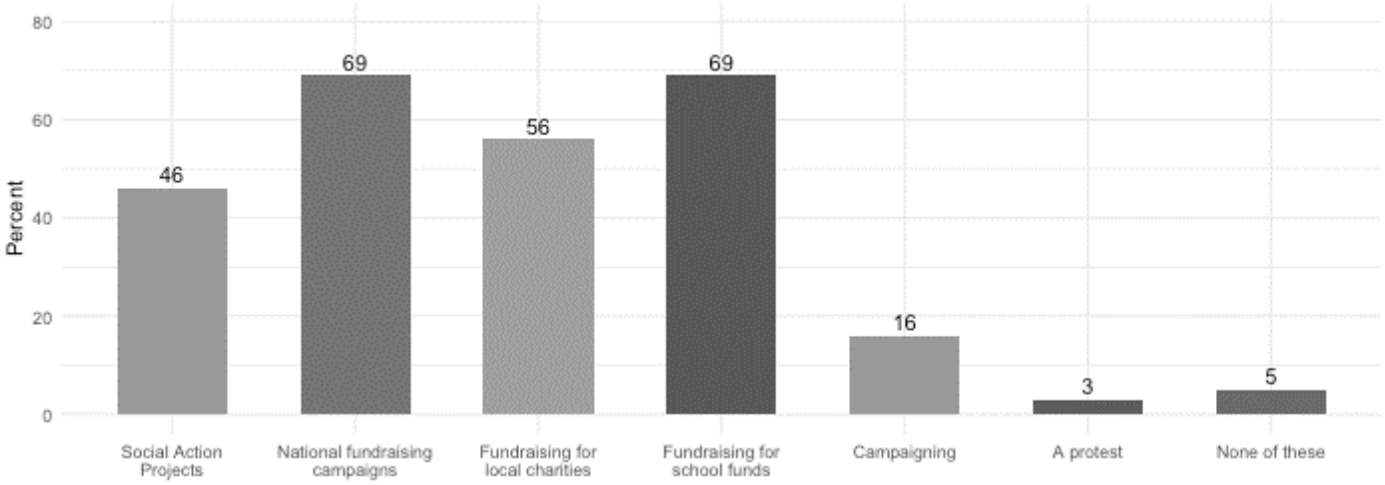


Figure 1: Percentage of primary school teachers who reported their pupils participated in each activity at least once in the previous year.

Overall, whilst we do see that the majority of children do at least have some access to active civic learning opportunities within primary schools in England, the majority of this activity is dominated by the giving or raising of money, with less attention paid to other forms of voluntary action, such as volunteering, campaigning and protests.

RQ2: How are these activities pedagogically framed?

Drawing on Westheimer's framing of citizenship programmes in schools, our prominent finding is that engaging in fundraising, as an example of active civic engagement opportunities, is most commonly framed within a contributory discourse, with around just one third of children encouraged to debate issues of inequality and social justice when fundraising. This means whilst children are encouraged to support a cause, they are less likely to explore the reason why that cause exists – for example children will be encouraged to give to a food bank without critical consideration of why food poverty exists and other potential and appropriate responses, such as governmental responses.

We applied Westheimer framing of citizenship programmes as contributory, participatory and justice orientated to teachers' perceptions of their citizenship education offering. In Survey 1 we presented teachers with a list of potential activities that map onto these three citizenship education types, and asked teachers to indicate which happened in their schools. Teachers could select as many options as they felt were appropriate. Using fundraising as an example of civic engagement (our data shows this is one of the most popular activities in primary schools) and an indicator for the type of citizenship approach within schools, analysis of the Survey 1 reveals that 80% of primary school teachers report that in their school children are asked to contribute to school fundraising events. Meanwhile 60% of the teachers report that their school facilitates children to participate in organising fundraising and campaigning, and finally just over a quarter, 31%, debate issues of social justice and inequality when engaging children in fundraising, as shown in Table 1.

In our school, our students…	**% Agree**
Contribute to school fundraising events, without discussing the cause they are contributing towards	80
Actively participate in organising school fundraising and campaigning	60
Debate issues of inequality and social justice when engaging with fundraising	31

Table 1: Pedagogical approaches adopted towards fundraising activities

Here we are also interested in the children's agency in decision making with regards to their civic engagement. Exploring the participation of children within active civic engagement, in Survey 2 just over half of the teachers reported that children frequently lead on deciding which causes they support. This was most commonly facilitated via school councils, with almost all schools (94%) citing this as a space for children's participation. Barriers to wider participation were frequently cited as time, for example:

> *"The time to explain to children, the time for children to find out about different charities and the time it takes to organise charitable events".*
>
> *"The realities of the modern school where everything is regimented to the last minute, means there just isn't the time to do this".*

Another common barrier cited was *"curriculum pressures",* which *"make it impossible to explore anything not on the syllabus".* Furthermore, several teachers raised concerns about children's capacities *"to understand what they were doing, without being told".*

Whilst previous research highlights young children's capabilities of engaging in age-appropriate social, political and democratic decision making (Body et al., 2020; van deth et al., 2011), these findings suggest children's agency is commonly not realised within their active civic participation. This raises questions about the quality and frequency of the children's participation in this decision making and highlights the need for further research in this area to uncover the extent of children's participation in active civic engagement, the impact such participation has and how it can be best facilitated.

RQ3: Is there equity in access to opportunities for children?

Access and opportunity to participate in active civic learning is not equally distributed across primary schools. Survey 1 highlights that teachers are committed to delivering active civic engagement opportunities: 78% agree or strongly agree that charitable activities should be embedded as a core part of the curriculum. As there are no significant differences in this commitment from teachers across schools, regardless of levels of deprivation, OFSTED and school type, we conclude factors other than teacher commitment must be at play, which are causing this unequal distribution.

Figure 3 shows that most children have some opportunity to regularly participate in civic activities. However, schools with the most affluent communities are more likely to provide opportunities to participate in social action projects, national fundraising days, supporting local charities and fundraising for school funds. This decreases substantially with schools in the most deprived quartile, particularly for fundraising for school find and national fundraising campaigns. This is perhaps unsurprising as teachers within the more deprived school communities frequently highlight concerns about asking families for funds, for example as one teacher stated, "many of our children and families use food banks themselves so feel unable to give to others". Whilst campaigning for school issues only appears to happen in 16-18% of schools, this appears to be relatively equally spread across schools, based on FSM quartiles. However, the more deprived a school community is, the more likely the school is to do 'none of these' things (1% in Quartile 1 versus 8% in Quartile 4).

We equally see interesting trends when comparing schools by OFSTED rating. Schools rated as 'outstanding' are more likely to engage in fundraising for local charities and social action projects than those rated as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'. Whereas schools rated as requires improvement or inadequate are more likely to engage children in fundraising for school funds. National fundraising campaigns, campaigning and protests remains relatively consistent across all schools by OFSTED rating.

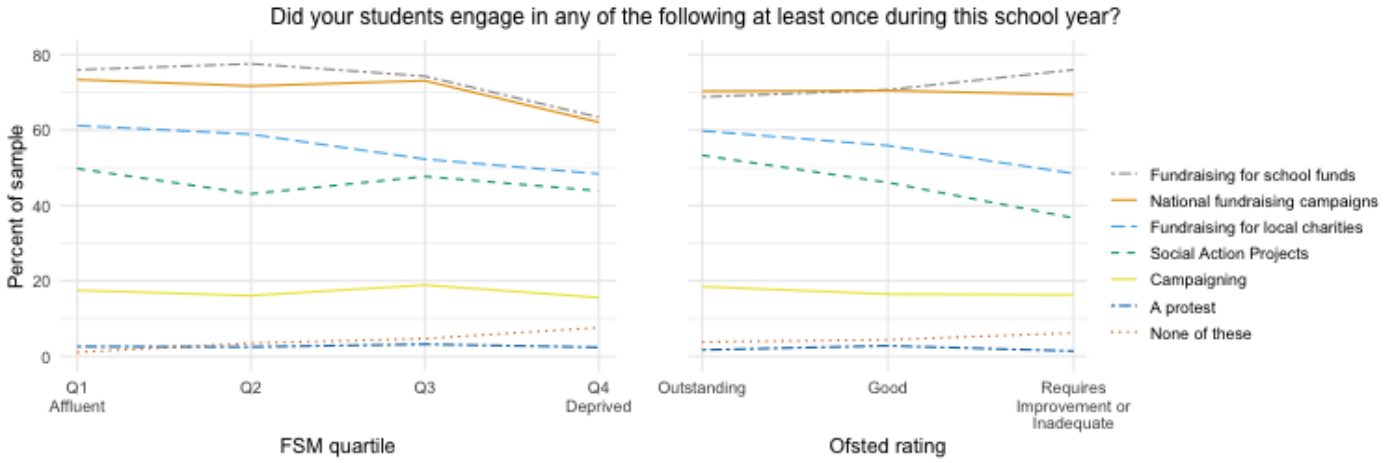


Figure 3: Student engagement in civil activities by free school meal quartile and OFSTED rating

When we compare pedagogical approaches to charity, giving and voluntary action in primary schools, we begin to see differences in the way in which schools approach teaching about charity in schools. As the Figure 4 shows, whilst a contributory approach is common in nearly all schools, using Free School Meal (FSM) data as a proxy indicator of deprivation, children in the most deprived school communities are consistently less likely to engage in each of the pedagogical approaches than children from more affluent school communities. Schools could also choose an option of don't know not relevant. Interestingly, 7% of teachers in the most deprived school communities selected this option compared to just 3% in the most affluent school communities. There are also differences by OFSTED rating, with students in schools that 'require improvement' or that are deemed 'inadequate' having much lower rates of contributing to school fundraising or campaigning and of debating issues of inequality and social justice.

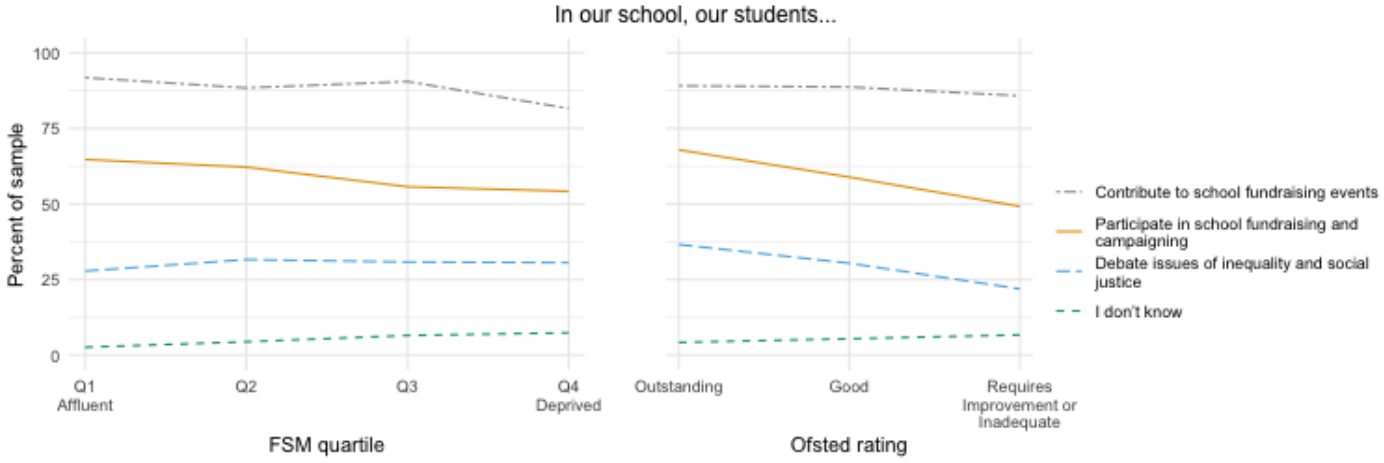


Figure 4: Pedagogical approaches to civic action by free school meal quartile and OFSTED rating

RQ4: What are the barriers to active civic engagement in primary schools?

For RQ4, we asked teachers to report the barriers they felt they faced as a school in undertaking civic learning. Teachers were presented with a number of potential responses and could select as many as they liked. Results are presented in Figure 5.

In short, the most disadvantaged schools by levels of deprivation as indicated by FSM, face the most barriers to engaging children in active civic learning opportunities. Similarly, schools rated as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' reported facing more barriers to engaging children in active civic learning opportunities than schools rated as good or outstanding.

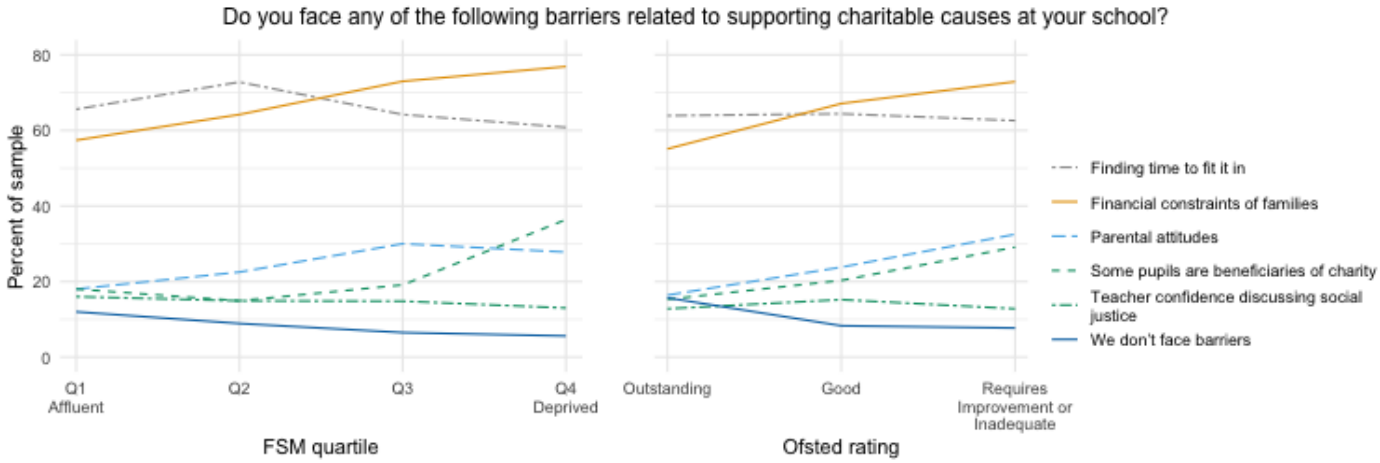


Figure 5: Teacher's perceptions of barriers to civic engagement with activities in school.

When we analyse the responses by Free School Meal (FSM) data, we quickly identify problematic trends which suggest schools with the highest levels of FSM (Quartile 4), which we take as a proxy indicator of the most deprived school communities, face considerably more barriers than schools with the lowest levels of FSM (Quartile 1). For example, schools in FSM Quartile 1 are twice as likely (12%) to report that they face no barriers to engaging children in active civic engagement than schools in Quartile 4 (6%). Furthermore, the most affluent school communities (FSM Quartile 1 and Quartile 2 at 18% and 22% respectively) are on average 50% less likely to report parental attitudes as a barrier to active civic engagement, than the less affluent school communities (FSM Quartile 3 and Quartile 4 at 30% and 28% respectively).

Perhaps most concerningly, though, is the finding that 57% of teachers within the most affluent school communities report concerns about financial constraints of families as a barrier to children's active civic engagement. This rises sharply to 77% of teachers in the most deprived school communities. Furthermore, whilst the proportion of teachers reporting being concerned about children being beneficiaries of charities such as foodbanks is between 15% and 19% in the wealthiest three-quarters of schools (FSM Quartiles 1, 2 and 3), this figure doubles in the least affluent quartile of schools to 36% in FSM Quartile 4.

We see similar patterns across schools in terms of OFSTED rating, with schools rated as 'outstanding over twice as likely to say they face no barriers to active civic engagement than schools rated as either 'good' or 'requiring improvement/inadequate schools'. Schools rated as 'requiring improvement' or 'inadequate' are much more likely to

identify financial constraints and pupils as beneficiaries of charity as a greater barrier to civic engagement, than schools rated as 'outstanding'.

Nonetheless, bucking this trend schools serving the most deprived communities are both the least likely to report struggling to find the time to fit civic engagement into the curriculum, alongside the least likely to see teacher confidence in discussing issues of social justice as a barrier to children's active civic engagement. It is schools rated as 'good' who are most likely to report teacher confidence and finding time to fit activities in as barriers to active civic engagement.

In summary, the most disadvantaged schools by levels of deprivation and those with a lower OFSTED rating, face the most barriers to engaging children in active civic learning opportunities, whilst those in the most privileged positions overall face the least barriers.

CONCLUSION – A CALL TO ACTION

This study aimed to map active civic learning activities throughout England. Our research methodology involved the utilisation of a large-scale survey, alongside a more in-depth, detailed survey. The total sample size encompassed over 2200 teachers, representing schools across England. Through this investigation, we have uncovered important trends regarding active civic engagement in primary education.

The research indicates that nearly all schools incorporate some form of active civic education, wherein children are engaged in activities such as giving, volunteering, social action, and advocacy. Given the importance of schools as sites for civic learning this ought to be celebrated (Brasta et al., 2019; Kerr and Hoskins, 2023; Weinberg, 2022). However, like others before us (e.g. Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Pope, 2011 & 2014; Seider & Graves, 2020; Watts et al., 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Westheimer, 2015), our argument does not primarily revolve around the question of whether active civic opportunities are being provided, but rather centres on the nature of active civic engagement being promoted within primary education. A dominant theme that emerged from our study is that teachers feel there should be a prioritisation of active civic engagement as an integral component of the curriculum. However, currently emphasis is predominantly limited to engaging in fundraising activities, primarily involving monetary contributions to national campaigns, school fundraising projects, and local charities. These activities are often presented within a discourse of contributory acts and personal responsibility, thereby failing to provide children with sufficient opportunities for participatory and critical engagement with the underlying charitable causes. These opportunities to participate and deliberate are vital in supporting active civic engagement (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Peterson & Knowles, 2009; Muddiman, 2017). This is consistent with concerns made by others that the mainstreaming of charity within schools teaches children that charity is the answer to social ills, addressing consequences of social and environmental issues rather than considering collective responses to systemic and systematic structural issues which cause these issues in the first place (Body et al., 2020; Power & Taylor, 2018).

This restricted approach to active civic engagement within primary schools runs the risk of teaching active citizenship as an individualistic and transactional gesture of tokenism, which lacks meaningful connections to essential social and environmental issues and appropriate actions (Lamb et al., 2019). While it is true that approximately half of the schools appear to be developing participatory active civic engagement, it is noteworthy that these programmes do not necessarily aim to foster children's ability to analyse, deliberate and critique the root causes of social problems (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). As Westheimer (2015) points out 'we want students who participate and think about the root causes of problems and ideals of justice. Developing both civic participation and social justice, as well as fostering the capacities to fulfil these commitments seems more like a likely path toward a more democratic society' (p.50).

Simultaneously, our findings show that teachers are concerned about the rising cost of living and families experiencing financial hardship, which has resulted in reservations about requesting financial contributions from families. Consequently, the narrow focus on charitable giving as the main pathway to active civic engagement opportunities becomes increasingly problematic as teachers and schools strive to "poverty-proof" their institutions. Indeed, our research suggests that by broadening their range of activities and adopting more participatory and justice-oriented approaches, all schools can continue to provide opportunities for civic engagement in schools, regardless of the financial position of parents. By engaging in collective and voluntary actions that are accessible to all students, rather than solely focusing on charity and school fundraising campaigns, schools can expand their impact on children's civic development, thereby fostering more inclusive and meaningful civic engagement opportunities. As demonstrated throughout various studies (e.g. Abendschon & Tausendpfund, 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Payne et al., 2020; Simpson, 2017; van Deth et al., 2011; Westheimer, 2015; White & Misty, 2019), teaching children how to think critically should be a fundamental priority within any democratic society (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Consequently, our efforts should be directed towards assisting children in developing critical thinking skills, encouraging them to ask questions, evaluate policies, and collaborate with others to effect change that advances democracy and society (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Further research is required to identify pockets of good practice and understand impact.

In keeping with previous studies such as Checkoway and Aldana (2013) and Watts and Flanagan (2007) our research also demonstrates substantial disparities in children's access to civic engagement opportunities, particularly in relation to socio-economic status. Substantial differences exist between the most affluent and least affluent school communities. Schools serving disadvantaged communities not only report encountering multiple barriers to active civic engagement opportunities, resulting in a lower provision of such opportunities, but they also offer children fewer chances to engage in participatory and justice-oriented approaches. Given the numerous challenges faced by these schools and their communities, it is unsurprising that this disparity exists, and it is all the more concerning that it is these children who are facing the most hardship and inequality, who are being least prepared for challenging the status quo.

In conclusion, we emphasise two key messages derived from this research. Firstly, equity in opportunities for active civic learning is crucial. While primary school educators are dedicated to fostering children's active civic learning, there is an uneven distribution of opportunities, favouring children from more privileged communities. This suggests that from an early age, these children are more

likely to be prepared for civic life. We see this perpetuated throughout adolescents as outlined in the background context of this article. This calls for greater attention to civic learning for all children during early and middle childhood. Secondly, there is a need to reframe civic engagement around participatory and social justice orientations. Most civic engagement activities in primary schools are discussed within a contributory and personally responsible approach, which emphasises individual acts of responsibility in the community, such as charitable giving. This approach may overlook the necessity of active collective participation and critical challenge of established systems, denying children the opportunity to develop skills for considering more critical pathways to change. Thus, it is imperative to prioritise participatory and justice-oriented approaches when engaging children in civic activities within primary education.

As a result, our research highlights the critical need for further research in this area, to uncover the extent of children's participation in active civic engagement, the impact such participation has and how it can be best facilitated, as well as uncovering the barriers limiting primary schools' ability to deliver active civic learning, and how these can be overcome.

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

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Ethical guidelines: BERA guidelines were followed, and ethical approval was gained from the University of Kent's Ethical Committee.

Conflicts of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest.

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