

Educating for Public Good: A critical exploration of how active citizenship is taught in primary school

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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 civically engaged citizens?
- What opportunities are they afforded to develop their civic learning, how are these ideas framed (i.e. how are they discussed and enacted) and is there equity in access to active civic learning opportunities across primary schools in England?
- 3-part, 3-year research project:
 - **Year 1 – What** - Survey mapping of ‘what’ is happening in primary schools across England
 - **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
- Reflects upon a challenging period for schools.

We're
here!

Brief Background

Summary of 106 academic research articles:

- Educational, social and development psychology theory and research consistently highlights middle childhood and the primary school years (ages 4–11 years) as crucial in the development and normalisation of civic behaviours.
- Young children capable of engaging in and expressing critical social and political thinking.
- Importance of practicing everyday civic-ness in a real-world context and experiential learning.
- Early engagement in civic, pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours increases likelihood of engagement as an adult.
- Inequalities in access exist from an early age – and increase without intention.
- Consistent positive links between attainment, engagement, parental engagement and behaviour, and active citizenship programmes.
- Primary school years overlooked in the research and practice literature.

The Civic Journey

Citizenship Values

EYS/KS1

Practicing every day civic-ness – art, creativity and the moral imagination.

Establishing civic, political and social literacies.

Establishing habits of critical curiosity.

Engaged in decision making.

Community engagement.

Values in Action

KS1/KS2/KS3

Participative social action/
experiential learning

Practicing and embedding civic,
political and social literacies.

Engaging/ leading in issues of
environmental & social justice.

Engaging WITH community.

Sharing/ leading decision making

Leading Communities

KS3/KS4/KS5/HE

Social action/ advocacy/ formal
political engagement.

Scaffolding discussions of justice.

Leading decision making and leading
change.

Politically, civically and socially
literate.

What kind of citizen?



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.

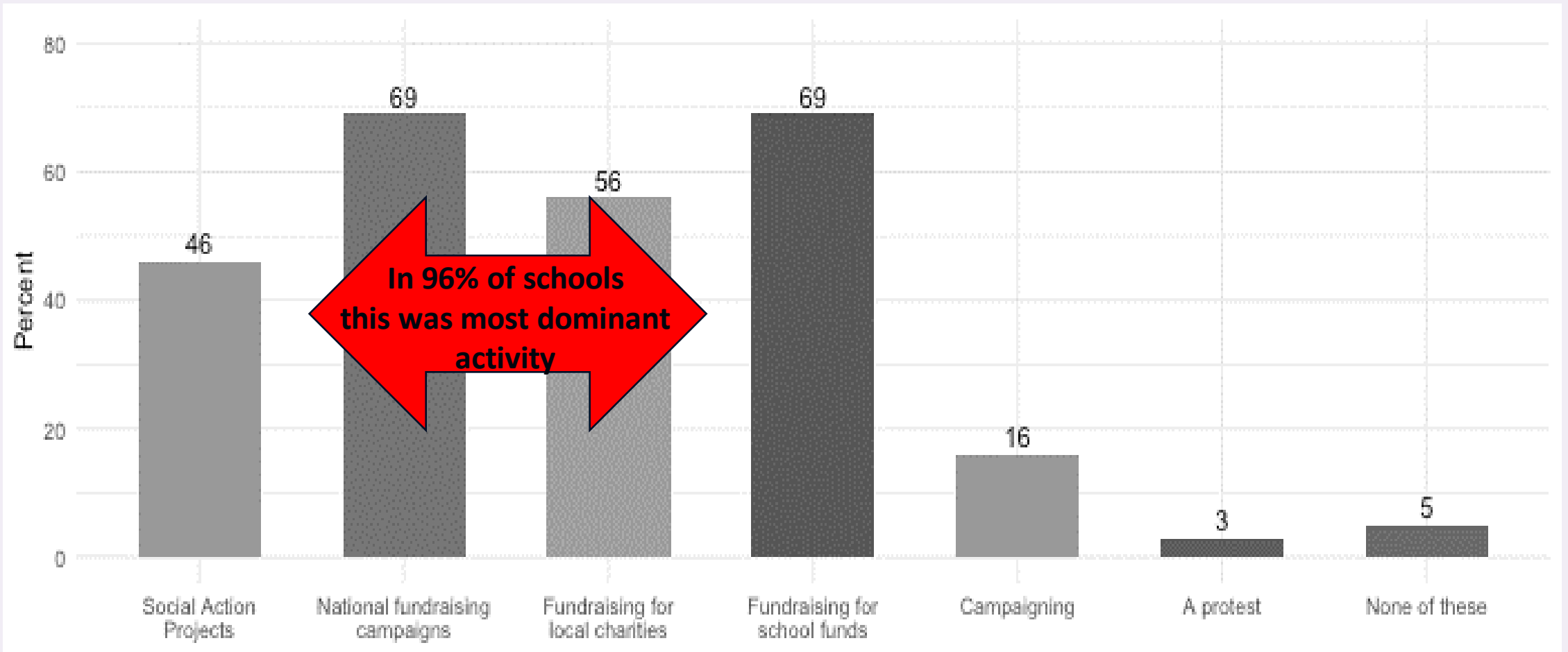


<https://research.kent.ac.uk/children-as-philanthropic-citizens/>

Finding 1: Framing

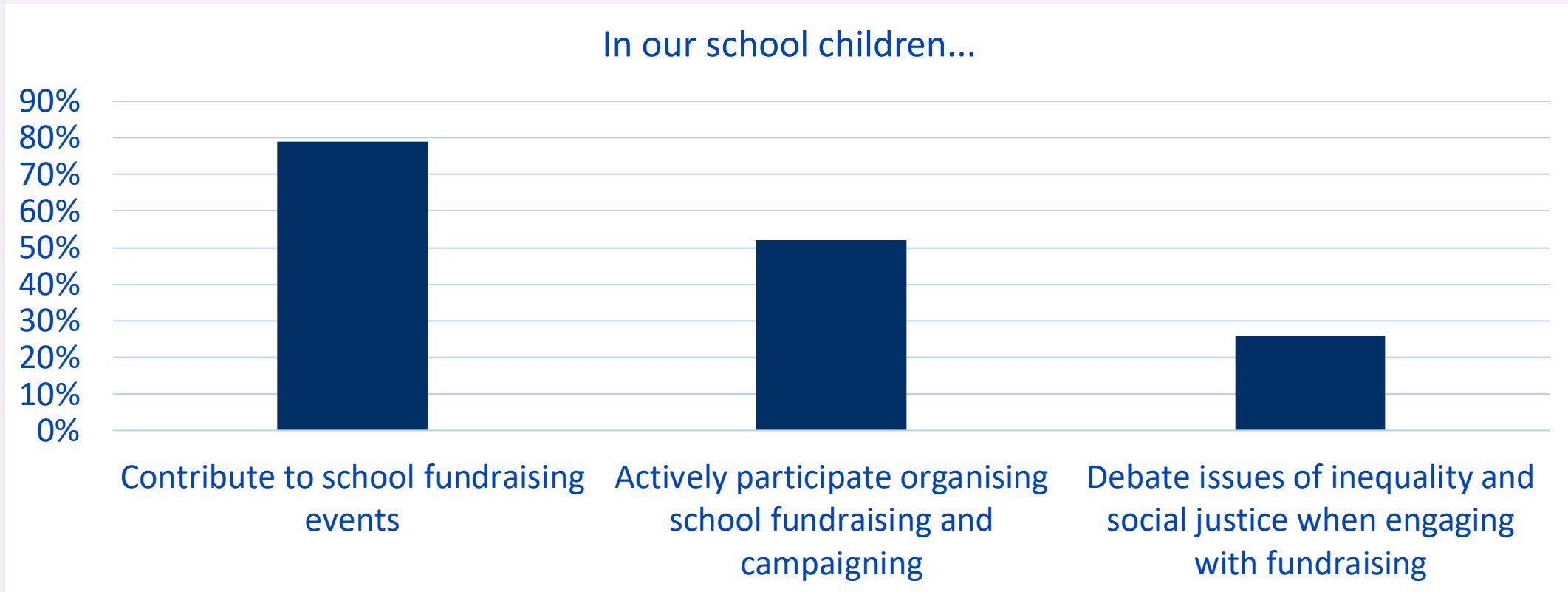
- Most civic engagement activities within primary schools are discussed within a contributory, personally responsible approach.
- This approach encourages acts of responsibility in the community, such as giving to charity, and assumes solving social and environmental issues requires personal responsibility, potentially overlooking the need for active, collective participation and critical challenge of established systems, and potentially denies children the opportunity to develop skills to consider more critical pathways to change.
- **We call for greater attention to be paid to participatory and justice orientated approaches to engaging children in civic activities within primary education.**

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



How are these activities pedagogically framed?

Over 96% of the schools reported in engaging either in national fundraising campaigns and/or fundraising for local charities. Of these schools....

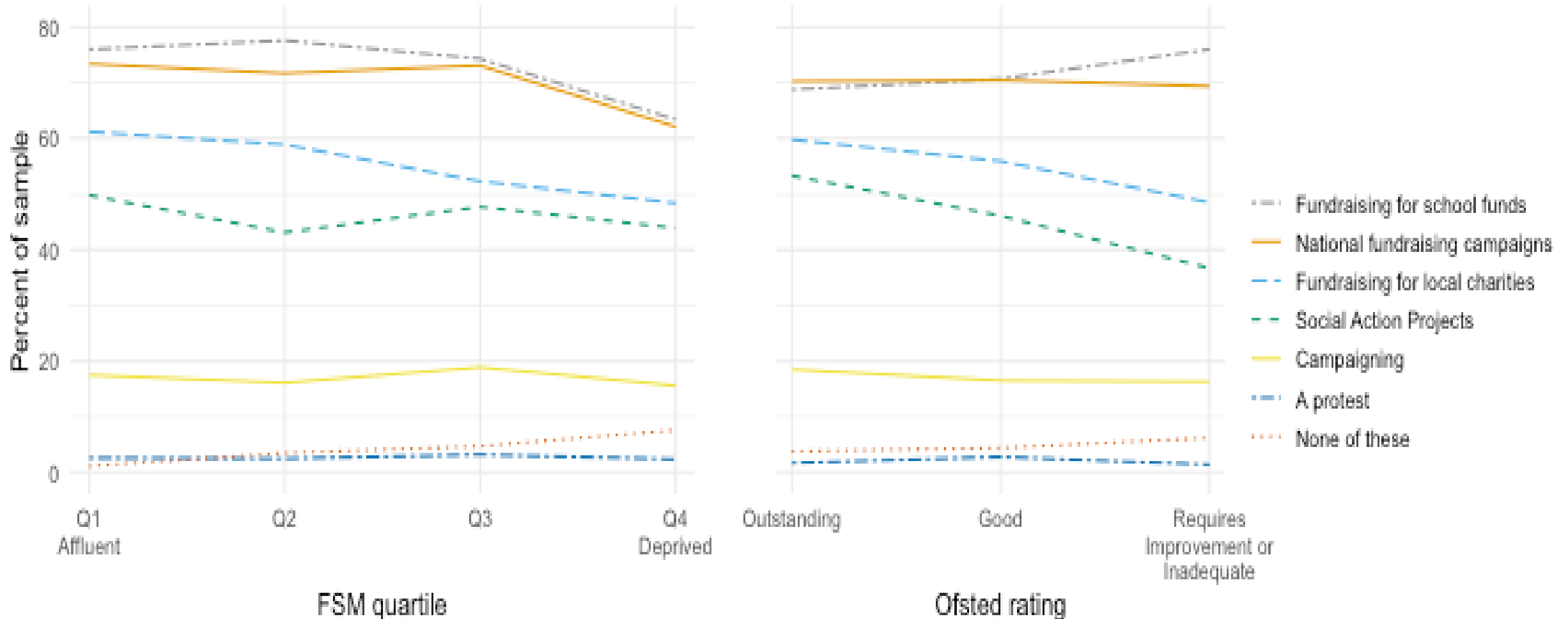


Finding 2: Distribution

- Primary school educators are committed to facilitating children's active civic learning.
- However, distribution of opportunities is uneven: children from more privileged communities have greater access to opportunities to develop their civic skills and practice their civic-ness.
- **This suggests, from an early age, these children are more likely to be prepared for civic life than those from disadvantaged backgrounds, thus potentially cementing inequalities in civic education from early on.**

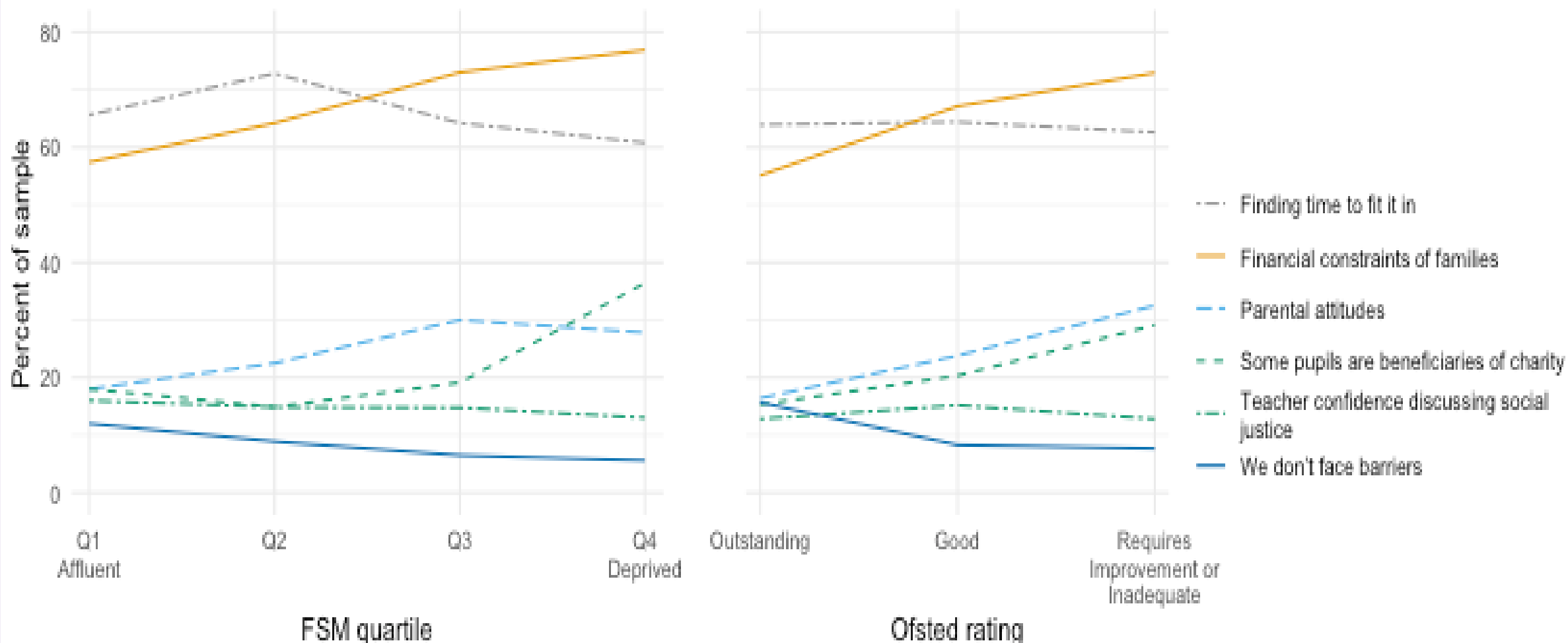
Is there equity in access to opportunities for children?

Did your students engage in any of the following at least once during this school year?



What are the barriers to supporting charitable causes in primary schools?

Do you face any of the following barriers related to supporting charitable causes at your school?



Finding 3: Civic Leaders

- Active civic learning does not sit within a vacuum, it reflects lived experiences, situated within an ecosystem of communities, civic actors, civil society and social structures - some of which perpetuate inequality, which children are experiencing in their everyday lives.
- Teachers are simultaneously encouraging active civic engagement to tackle social issues whilst supporting children with lived experiences of these issues.
- **We call for greater recognition of the importance of teachers as civic leaders and co-producers of active civic learning which is embedded in lived experiences, collectively working with children, families, communities and civil society organisations to co-produce responses to social issues in a democratic way.**

Some examples...

- Primary school teachers overall are more civically active than the general population, with older teachers (those 50+ years) being the most civically engaged.
- We find a positive relationship between teachers own civic activities and how teachers identify the schools teaching approach to civic learning.
- There is a positive relationship between partnerships with third sector organisations and participatory and justice orientated approaches to active citizenship education.

“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!”

“Parental engagement is a barrier - we have a lot of parents who are struggling with mental health issues and just getting their children to school is an achievement some days. They may be overloaded and can't cope with anything extra on top of an already hard life. They are surviving.”

“Very concerned that the government are trying to limit schools in discussing some topics, stating we are being political.”

Part 2 - Methodology

- Over 100 semi structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders across the country (January to June 2023)
- Special attention paid to inclusion of diverse voices representative of the education sector
- Teachers ranged from ECT's to experienced senior leaders
- Analysis is ongoing
- Questions focused on:
 - Understanding of active citizenship as individual and educator
 - Pedagogy and framing (Westheimer)
 - Role of Individual teachers, senior leadership and school community
 - Space for civic learning – can it be found in curriculum? Is it embedded across? Add-on?
 - Taboo topics of conversation/ barriers to civic debate
 - Role of school as provider of charity/support in community and tensions
 - Teachers own civic engagement

Common Ground....

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

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.

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.

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.

Civic School:

Emphasises a pedagogical approach which embraces civic education;
Civic education prioritised in the curriculum design to develop understanding of civic concepts, values and skills;
Foster, critically informed active citizenship which is justice orientated;
School values seek to empower children as active citizens;
Democratic decision making fostered in school processes and governance, actively and meaningfully involving children;
Foster active learning and experiential education throughout school;
Engage in ongoing and sustained active community partnerships;
Shared language/ scaffolding

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

Inhibitors & Enablers

Curriculum pressures
Time & resources
Financial constraints
Education policy
Media discourse/ moral panics
OFSTED
Larger school

School leadership & culture
School values
Teachers own civic values & civic-ness
School governance structure
School demographics – FSM, SEN, diversity
School's location & geography
Parental relationships
Needs of local community

External Partnerships
Engaged with community
Pedagogical scaffold
SIAMS
Smaller school
Dedicated CPD
Religiosity of school

School

	High Enablers	High Inhibitors
Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic learning is embedded in the curriculum, school culture, values and children's every-day experiences of school life. • Values and experiences are orientated around a sense of critical enquiry, social justice, community and equality. • Democratic and inclusive processes of governance within the school. • Highly motivated and committed staff. • Most likely to discuss positive behaviours in schools (inc. parental engagement) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic learning and democratic processes are not embedded throughout the school. • Teachers seek spaces and opportunities to bring this into the curriculum. • Draw on own experience. • Likely to link learning to ideas of social justice, but this is framed as a type of 'quiet activism'. • Engagement in active citizenship is sporadic. • Teacher likely to express higher levels of frustration.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic processes do not always follow through into the classroom experience. • Participation can be tokenistic. • Activities tend to be sporadic rather than embedded. • Children not actively encouraged to link actions with ideas of justice. • More likely to frame ideas in individualised and/or participatory frameworks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of active civic learning • Often internally focused as a school • Teaching described as quite technical, prescriptive and top down (teacher acts as technician). • High focus on behaviour and individual needs (including welfare) • Teachers most likely to discuss dissatisfaction with teaching profession.

School

High Enablers

High Inhibitors

High Enablers

- Civic learning is embedded in the curriculum, school culture, values and children's everyday experiences of school life.
- Values and experiences are orientated around a sense of critical enquiry, social justice, community and equality.
- Democratic and inclusive processes of governance within the school.
- Highly motivated and committed staff.
- Links character to participation to justice.

- Civic learning and democratic processes are not embedded throughout the school.
- Teachers seek spaces and opportunities to bring this into the curriculum.
- Draw on own experience.
- Likely to link learning to ideas of social justice, but this is framed as a type of 'quiet activism'.
- Engagement in active citizenship is sporadic.
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Teacher

High Inhibitors

- Democratic processes do not always follow through into the classroom experience.
- Participation can be tokenistic.
- Activities tend to be sporadic rather than embedded.
- Children not actively encouraged to link activities with ideas of justice.
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- Low level of active civic learning
- Often internally focused as a school
- Teaching described as quite technical, prescriptive and top down (teacher acts as technician)
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More likely to be a spectrum, which is constantly shifting, than binary divides – this simply illustrates the typologies.

Schools as Quasi-Welfare State Providers

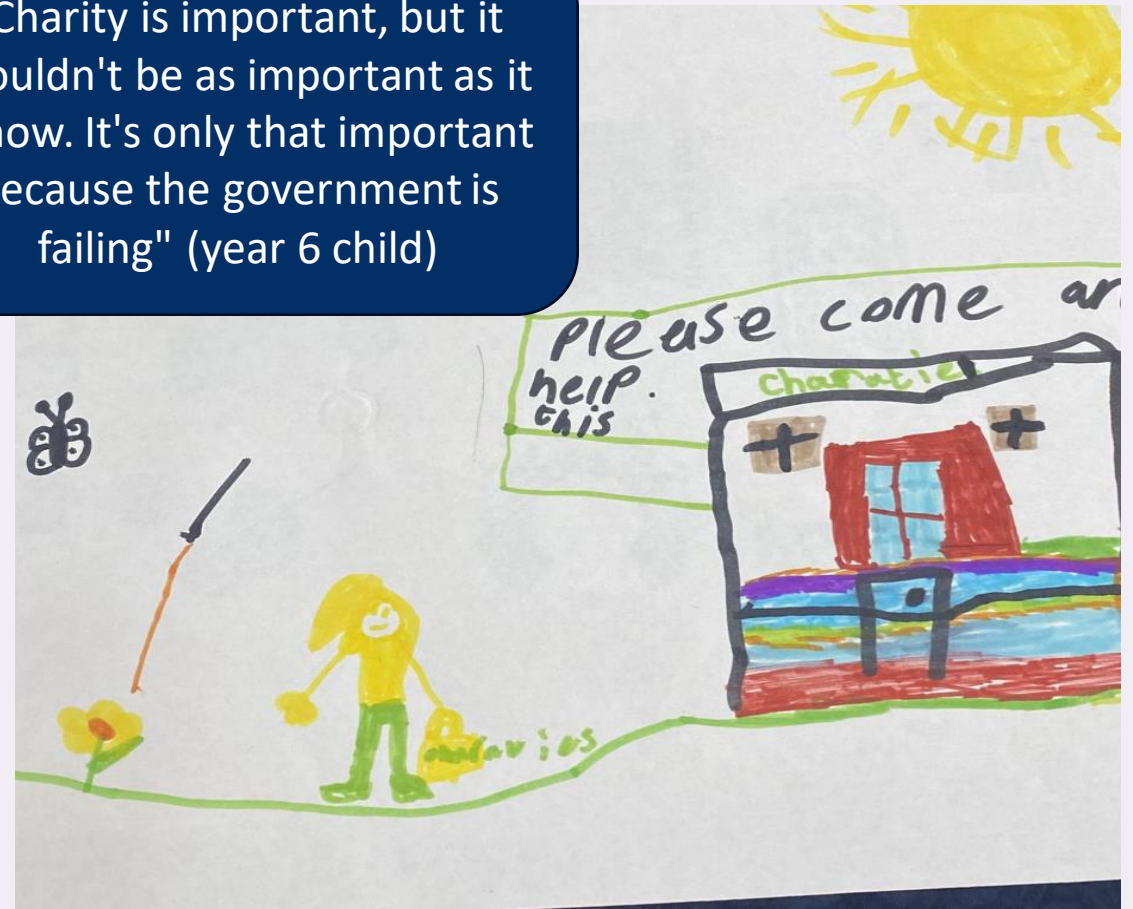
Conflating narratives of schools as site for civic action and space of civic support. Rising poverty and disadvantage is both positioned as a barrier to civic engagement and motivator for action. Over 80% of schools providing some form of additional support.

- *“We run a foodbank, a warm bank and a clothes bank, as well as do washing for our families, and even offer a warm shower for many.”*
- *“Lots of our support goes into supporting our own families in our community. We cannot ask for regular donations as we serve a highly disadvantaged community.”*
- *“We have also found that a lot of our families are now financially very vulnerable so through our work on poverty proofing we have reduced our requests to parents for money.”*
- *“Our children come from deprived backgrounds. We want to ensure that our values are seen as 'regardless' of socioeconomic status and choose charities that work to better the lives of all.”*
- *“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.”*

Children's Voices (very early)

- Children demonstrate high levels of civic and political literacy
- Recognise democratic processes
- Apply civic knowledge to friendships, family, community and wider global conversations
- Feel empowered as citizens
- Recognises issues such as climate change, inequality, food poverty, inflation, cost of living crisis, global conflicts, etc.
- Practicing/ experiential opportunities matter.

"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)



Concluding Thoughts (for now...)

- Raises important considerations for education regarding the prioritisation (or lack thereof) of active citizenship education in the primary curriculum.
- Importance of inhibitor and enabling factors in fostering children's active citizenship.
- Important links between teacher's happiness and wellbeing, as well as perceived behaviour in schools.
- The intersect between the micro (teacher/ classroom), meso (school/ community) and macro (policy/ media) requires further exploration.
- Schools increasingly acting as quasi-welfare state responding to immediate needs of the community (foodbanks, warm banks, housing) – this becomes focus of their civic mission.
- Further ongoing research and analysis ongoing.

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Educating for Public Good website: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/children-as-philanthropic-citizens/>

Any Reflections or Questions?



**Thank
you.**

