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Citizens of now

High-quality youth social action in primary schools

Mehak Tejani and Hannah Breeze

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We would like to give a special thank you to all the schools who have taken part in this project in some form over the past three years, and especially to those schools that continued to participate during the challenging past academic year. We will be forever grateful that you came on this journey with us and gave time, energy and space for your pupils to participate in youth social action opportunities through school. Thank you to Abbeywood First School RSA Academy, Sutton Park Primary RSA Academy, Oldbury Park Primary RSA Academy, St Stephens' CE RSA Academy, Woodrow First School, St Oswald's CE Primary School, Allenscroft Primary School, Kitwell Primary School, St Mary's CE Primary School, Offmore Primary School, Charford First School.

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Our vision

A world where everyone is able to participate in creating a better future.

Our purpose

Uniting people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time.

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A global community of proactive problem solvers.

This report is part of an action-research project led by the RSA (the royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce) and funded by the Pears #iwill Fund. The project investigated what high-quality youth social action looks like in a primary school setting and what enables or limits teachers' abilities to embed youth social action into their practice.

The report's title, 'Citizens of Now' challenges us to see primary-age pupils as active citizens who can make a difference today, rather than discounting them as changemakers of some distant future.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Rationale for the project

Participating in high-quality youth social action opportunities has a 'double benefit' to both the young person involved and their communities. Young people develop new skills that can support them throughout their lifetime, while their communities benefit from the positive actions of socially responsible and compassionate young citizens.¹

The RSA's Teenagency report found that young people want to make a difference in society, but opportunities to engage in high-quality youth social action are limited.² Research from the Jubilee Centre suggests young people who were first involved in youth social action before the age of 10 are more than twice as likely to have an ongoing commitment to social action (a 'habit of service') than those who first participate after the age of 16.³

Teachers and school leaders who lead youth social action have found that it has a positive impact on academic standards and personal development. It also helps to create a learning environment of high expectations, supports better attendance, and even reduces exclusions.⁴ An in-depth evaluation conducted by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) of several youth social action programmes, including one with primary-age pupils, found that

young people who participated in high-quality opportunities saw improvements in character qualities including empathy, cooperation, resilience and problem-solving.⁵

Despite evidence of benefits of youth social action, and a clear desire from young people to make a difference, there is very little research exploring what high-quality youth social action with primary-age pupils should look like.

Over the last three years, in partnership with the Pears iwill Fund, the RSA has been exploring this issue.

We designed, delivered and evaluated RSA4, a youth social action programme for Year 4 pupils in nine schools in the West Midlands.⁶

RSA4 provided pupils with opportunities to lead practical action on the social and community issues they care about, with the support of their school community. They undertook actions such as fundraising, campaigning, raising awareness, volunteering, or engaging in environmental activities that were socially impactful and meaningful for themselves and their communities.

1 Ockenden, N., Unell, J., Donahue K et al (2013) Scoping a quality framework for youth social action: The campaign for youth social action. Cabinet Office; Institute for Volunteering Research; NCVO; The Young Foundation. [pdf] Available at: youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Scoping-a-Quality-Framework-for-Youth-Social-Action-FINAL.pdf

2 Partridge, L., Astle, J., Grinstead, S., & Landreth-Strong, F (2018) Teenagency: How young people can create a better world. The RSA. [pdf] Available at: thersa.org/reports/teenagency-how-young-people-can-create-a-better-world

3 Arthur, J., Harrison T, Taylor-Collins E et al (2017) A habit of service. The Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham. [pdf] Available at: jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf

4 Ofsted (2016) How social action is being applied to good effect in a selection of schools and colleges. [pdf] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/540766/How_social_action_is_being_applied_to_good_effect_in_a_selection_of_schools_and_colleges.pdf

5 Kirkman E, Sanders M, Emanuel N et al (2016) Evaluating youth social action: Does participating in social action boost the skills young people need to succeed in adult life? London: Behavioural Insights Team. [pdf] Available at: bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/YSA-Report-Final-Version1.pdf

6 A total of 519 Year 4 pupils (aged 8-9) participated in the programme over three years.

Through RSA4, our aims were:

- To better understand the benefits experienced by primary-age pupils from participating in high-quality youth social action.
- To understand the role of the teacher in supporting primary-age pupils to lead their own youth social action projects.
- To understand the challenges that exist for primary schools when delivering high-quality youth social action, and identify how they can be resolved.

This report is the culmination of this work. We share what we did and what we have learned along the way. We hope that it contributes to wider learning around what is needed to lead high-quality youth social action in primary schools and inspires more educators to embed it into their practice.

Defining high-quality youth social action

Simply put, youth social action is “young people taking practical action in the service of others in order to create positive social change that is of benefit to the wider community as well as to the young person themselves”.⁷

From this, we can understand that youth social action is made up of activities that are:

- 1 Practical and directive, such as but not limited to, campaigning, raising awareness, fundraising, and volunteering.
- 2 Undertaken in the service of others or the environment.
- 3 Aimed at addressing real social issues that are important to communities.
- 4 Beneficial to both the wider community and the participants themselves.

RSA polling and repeated National Youth Social Action Surveys tell us that many children and young people are taking part in some form of youth social action, particularly through their school.^{8,9} However, these often don't translate into meaningful experiences for the young people involved.

For example, when Dr. Alison Body and colleagues looked at charitable action in primary schools, they found that pupils did not always connect the fundraising activities to their purpose. Pupils assumed that the purpose of [Children in Need](#) fundraising was to buy Pudsey Bear a new eye:

“Almost all the children [*in the study*] were able to identify Pudsey Bear, recognise the poppy and the Comic Relief red nose, and associate this with various activities they had taken part in. However, less common was a deeper, more critical engagement in the reasons for this fundraising activity and the issues that sit behind this giving.”¹⁰

While schools do good work to engage pupils in charitable action, they may miss opportunities to engage pupils more meaningfully to understand the social cause behind the action. When pupils are invited to understand and shape the youth social action they participate in, they are more likely to draw meaning from the experience and want to participate in similar actions again.

⁷ Ockenden et al (2013) op cit.

⁸ Partridge et al (2018) op cit.

⁹ The latest National Youth Social Action Survey can be found here, along with links to previous years: gov.uk/government/publications/national-youth-social-action-survey-2019. The surveys do not cover young people outside of the 10-20 age bracket.

¹⁰ Body, A., Lau, E. and Josephidou, J (2019) Our Charitable Children - Engaging Children in Charities and Charitable Giving. University of Kent. [pdf] Available at: karent.ac.uk/72169/1/OUR_CHARITABLE_CHILDREN_ENGAGING_CHILDRE-FINAL-2019.pdf

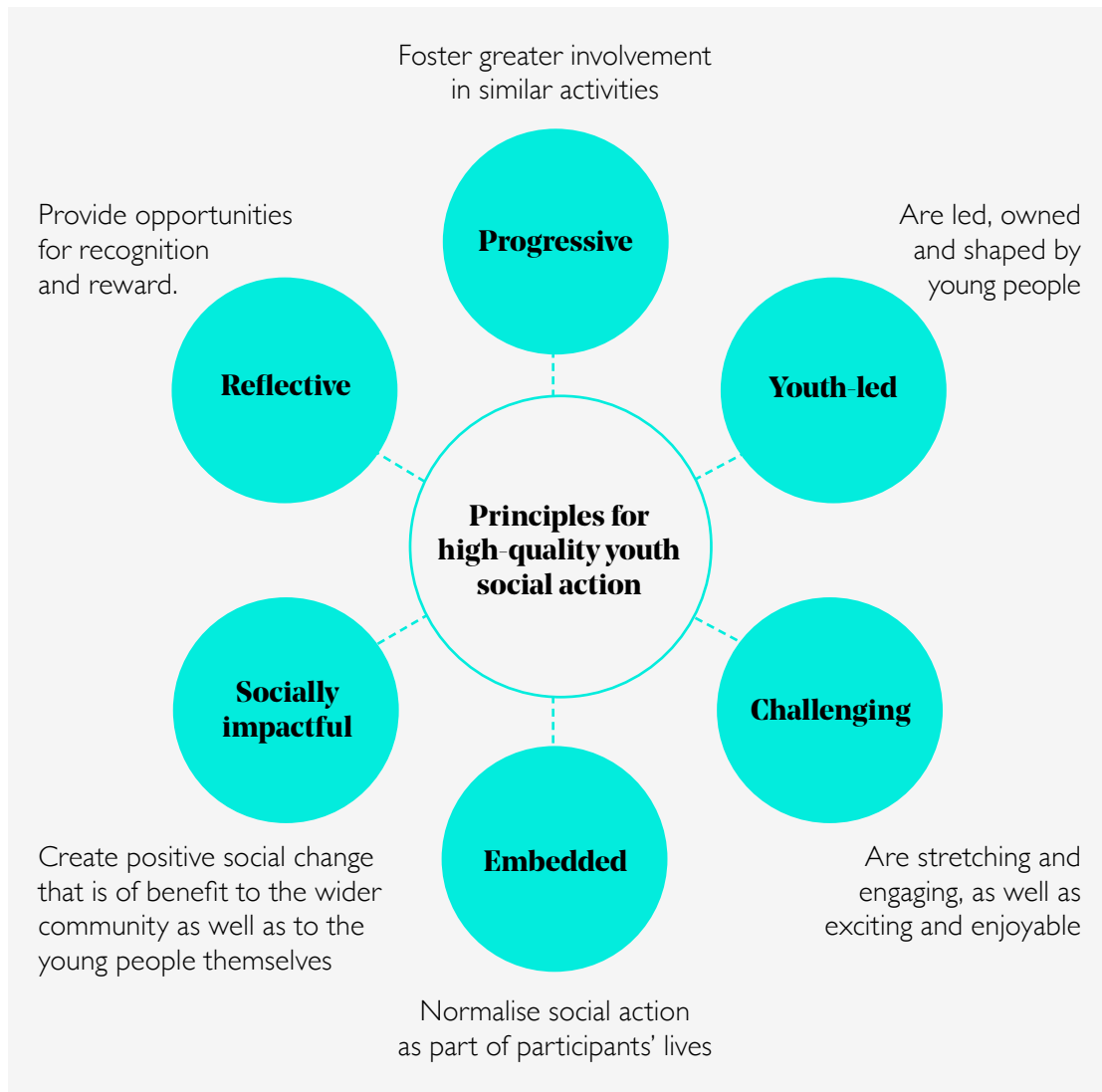
// Because of us all the animals have a home to live in. Not only did it fill me up with joy because of how it turned out but also to know that we could **make a difference made us happy.**

Pupil, Cycle 2



Introduction

Here, the iwill campaign principles for high-quality youth social action are instructive as they capture the missing element of meaningful engagement.¹¹



Research has explored how the iwill campaign principles might provide a useful framework for a broader programme of character education in schools that supports a positive change in both individuals and the community.¹²

For teachers, implementing these principles requires careful planning, expert guidance, and confidence in students' abilities to lead youth social action. Without these principles in place, pupils and communities are more likely to miss out on the transformative potential of youth social action.

¹¹ Ockenden et al (2013) op cit.; for more information on the principles see #iWill, What is Youth Social Action [online]. Available at: www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/youth-social-action [Accessed 10/11/21]

¹² Lamb M, Taylor-Collins, E. and Silvergate, C (2019) Character education for social action: A conceptual analysis of the iwill campaign. *Journal of Social Science Education* 18(1): 125–152. Available at: www.jsse.org/index.php/jsse/article/view/918

The primary school context

Schools play an important influencing role and act as a gateway into youth social action.¹³

Encouragingly, primary and secondary school teachers are increasingly seeing youth social action as part of their school's culture and practice (34% in 2015 up to 59% in 2017).¹⁴ However, there are some notable differences between primary and secondary schools. While 77% of primary school leaders report that their school ethos includes developing character and resilience, only 15% report providing opportunities for students to take part in youth social action/volunteering to help develop these traits (compared with 47% of secondary school leaders).¹⁵ Primary teachers are also more likely than secondary teachers to report that youth social action is not something they have thought about doing.

Worryingly, there is a significant socio-economic gap in how schools' engage with youth social action. Just 27% of primary teachers in schools with above the national average % of free school meal (FSM) pupil populations said youth social action is embedded in their practice compared with 57% of primary teachers in schools with below national average % of FSM pupil populations.¹⁶ This disparity in participation based on young people's socio-economic status exists outside of schools too.¹⁷ Thus, schools can play an important levelling role in driving young people's participation in youth social action.¹⁸



77% of primary school leaders report that their school ethos included developing character and resilience



Yet 15% report providing opportunities for students to take part in youth social action

¹³ CAF (2013) Growing Up Giving: Insights into how young people feel about charity. Charities Aid Foundation. [pdf] Available at: www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/growing_up_giving.pdf; see also Ipsos MORI National Youth Social Action Surveys.

¹⁴ Smith, R., Tattersall, J., Rabiasz, A. and Sims, D (2017) NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus: Research Report. [pdf] Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584503/Teacher_Voice_Summer_2016_Report_Final.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ipsos MORI (2015) Schools Omnibus Survey. [pdf] Available at: www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/youth-social-action-uk-2015

¹⁷ Dartington Service Design Lab (2019) #iwill Fund Learning Hub Evidence Workstream The Socioeconomic Participation Gap in Youth Social Action. [pdf] Available at: www.youthimpact.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/iwill_fund_learning_hub_-_evidence_workstream_-_the_socio-economic_participation_gap_in_youth_social_action.pdf

¹⁸ Hogg, E. and R De Vries (2018) Different Class? Exploring the Relationship between Socio-economic Advantage and Volunteering during Adolescence. [pdf] Available at: www.iwill.org.uk/relationship-between-socio-economic-advantage-and-volunteering

What works in schools

In 2015, Step Up To Serve, the coordinating charity for the iwill campaign to get more young people involved in youth social action before 2020, convened a roundtable of education leaders to answer the question:

'How can we make youth social action a part of life for every 10-20 year old going to school or college in the UK by 2020?'

Headteachers leading this work within their own settings identified four key principles to their practice:

- **Youth social action is at the heart of the school mission, values and the lens through which pupils learn.**
- **Youth social action participation is recognised and rewarded similarly to academic achievements.**
- **Young people are empowered to lead the direction of youth social action.**
- **Strong partnerships are built with local and national organisations to help create opportunities.**¹⁹

In Ofsted's exploration of youth social action, school culture was found to be an important influencing factor in achieving positive outcomes for the pupils and their communities. Schools that prioritised youth social action empowered teachers to seek out external opportunities for participation and supported their development around delivering youth social action. Teachers reported feeling better equipped to tackle sensitive subject matter that could arise from youth social action when they received training and support.²⁰

Inspectors also noted that within the schools in question, youth social action was an implicit part of teaching practice and was woven throughout other aspects of the formal curriculum, particularly at the primary phase. Aspects that helped develop a distinct youth social action offer included: teachers' good knowledge of local community issues/opportunities to help, and their ability to draw on local community groups' expertise, link youth social action to the social, moral, spiritual and cultural (SMSC) education curriculum, and root the action in authentic issues that are deemed important by pupils themselves. Where it was seen to be the most successful was when it acted as a 'golden thread' for developing skills, knowledge and wider learning within schools.²¹

¹⁹ The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues with Step Up To Serve (2015) Transforming Young People and Communities. [pdf] Available at: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Transforming_Young_People_and_Communities.pdf

²⁰ Ofsted (2016) op cit.

²¹ Ibid.

Chapter 2

**Teacher
attitudes
towards
high-quality
youth social
action**

2 Teacher attitudes towards high-quality youth social action

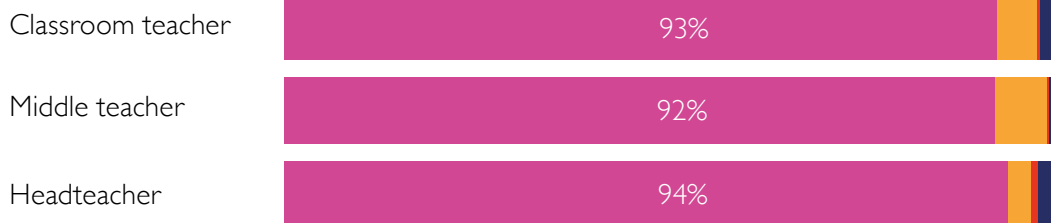
Polling by NFER between 2016 and 2018 tells us youth social action is not as widely understood by primary teachers as by secondary colleagues.²² To gain further insight on teacher attitudes towards youth social action in primary schools, we commissioned a Teacher Tapp survey in February 2020.²³

This chapter shares insights from the survey.

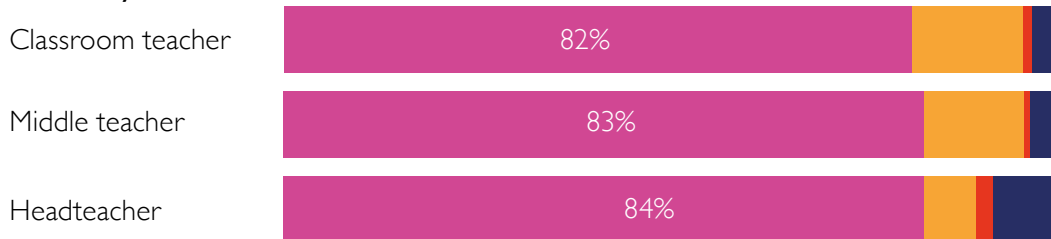
Insight 1: Teachers and headteachers believe in the importance of youth social action during the primary phase

Children should participate in a practical activity that aims to make a positive difference in society and improve the lives of others before leaving Year 6.

Primary



Secondary



■ Strongly agree - agree
 ■ Neither agree/disagree
 ■ Strong disagree - disagree
 ■ Not relevant/cannot answer

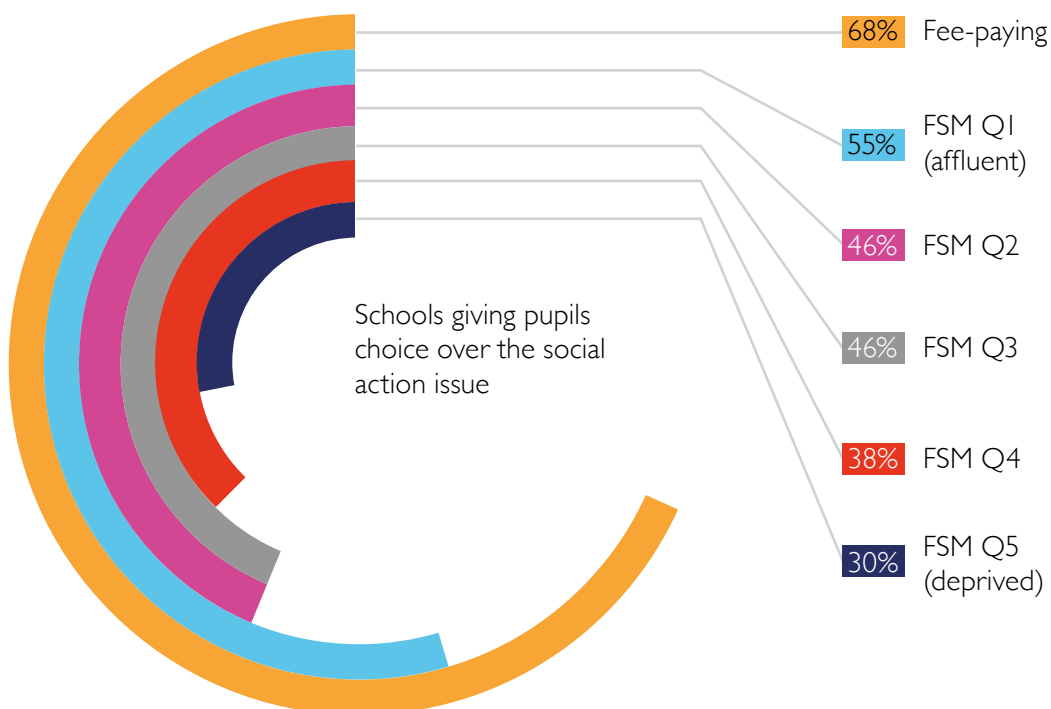
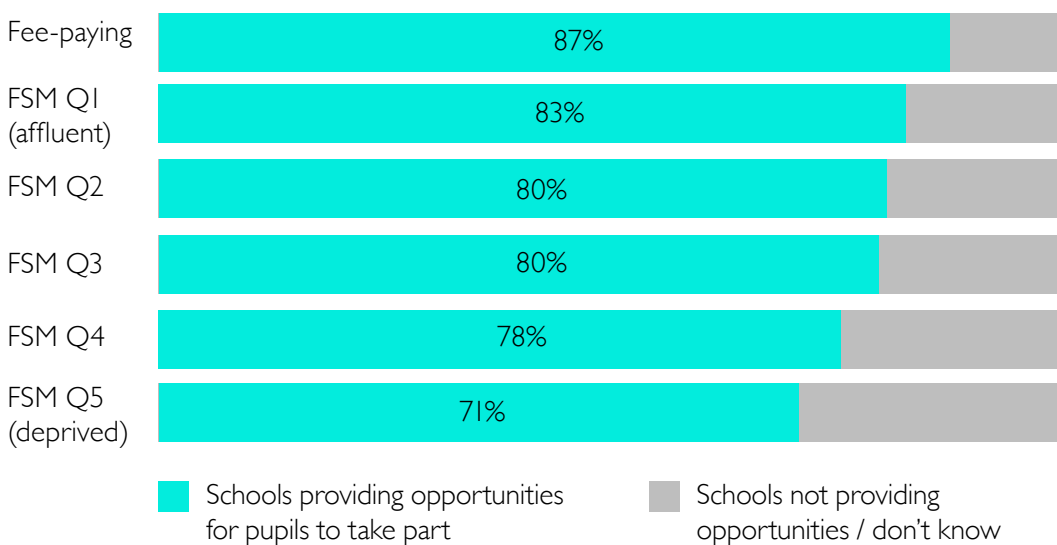
²² National Foundation for Educational Research (2016-2018) Teacher Voice Omnibus

²³ Teacher Tapp is a survey for teachers currently working in English schools.

Survey responses are weighted to represent the national teaching population, according to school funding, phase and region, along with teacher age, gender and level of seniority. For questions sent to all teachers, we received on average just under 6000 responses. For the question specific to primary school teachers, we received just under 2000 responses.

Insight 2: In line with previous findings, schools located in some of the most deprived areas have fewer opportunities for pupils to take part and lead in youth social action

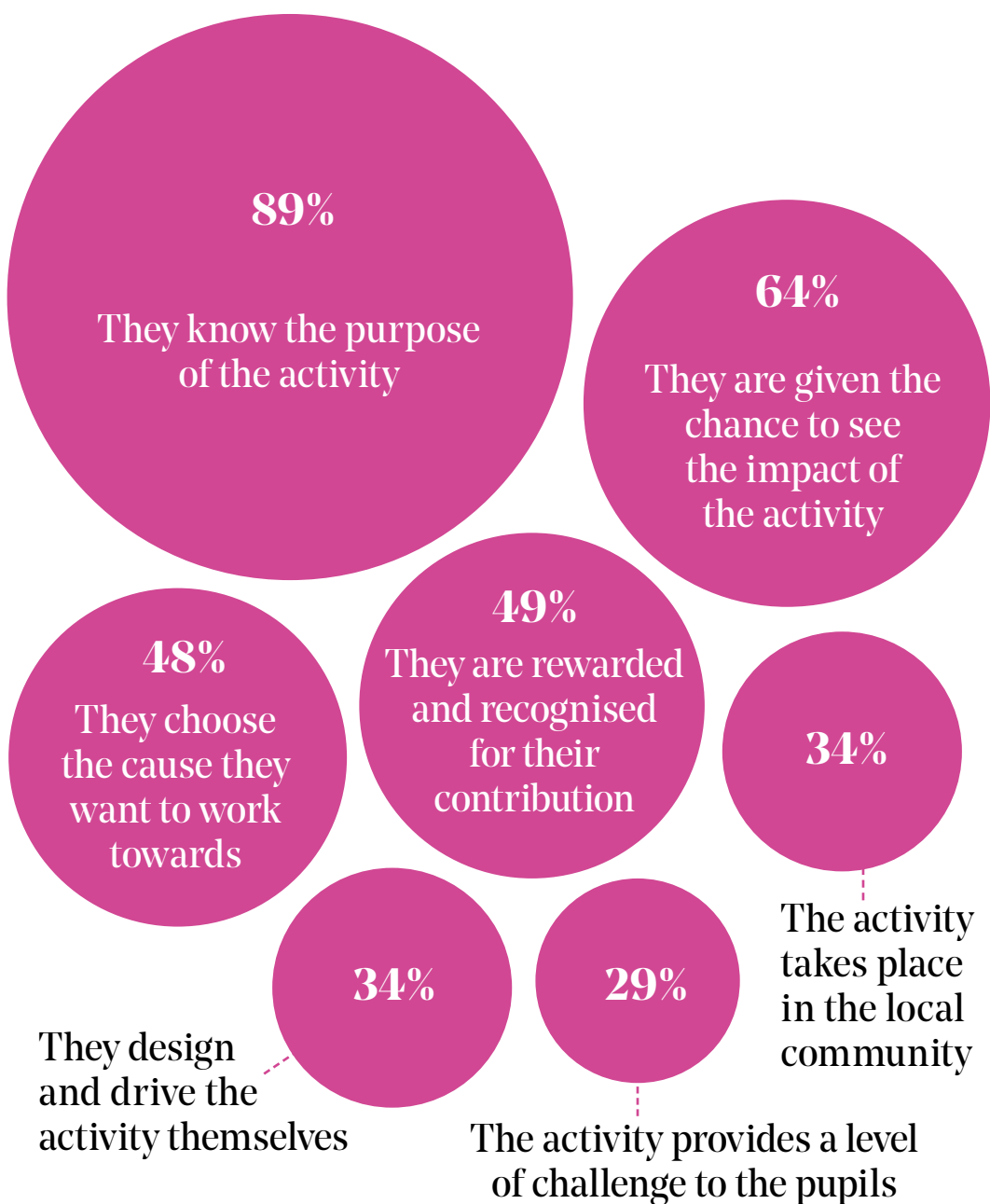
Social action is a practical activity that makes a positive difference in society (such as fundraising, campaigning or volunteering). Who chooses what sorts of social action issues?



²⁴ The % of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) is widely used in educational research to indicate levels of disadvantage among a school's population of pupils. See Ipsos MORI (2015) op cit. for previous research on the relationship between disadvantage and participation in social action.

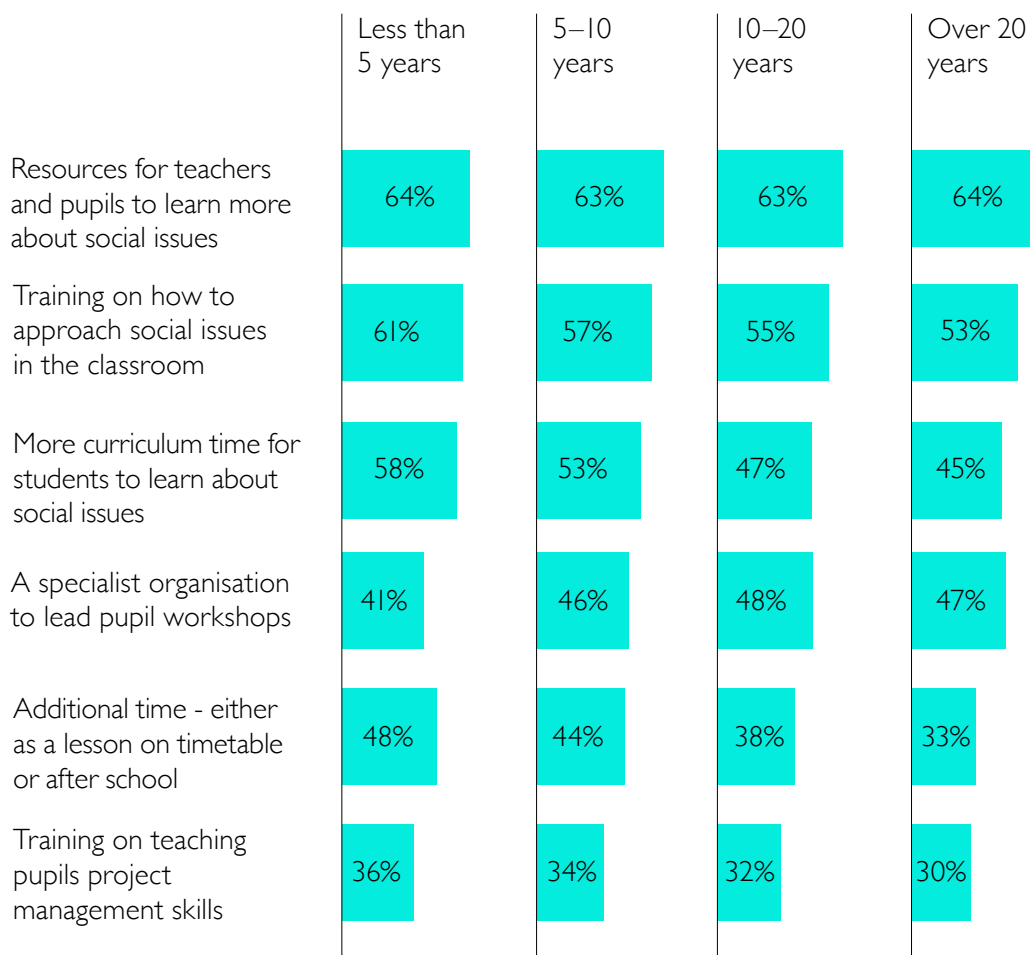
Insight 3: Teachers agree that youth social action should be more than just 'the action'

When students participate in practical activities to make a positive difference in society (such as fundraising or volunteering). I think it is essential that...



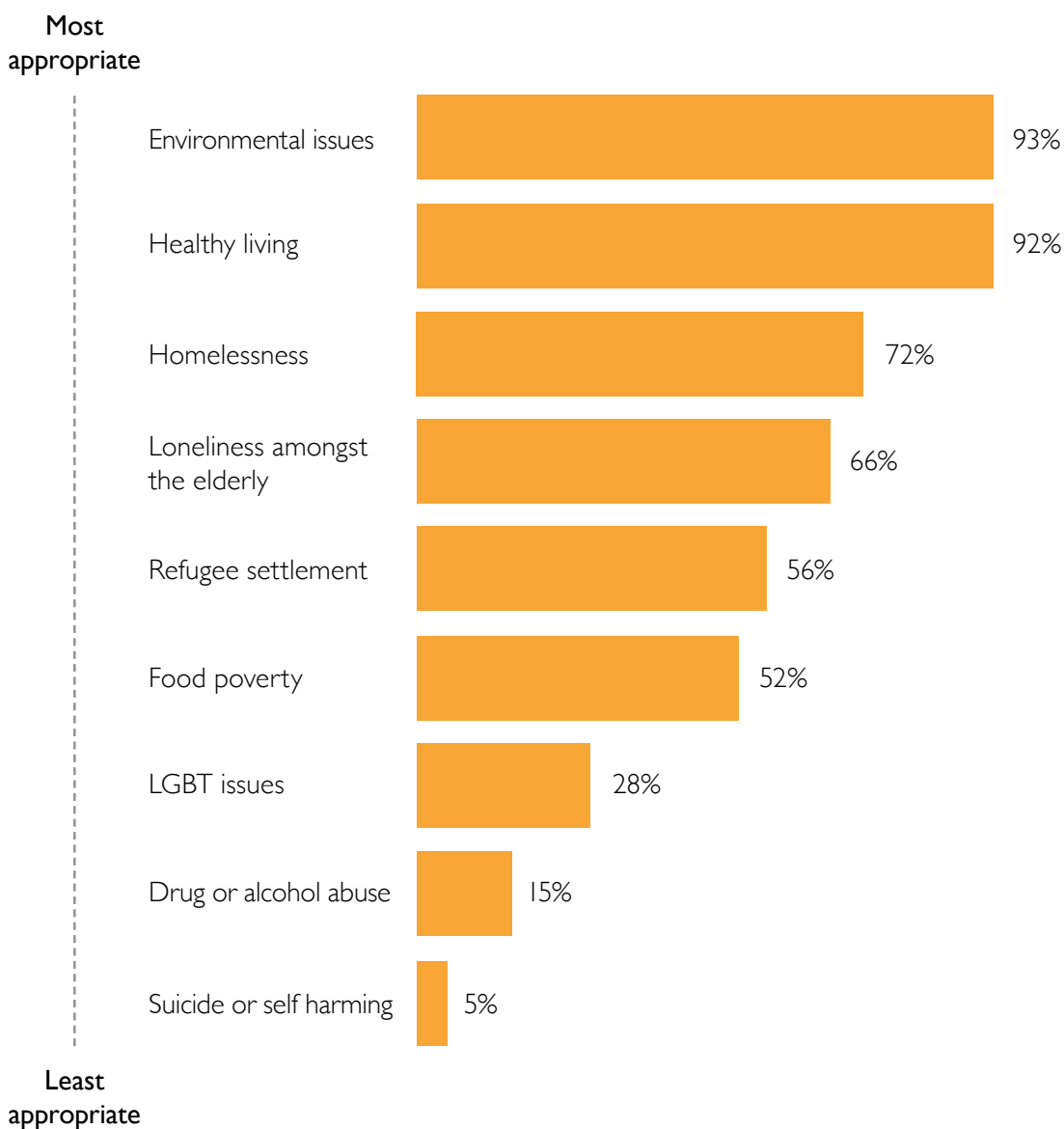
Insight 4: Regardless of years of experience almost all teachers want support in approaching social action in the classroom

Imagine you are asked to run a social action programme for pupils in school. What support might you want or need to do this well?



**Insight 5: Teachers judge
some social issues as more
'age-appropriate' than others
for primary-age pupils**

In your own opinion, which of these issues are age-appropriate as a social action topic for Year 4 pupils (age 8-9)?



Almost all teachers surveyed believe in the importance of youth social action during the primary phase.

Pupils in fee paying schools are twice as likely to choose the social issue they want to address compared to their peers in the most deprived areas.

Regardless of experience almost all teachers want support in approaching social action in the classroom.

Connecting Teacher Tapp insights to RSA4

The finding that schools in the most deprived areas are less likely to give pupils the opportunity to lead and take part in youth social action is particularly relevant to our project due to the social profile of the schools involved. All but three of the schools involved have had above the national average (23%) of pupils eligible for free school meals at any time during the past six years – one school has had almost three times the national average.

While we cannot tell whether these schools would have engaged in youth social action outside of RSA4, our experience with them tells us that they are open to such engagement and have the drive to incorporate youth social action within their practice moving forward. This suggests that if schools in deprived areas are presented with the opportunity to engage with youth social action, they are likely to take advantage of it.

Teachers need support to develop youth social action opportunities for their pupils, through training, provision of resources, and guidance from organisations with expertise in facilitating youth social action workshops for pupils. As well, they may need further guidance on how to approach potentially sensitive social issues such as refugee settlement, food poverty, substance abuse and LGBT issues. External delivery partners and programmes like RSA4 might offer opportunities to support these needs and build teachers confidence and capacity to embed youth social action into their practice.

Chapter 3

What we did

3 What we did

The RSA4 programme set out to incorporate the iwill campaign principles in a way that was practical for the primary school setting and ambitious about what is possible when primary-age pupils are given the opportunity to lead their own youth social action. We focused on Year 4 (pupils aged eight to nine years) in response to findings from the Jubilee Centre that those with a habit of service first became involved in service before the age of 10.²⁵

During the programme, Year 4 pupils developed their own high-quality youth social action projects, with the support of school staff and other adults. Pupils were invited to develop projects that addressed an issue they cared about beyond the school gates and involved practical action(s) that made a positive impact on people and our planet.

**// I think they [*the pupils*]
feel **empowered** now. //**

**Senior Leadership Team Member,
Cycle 1**

25 Arthur, J. et al (2017), op cit.

RSA4 aim and outcomes

The aim of the programme was to plant a seed for a growing commitment to social action now and in the future, leading to a habit of service.

In addition to incorporating the iwill campaign six principles for high-quality youth social action, and in line with existing evidence on expected outcomes,²⁶ we identified the following skills and attitudes as the intended outcomes for pupils:

Aim:

Fostering a habit of service:

Planting a seed for a commitment to social action now and in the future.

Outcomes:

Skills:

- **Leadership:** Pupils feel empowered to act and mobilise others. Pupils have a sense of ownership over their youth-led project.
- **Teamwork:** Pupils can work with others towards the same goal in an inclusive and collaborative way.
- **Communication:** Pupils can listen to others as well as successfully relaying their own ideas and opinions.
- **Problem-solving:** Pupils can reason, use the information available, and think creatively in order to reach a goal.

Attitudes:

- **Increased sense of social responsibility:** Pupils understand that actions affect people and our planet and that we should strive to have a positive impact in our communities.
- **Increased civic self-efficacy:** Pupils believe in their ability to make a difference through prosocial actions.

²⁶ Kirkman E. et al (2016), op cit.

Profile of the schools

Primary schools across the West Midlands were invited to participate in the RSA4 programme. Schools came from within the RSA Academies and their regional networks, as well as schools who had participated in previous RSA projects.²⁷ In total, nine schools participated over two full cycles.

Schools at or above the national average for FSM-eligible pupils were targeted for recruitment. Following the Teacher Tapp data that suggests schools in areas of high deprivation are less familiar with youth social action, we anticipated that these schools would particularly benefit from our approach offering more structured external support. We felt this would help build teachers' capacity and encourage them to sustain youth social action into the future.

Participating schools

School	Location	% of pupils eligible for FSM in the past 6 years*	Cycle
Charford First School	Bromsgrove	21.5%	1
Abbeywood First School RSA Academy	Redditch	25.5%	1 + 2
Sutton Park Primary RSA Academy	Kidderminster	23.1%	1 + 2
Woodrow First School	Redditch	44.2%	1 + 2
St Stephen's CE RSA Academy	Redditch	26.7%	2
Allenscroft Primary School	Birmingham	60.4%	2
Kitwell Primary School	Birmingham	49.8%	2
St Oswald's CE Primary School	Kidderminster	33.7%	2
Oldbury Park RSA Academy	Worcester	19.7%	2

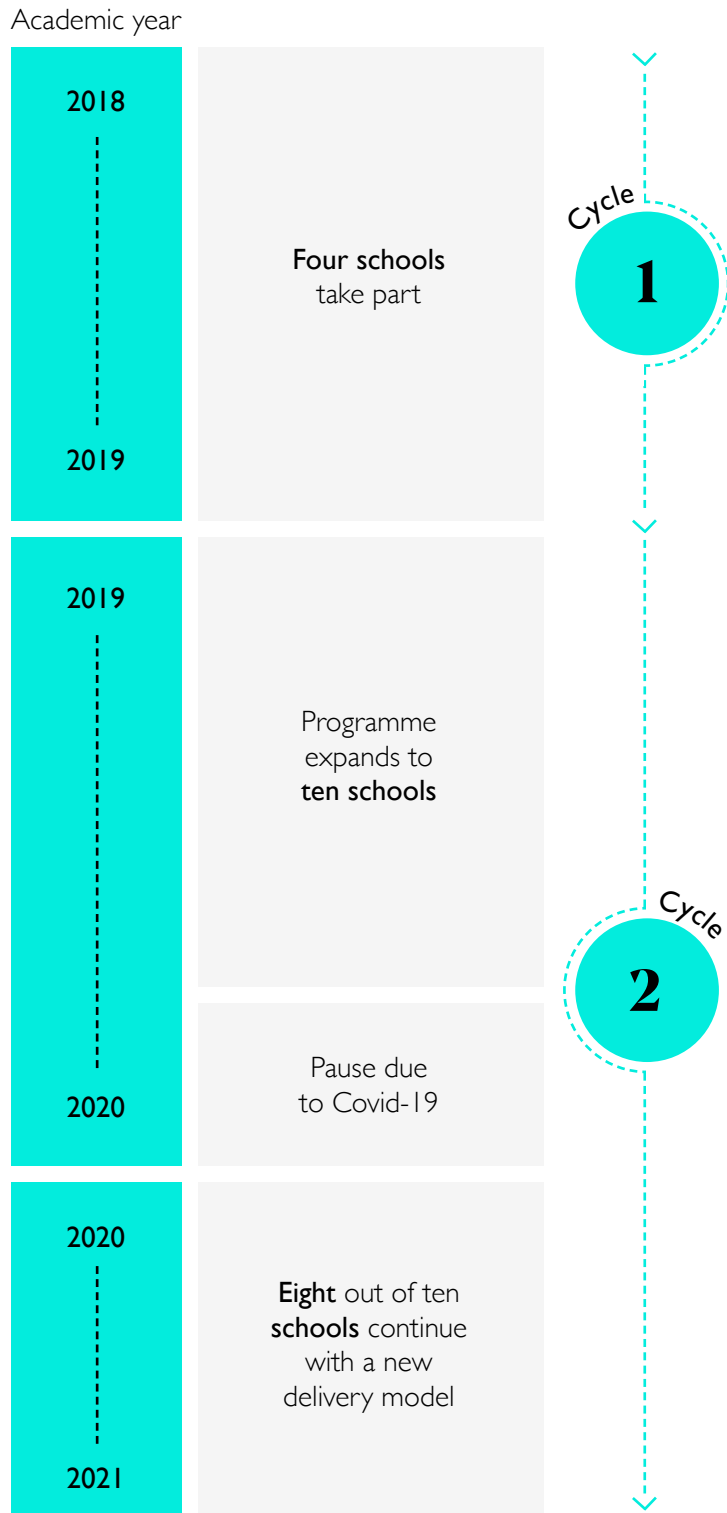
*based on 2018-2019 data. National average 23%

²⁷ The RSA Academies are a group of academy schools sponsored by The RSA in the West Midlands.

Programme Cycles

The programme ran for two cycles over three years. Cycle 1 took place in the academic year 2018-19 and involved four schools. During Cycle 2 (2019-20), the programme was expanded to 10 schools. However, due to Covid-19 disruptions and resulting school closures,

the project paused and restarted in March 2021 with a new delivery model in response to the restrictions placed on schools. Eight out of 10 schools from Cycle 2 chose to continue with the project in the academic year 2020-21.



The RSA4 model



Cycle 1 - The Pilot

RSA4 was partly inspired by the RSA Academies' long-running and successful Year 8 youth social action project that had an established 'Pupil Leader' model. Based on this, the initial model for RSA4 had two levels of participation for pupils:

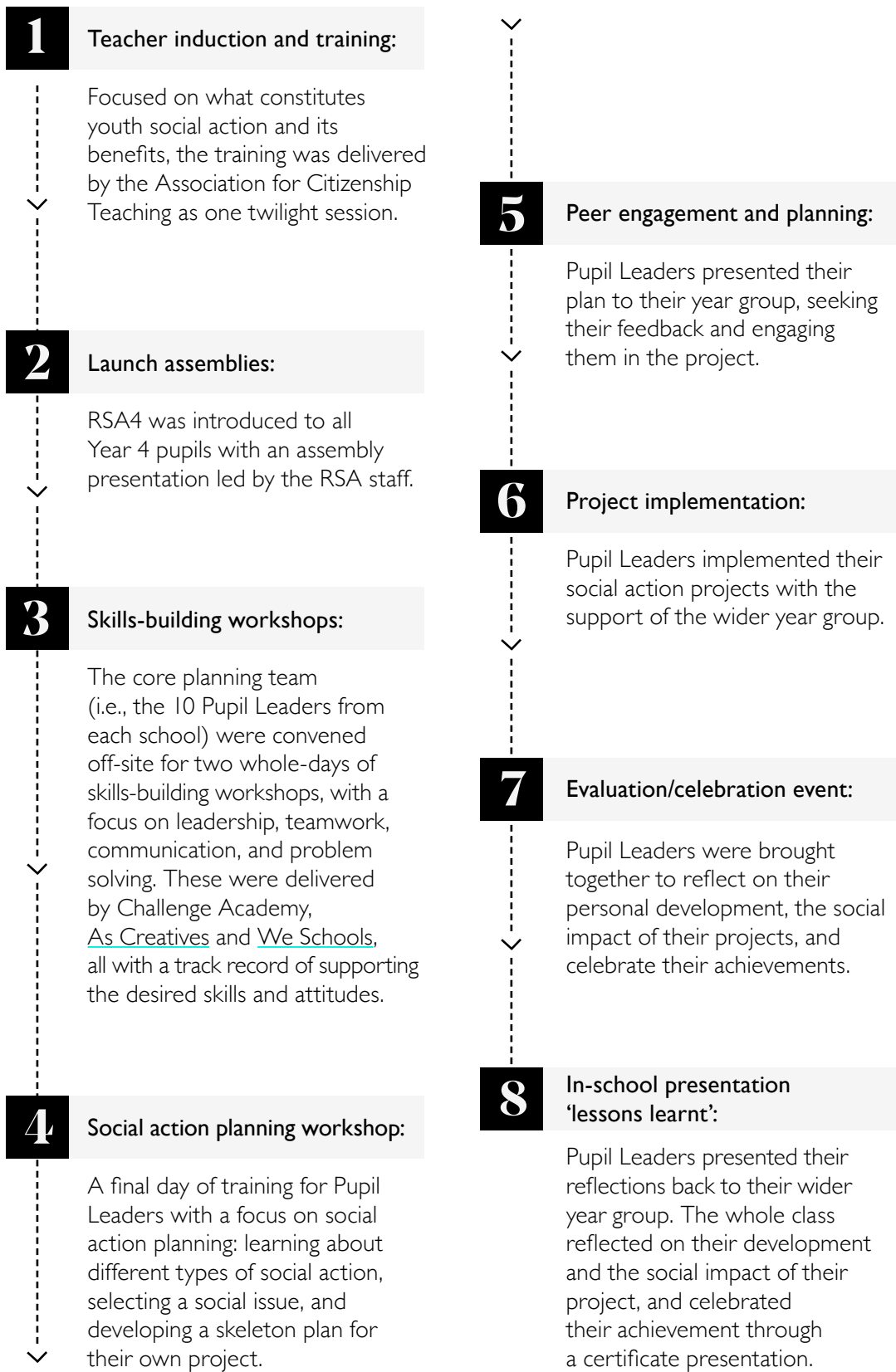
Pupil Leaders:

Approximately 10 pupils per school who formed the core planning team, and who were responsible for leading the project in their own schools. These pupils were selected by their teachers to attend off-site cross-school workshops.

Wider year group:

All other Year 4 pupils who played an active role in supporting Pupil Leaders to carry out the project. This included undertaking research to learn more about the chosen social issues or helping with specific tasks as part of the practical action.

The model can be summarised in eight stages:





Cycle 2 - The Revision

Evaluation of the pilot by the Behavioural Insights Team provided four key insights that allowed us to improve the programme for Cycle 2 and link it more strongly to the six iwill campaign principles. The eight stage structure from Cycle 1 remained the same with the following revisions to the content:

Insight 1: Pupil workshops need to be rooted in the substance of youth social action rather than skills

The initial workshops were designed to build skills that evidence tells us are important for enabling youth-led social action such as leadership, communication, problem-solving.²⁸ However, unlike older pupils in the RSA Academies Year 8 youth social action project, primary-age pupils found it more challenging to apply generic learning about these skills directly to youth social action. For this reason, we redesigned the training workshops around questions on youth social action.

These included:

Workshop 1: What do we mean by youth social action and active citizenship?

Workshop 2: What is a social issue and how do you become ambassadors for the issues you care about?

Workshop 3: What sort of practical actions can make a difference?
How to plan youth social action?

Workshop 4 (half-way check-in point):
What actions are making an impact?
What parts of your plan can we continue to build on?

28 Kirkman E. et al (2016), op cit.

Insight 2: Teachers need support on facilitating youth-led projects

Teachers from Cycle 1 told us that supporting pupils to lead their own projects without taking over was a fine line to tread. To support them, we introduced training on facilitating group discussions around sensitive topics, facilitating decision-making processes, knowing when to use directive and non-directive language.

Insight 3: Pupil Leaders should play more of a 'peer ambassador role'

Working with a smaller group of pupils to develop their understanding of skills and attitudes had proven helpful in ensuring that the social action is youth-led. However, an unintended and undesired consequence was that the wider year group felt that they had less agency because they were not the 'leaders'. To rectify this, we renamed the role to 'Pupil Ambassadors', to signal a more equal and collaborative relationship, whereby Pupil Ambassadors represented the passions and ideas of their peers at workshops.

Insight 4: Schools need extra encouragement to pick 'unlikely' Pupil Ambassadors

Despite our guidance, teachers in Cycle 1 chose pupils who already exhibited the desired leadership skills to be Pupil Leaders rather than those most in need of developing leadership skills. However, across all schools, there were examples of 'unlikely' students who benefitted far more from the programme and the experience of youth social action than their teachers anticipated. In Cycle 2, all schools were encouraged to use an application process in which pupils were given the opportunity to apply. Teachers were especially asked to support those least likely to put themselves forward to apply, and prioritise pupils who could benefit the most from the skills-building and youth social action workshops. Where schools felt it was fairest, and could avoid a popularity contest, they chose to incorporate a pupil vote on their Ambassadors.



Pivoting Cycle 2 to respond to Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted the delivery of Cycle 2, including:

Move to online workshop delivery

Covid-19 restrictions meant breaking Year 4 class bubbles for in-person workshops was neither safe nor viable. Instead, with the help of the [Green Schools Project](#) and [Epic Steps](#) we developed an online iteration of the workshops which were delivered directly into classrooms via Zoom.

Teachers played an increased workshop facilitation role

Online delivery meant that teachers were also involved in the workshops. Green Schools Project and Epic Steps consulted with teachers on the facilitation needed for each workshop and provided lesson plans to help teachers feel more comfortable with this new role.

One level of pupil engagement

As well as not being able to convene Pupil Ambassadors off-site, school-related restrictions and staff shortages proved it difficult to take Pupil Ambassadors out of class for the skills-building and youth social action workshops. To overcome this issue, the two distinct levels of pupil engagement (i.e., Pupil Ambassadors and wider year group) were abandoned. Instead, the online workshops were delivered directly into Year 4 classrooms, where the whole cohort participated in the workshops.

Pupils' youth social action projects

School	Social issue(s)	Summary of pupils' project
Charford First School	Plastic pollution	Cycle 1: Charford First School led a campaign to educate others about reducing plastic waste, to increase recycling and establish a pupil eco-committee.
Abbeywood First School RSA Academy	Wellbeing and social isolation	Cycle 1: Pupils established a wellbeing garden in school and encouraged local businesses and members of the community to take part in a community gardening day. Cycle 2: Pupils created 'kindness postcards' with inspiring quotes and messages. They worked with a local printing company to print the cards for free and distributed them to local care homes residents isolated by the pandemic.
Sutton Park Primary RSA Academy	Plastic pollution and protecting nature	Cycle 1: Pupils worked with their school business manager to apply for a grant to introduce more recycling bins, coordinated a community litter pick and established a pupil eco-committee. Cycle 2: Combining nature and mental health, pupils created a sensory garden designed to attract insects, grow plants and create a safe space. They were inspired by how spending time outdoors during lockdown helped improve wellbeing for children and adults.
Woodrow First School	Homelessness, food poverty and racism	Cycle 1: Pupils worked with a local homelessness charity to organise a community food drive for their food bank. Cycle 2: One Year 4 class decided to focus on food poverty by continuing the partnership with the local charity. The second Year 4 class chose to lead fundraising events for <i>Show Racism the Red Card</i> and created their own spoken word film to raise awareness of racism.
St Stephen's CE RSA Academy	Food poverty	Cycle 2: Pupils focused on the issue of food poverty after hearing stories of schools helping to feed families over lockdown. Pupils coordinated a community donation, eventually collecting seven crates of food to be donated through a local foodbank chosen by the pupils.

What we did

Allenscroft Primary School	Protecting nature/litter	Cycle 2: Pupils grew their own vegetables and plants on school grounds to attract wildlife. They also educated other year groups on the importance of recycling and organised a litter pick (on school grounds due to Covid restrictions but pupils hope to carry out a community litter pick in future).
Kitwell Primary School	Protecting nature	Cycle 2: At Kitwell Primary pupils learnt more about how they can increase biodiversity in their school grounds and local community by creating bug and insect 'hotels' and animal feeders.
St Oswald's CE Primary School	Homelessness	Cycle 2: Pupils at St Oswald's decided to work with a local charity that supports young people who have become temporarily homeless. They organised sponsored fundraising events and created 'kindness bags' with essential items and inspiring words after talking to a representative from the charity about what items would be most useful.
Oldbury Park RSA Academy	Protecting nature and mental health	Cycle 2: Pupils decided to create a school reflection garden to promote community wellbeing as well as to attract wildlife. They helped raise awareness of endangered bees and created new bee hotels and plants to attract them. They have high hopes of installing a pond to care for frogs and are working with local companies to make this possible.

Research design

Through RSA4, our aims were:

- To better understand the benefits experienced by primary-age pupils from participating in high-quality youth social action.
- To understand the role of the teacher in supporting primary-age pupils to lead their own youth social action projects.
- To understand the challenges that exist for primary schools when delivering high-quality youth social action, and identify how they can be resolved.

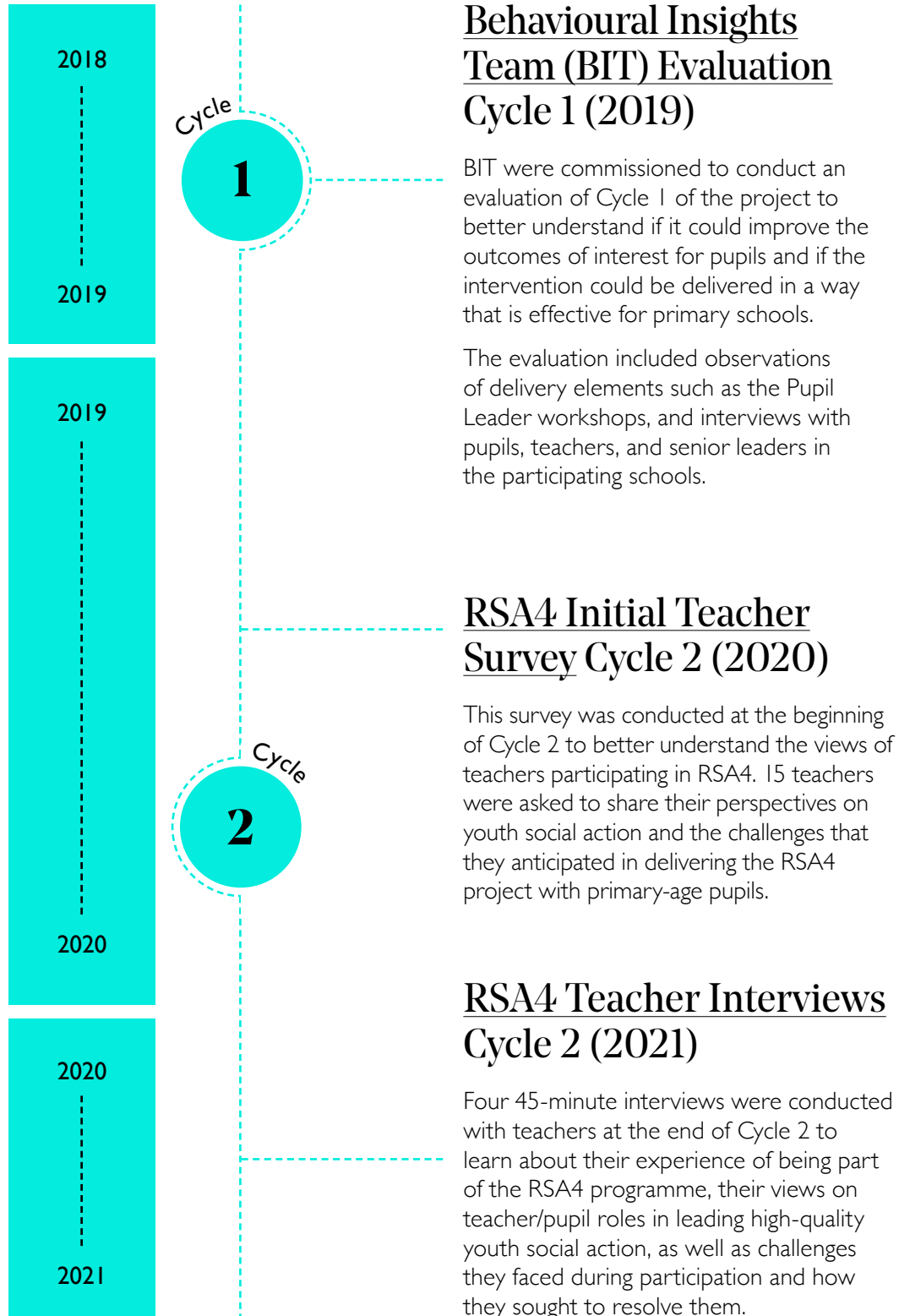
To meet these aims, we established the following four research questions:

- 1 How do pupils benefit from participating in high-quality youth social action?**
- 2 What roles do teachers play in leading high-quality youth social action projects?**
- 3 What challenges might teachers face when pupils define and lead their own projects?**
- 4 What is required for high-quality youth social action in primary schools?**

What we did

We used a variety of methods to help us evaluate the RSA4 programme and to draw out insights related to the research questions:

Academic year



Chapter 4

What we've learned

4 What we've learned

1 **How do pupils benefit from participating in high-quality youth social action?**

Leadership

One of the biggest highlights from teachers was the “sense of ownership” and “power” pupils felt over their youth social action project. Referring to the process of joint decision-making around choice of topic and activities, teachers reflected that everyone in the class felt equally part of the project:

“Everyone has a voice and it makes them feel like it is their project. – *Class teacher, Cycle 2*”

Teachers also recognised that for many pupils, this may have been the first opportunity to truly “lead” something:

“At this age, almost all things are either done to them, for them or at them – this is done with and by them. – *Class teacher, Cycle 2*”

One teacher was especially pleased that the experience of leading the project made her previously shy class more independent:

“They [the pupils] weren't an independent class and this has really helped them. – *Class teacher, Cycle 2*”

Problem-solving

Pupils also exhibited entrepreneurial skills when faced with challenges around resourcing materials, such as wood for the sensory garden, for their projects. Some directed their efforts towards more obvious avenues such as asking parents and family members, while others expanded their horizons by reaching out directly to local shops and self-initiating fundraising activities such as a jewellery sale in their local communities.

Through this, pupils showed an awareness that overcoming social challenges is not something they must do on their own, but rather it is something that can be aided by working with and alongside their communities.

Teamwork and communication

Teachers and pupils from Cycle 1 reported improved inter-pupil dialogue in small groups, with pupils improving their listening skills and their ability to resolve differences of opinion. They also reported less confident pupils contributing to ideas where they hadn't previously done so.

“ Before, I thought working as a team is just doing work together. But now I think it's like listening to each other's ideas, sharing ideas, making them better and I've learnt to do what teamwork really is.
– Pupil Leader, Cycle 1

Teachers interviewed in Cycle 2 also reflected on pupils' improved teamwork skills, through “sharing ideas, listening to others' ideas, building on ideas” and how this has enabled them to “build empathy and understanding of one another.”

Another reflection included how pupils learnt to not only share and collaborate on ideas but also “how to compromise with others.”

One teacher delighted at the fact that pupils who hadn't previously worked together were not only in the same team but were working well together, showing pupils' increased sense of camaraderie, and understanding of one another.

Attitudes: Social responsibility, civic self-efficacy, and habit of service

Existing evidence suggests that the challenge of engaging younger children in youth social action is that pupils may get caught up in the details of 'the what' while forgetting 'the why,' thereby missing out on the primary purpose of the social action.²⁹

RSA4 teachers told us otherwise. The children, they said, “were very aware of the needs of the community, always thinking about the work they are doing can be of benefit.”

In sharing their project with the wider community, including local journalists, children from one school spoke clearly and passionately about their social cause and what they were trying to achieve. Furthermore, pupils expressed gratitude for the RSA4 experience – they felt lucky to have had the experience, proud of what they had produced and the impact they had on their community.

For one teacher, it felt that pupils had come to a realisation that “if they see something that makes them uncomfortable or that

doesn't feel right, they have the power to change it.”

For some, this impact was observed very quickly as birds, bees and other wildlife started to visit their class gardens, which helped pupils understand and appreciate the impact they had made and hopefully can make in the future.

“ I want to make the world a better place for animals, plants, every single thing.
– Pupil Leader, Cycle 1

While it is difficult to say with certainty that the experience of RSA4 will result in pupils developing a lifelong habit of service, we have already some indications of it. In one school, pupils who were engaged in Cycle 1 of the project carried on with their social cause (environment) by starting a school eco-council and taking on environment-related projects within their local community beyond Year 4.

²⁹ Body, A. et al (2019), op cit.

2 What roles do teachers play in leading high-quality youth social action projects?

The role of the teacher in this project was one of a facilitator and partner. From the beginning, all teachers in the project were encouraged to make this role explicit and to let pupils know that this is 'their' project.

This meant that pupils decided the social issue they wanted to focus on, as well as the type of activities they would undertake. Teachers also checked the viability of pupils' ideas. However, instead of dismissing the nonviable options, they asked open-ended questions and prompted pupils to reach their own conclusions.

Examples of questions and prompts included:

- *What is it that you want to do? What can we do in our school community? You need to tell me, it's your project, not mine.*
- *Have a think about it.*
- *Why don't you try this? Why don't you have a go at this?*
- *How are you going to do this?*
- *Do you think this is going to work?*
- *Talk to me about what might go wrong?*

For some teachers, this type of facilitative and partnership role was new and different to their normal relationship with pupils. Teachers acknowledged that letting pupils make decisions was "scary" and required "a lot of patience (to not jump in and make a decision for them)."

Letting them have control. It has been scary in a way. They are driving it.
— *Class teacher, Cycle 2*

It's been great... It's made me more confident to let the children follow their own idea, and I think that's why they have been so passionate and that's why they keep thinking of more ideas. — *Class teacher, Cycle 1*

This role also required an element of leadership. Teachers led pupils through reflection on the process: what was working and what could be improved. They also led reflections on the purpose of the action pupils were undertaking and helping pupils connect their actions back to the social issue in focus.

This proactive role in ensuring pupils could indeed lead their projects was also expressed through deliberate curriculum and timetable planning to integrate the youth social action into formal learning. Some teachers did this more successfully than others (we will cover this in more detail in the next section). They also set parameters to manage potential risks to pupils' health and safety, including mental and emotional wellbeing when sensitive topics were raised.

Teachers' support was also reactive and practical as they helped pupils with specific tasks to support pupils with practical actions such as contacting local organisations they had identified as being relevant to their youth social action project.

In taking on the above roles, RSA4 teachers were able to provide a context where "children are in fact allowed to make decisions and take on leadership roles" and not a process whereby children engaged in "token gestures or interventions that have little impact".³⁰

30 Torres-Harding, S., Baber, A., Hilvers, J., et al (2017). 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

3 **What challenges might teachers face when pupils define and lead their own projects?**

We identified two main challenges that RSA4 teachers faced when pupils defined and led their own youth social action:

Practical challenges:

Where teachers' local contexts made it challenging for them to deliver the project.

Ethical challenges:

Where there was uncertainty about the age-appropriateness of some social issues.

Practical challenges

School leaders set the agenda for their school culture, which determines whether and how youth social action is prioritised and resourced. While headteachers do recognise the benefits of youth social action in the primary phase, it may be compromised in the face of external factors such as squeezed budgets, concerns around retaining teachers, and accountability pressures.³¹

In-school delivery in primary schools largely refers to classroom teachers' time. Committing already stretched teacher time and staffing budgets may pose some of the biggest practical barriers to embedding youth social action. Newly qualified teachers may especially find it difficult to take this on if it is an 'add on' to their curriculum as opposed to part of their curriculum from the beginning of the year. We found this to be the case for one of the schools who participated in Cycle 1 of the project but were unable to continue to Cycle 2.

Teachers who wanted, and were able to, design their curriculum around a social

issue shared how it enhanced pupil's understanding of the issue itself, thereby enhancing their drive towards the youth social action project. In one case, a school chose to integrate the pupils' youth social action project as much as possible into a term's scheme of work by setting the pupils' chosen social issue as the key topic for that term. This involved assigning lesson time in science, English, maths, and computing to the RSA4 project.

In addition, some schools found that letting pupils take ownership of the issue and the project, while considered a benefit to the pupil, was a challenge. In schools where it worked well, this kind of pedagogy where pupil agency is promoted was not unfamiliar, and where teachers were used to taking on facilitator and partner roles.

Some teachers also struggled to connect with their local communities, whether it was charities or local businesses, and felt that they could have done with extra support (either external or internal) with this aspect of the project.

31 Bamburova, A (2017) An exploration of the drivers and potential barriers for schools in England embedding youth social action in their culture and practice. Henley Business School

Ethical challenges

Schools may be hesitant to offer youth-led social action opportunities if they feel that the issues or actions selected by pupils are inappropriate for young children.³² During the first year of the project there were some initial reservations of some teachers that their pupils were too young to effectively engage in youth social action and sensitive issues:

“ I was nervous, and the other two teachers were nervous about them choosing homelessness because we thought, ‘What are we going to do?’, and you know, ‘It’s too sensitive’. They may be too young, and they might be doing things that aren’t age appropriate... I really didn’t think it would be this successful.
– Class teacher, Cycle 1

However, all teachers interviewed during Cycle 2 described being “surprised” by the level of maturity of pupils when dealing with the potentially sensitive subject matters and expressed no concerns about age appropriateness of letting pupils choose their own social issues. In fact, some mentioned how it would have been more damaging to not cover an issue that is prominent in their local communities.

“ I think to not do it is actually more damaging, because they need to be aware that it’s happening, and to be able to make that change... I don’t think there is any point shying away from it, because it’s not going to disappear. And I think giving them the opportunity to reflect on it...and what can we do to help these people gives them more kind of drive than it would if it was shied away from because it kind of gives them a more empathetic response. – Class teacher, Cycle 2

“ Children are already having these conversations as it happens in our area [...] we’re trying to help make people’s lives better so it is okay to talk about it. – Class teacher, Cycle 2

These reflections suggest that concerns around age appropriateness might be more internal to teachers than external. For example, teachers might feel nervous or less confident about discussing some topics more than others, and that this could be overcome by sharing successful examples of how various social issues are covered by colleagues in other settings and/or receiving support from experts.

³² Teacher Tapp data revealed that some subjects such as mental health and wellbeing or healthy eating were examples of topics deemed age-appropriate for young pupils whereas there was less of a consensus on the suitability of topics such as food poverty and refugee resettlement.

**// It's been great...
It's made me more
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I think that's why
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that's why they keep
thinking of
more ideas.** **//**

Class teacher, Cycle 1

4 What is required for high-quality youth social action in primary schools?

Through the various cycles of RSA4, we have identified several active ingredients that enable high-quality youth social action in primary schools.

For achieving intended outcomes

Pupils' ownership over the goal and the means of the youth social action project:

Youth-led projects should be built on pupil-adult partnerships that facilitate joint decision making. Teachers should be explicit about their facilitating role from the start of the project, encouraging and reminding pupils that the ideas and direction must come from them.



What I think has been different is that the children have had complete ownership over it, so it's been their project and they decided what they wanted to do. They decided how they want that to run in school, and I guess we probably don't give that much ownership over to the children ... That's something that we could learn from this. – *Senior Leadership Team member, Cycle 1*



At St Oswald's CE Primary School, the class teacher ran a ballot vote to select the issue with prompting questions such as: "what are we going to do that is most useful? What do we not already do?" Pupils wrote down their responses on a named ballot. A voting system meant that each pupil's voice was equally represented. The named ballot allowed the teacher to discreetly follow up with pupils who expressed an interest in a topic that was either too sensitive or prompted safeguarding concerns.

What we've learned

Pupils' feel connected to their local community and part of something bigger:

The workshop series brought pupils together from different schools, in-person during Cycle 1 and virtually in Cycle 2. This helped pupils recognise the importance and the wider impact of social action activities beyond their individual projects; it also normalised social action as something they can engage with outside of their class and school.

During Cycle 2, one class at Woodrow First School felt so passionate about the issue of food poverty that they decided to work closely with a local organisation that coordinates a food bank. In addition to supporting the issue locally, pupils also researched out to The Trussell Trust's national [Hunger Free Future campaign](#) to learn more about the scale of the issue. Pupils recorded a campaign video to raise awareness and asked the school to sign the campaign in support too.

Pupils' perception that the project is sufficiently difficult, including feeling a sense of 'controlled discomfort':

The project should push pupils to think differently, take on roles previously unfamiliar (i.e., that require more agency) and act in new ways. An initial sense of discomfort and nervousness combined with the appropriate amount of support from teachers can help to enhance pupils' sense of self-efficacy and confidence.

“ At the start [of RSA4] I didn't really know these kind of things and as we were going more into doing this I got more confident.
– Pupil, Cycle 1

During interviews, pupils and staff described a sense of controlled discomfort resulting from placing pupils in new or 'adult' roles and asking them to interact with new peers from other schools as well as adults from the community. For example, pupils at Woodrow First School were invited to lead a meeting with a local councillor to discuss their project and request help transporting their food donations to the local food bank.

Pupils' awareness of their personal development:

Pupils should be able to reflect on how they have grown and what they have learnt by participating in the social action. Where pupils may have negative self-beliefs or less awareness of their own development, teachers should provide compelling feedback and evidence of their development.

RSA4 brought participating schools together for a celebration and reflection event, where pupils were encouraged to identify personal achievements as well as the social impact they had helped create. This event was important for consolidating pupils' learning and personal reflections from the experience.

What we've learned

Pupils' perception that the project is successful:

Pupils should be able to articulate how the project has been socially impactful and define what success looks like, both personally and in terms of the community benefit. Teachers should lead pupils through guided reflections on how their project contributes to the social issue, even when their contribution may be relatively small compared to the size of the problem. These reflections should encourage pupils to consider continuing social action in the future.

Pupils at Sutton Park RSA Academy recognised at the end of Cycle 1 that their project to cut down plastic pollution needed on-going action. One pupil reflected:

“ I'm thinking it's quite successful... but at the same time... it's maybe not successful because I can still see loads and loads of litter around the pavements. I have put signs around the town on the lamp posts, like don't drop litter and they still have. – *Pupil leader, Cycle 1* **”**

Through careful reflection, the teacher guided pupils to consider the positive impact they had made and how they could continue to make a difference beyond their RSA4 project. As pupils got ready to move on to Year 5, they established a new school eco-council and spoke to the incoming Year 4 pupils about their project so that the new cohort could help pick up the mantle. Since then, pupils have self-initiated several social actions such as community litter picks, a crisp packet collection drive (after discovering a company that turns crisp packets into insulated blankets for homeless people) and letter-writing to a local restaurant to suggest ways to cut down its single use plastic.

For overcoming practical and ethical challenges:

School leadership drives a culture of youth social action and helps to overcome teacher-level barriers to engagement:

Pressures on senior leaders regarding timetabling, budgets and curriculum commitments can create practical barriers for class teachers trying to enable youth social action. The extent to which youth social action is embedded as a normal part of school culture is largely influenced by senior leaders' buy-in.

The RSA4 programme required considerable buy-in from senior leaders in the participating schools. The programme notably required headteachers to release pupils and school staff from the timetable to participate in workshops and spend additional hours to carry out their youth social action projects. Support from senior leaders empowered class teachers to adapt initial schemes of work to respond to pupils' chosen issues and actions.

What we've learned

Schools encourage youth-voice:

Schools that already had opportunities for active youth voice on social issues such as student councils or eco-committees found it easier to embed RSA4 into their programming. As well, schools that let pupils make decisions about their learning in other parts of the curriculum were more comfortable delivering RSA4 as it was often just an extension of their existing pedagogy.

“ Most of our curriculum is through [drama-based] enquiry [...] so, we are used to sitting back and letting the children drive things and following their ideas but that's always in an imaginary context in the work that we do. So, it was slightly different in that it was real life, but that is generally the way that we work.
– Senior Leadership Team member, Cycle 1

Schools are connected and engaged with their local community:

Schools that already had strong connections found it easier to kick-start community-facing projects, while others had to work to establish these, putting extra pressure on time-poor teachers. Where pupils worked with community allies, it enhanced the projects' impact.

Abbeywood First School RSA Academy looked to their community to send happiness cards to isolated residents in local care homes. Pupils realised that to have the biggest impact, they wouldn't have time to hand make each card. Instead, they designed a small series of card designs and focused their energy on researching and contacting local printing companies that could mass produce their cards. Pupils were surprised to find a local printing company that was so inspired by their efforts that they agreed not only to print their cards, but also help distribute them for free.

Teachers have confidence in teaching sensitive and/or controversial issues:

Teachers acknowledged the importance of not shying away from sensitive and/or controversial issues. Nonetheless, they appreciated being supported with training and resources to be able to do this well.

RSA4 offered teachers a dedicated twilight teacher training session at the start of the project. The training was led by Young Citizens who were chosen for their expertise in SMSC education, and how this links to youth social action. Part of the training specifically focused on how to approach sensitive and/or controversial issues in the classroom, and involved role playing and case study examples to help build teachers' confidence.

Chapter 5

**Practical
guidance for
teachers on
facilitating
high-quality
youth social
action**

5

Practical guidance for teachers on facilitating high-quality youth social action

In order to support these active ingredients, we've drawn up some practical guidance for teachers on how to facilitate high-quality youth social action:

Give pupils agency

Allow pupils to lead, shape, and own their youth social action project.

- Facilitate a discussion with pupils about the things they see in their community that they don't like; ask them why they feel this way and what they can do about it.
- Some pupils might need additional help to understand what is meant by a social issue. You may find it helpful to provide examples from pictures, newspaper stories, and video clips. If using examples, make it clear that pupils can choose issues outside of the examples.
- Introduce pupils to different forms of youth social action, such as fundraising, campaigning, and volunteering. Encourage them to consider what actions might be most impactful for their chosen issue.
- Lead pupils through a democratic decision-making process about their chosen issues/actions, such as a voting system.

Explore the issue in full

Provide plenty of learning opportunities for pupils to better understand their chosen social issue.

- Organisations such as [Young Citizens](#), [Kids Against Plastic](#), and [WE Schools](#) have ready-made resources that can help to introduce social issues in an age-appropriate way.
- Use this as an opportunity to learn about different research methodologies with pupils, for e.g., surveys, interviews, and online research.
- Ask tough questions: What are the root causes of the problem? What are the effects? Who is affected and who is already trying to help?
- Co-create a community code with pupils that sets out ways to respectfully discuss potentially sensitive issues, and how to work together as a team so that all pupils feel safe and supported when sharing their ideas, feelings, and experiences.

Pupils at St Oswald's CE Primary found and contacted a local charity via online research. Through that contact, they learnt about hidden homelessness, such as sofa surfing and its prevalence in their local community. This inspired them to organise fundraising to create 'kindness bags' with donated essential hygiene items.

Get to know your community allies

Your local community is a great resource for you to draw upon to enhance the quality of youth social action.

- When playing a facilitating role, you are not expected to be an expert on the social issue and/or run the youth social action project. Your role is to help facilitate connections between pupils and experts and others who can offer support.
- Get your school community on board with the project and encourage pupils to think about allies beyond the school gate.
- Invite relevant local organisations and/or individuals who can share their perspectives about the social issue and the different ways to address it. In our experience, projects that involve the wider community have the greatest impact.

With the support of community allies, Oldbury Park RSA Academy were able to expand the scale and scope of their pupils' ambitions. Initially, pupils wrote to local garden centres to ask for donations of supplies for their nature garden and bee hotels. Building on pupils' interest to create a home for nature, local businesses have since offered to help pupils to design a pond where frogs spawn and water-insects live, and they will be doing this work over the next academic year.

Make it relevant to your school

Embed youth social action within your school and practice.

- Take a step back and look at what already exists and ask yourself where might youth social action enhance your practice. For example, if your school has a focus on oracy or drama-based inquiry, consider how you could use this in the project.
- If you have existing pupil-led groups like eco-councils or student councils, these can be useful starting points for the project.
- Think about how you could better link existing avenues for youth social action to aspects of the high-quality principles. For example, if you have a regular harvest festival where pupils are encouraged to donate food, could this social action be more youth-led by consulting with pupils if they have other ideas about how they would like to support the foodbank? Could you be more socially impactful by inviting a food bank staff member to talk about the issue of food poverty to better understand the impact of their actions?

Link to your curriculum

Adapt your scheme of work to incorporate the chosen social issue across different subjects.

- Consider where you can build your project into existing schemes of work, such as using literacy lessons to write a letter to a local councillor or read a book on the social issue. [The Empathy Library](#) has a great selection of books on social issues to help build empathy in pupils.
- Explore links to the PSHE/SMSC education curriculum, including social justice and wellbeing. Some RSA4 schools made successful links to the [Thrive approach](#) and [Philosophy for Children](#) through their projects.

To help learn about homelessness in an age-appropriate way, teachers at Woodrow First School used the children's book 'Way Home,' which tells the story of a young boy who becomes homeless. By linking to drama and literacy, pupils explored the book's themes and gained insight into how it might feel to become homeless from the first-person perspective of the main character. Pupils undertook creative writing pieces based on their own version of the story if it were to take place in their community.

At Sutton Park Primary RSA Academy, the class teacher supported pupils to find out more about people's attitudes towards recycling through a maths lesson. Pupils conducted surveys and learnt how to analyse them by creating different types of graphs. This provided pupils with an opportunity to see how their learning relates to the real-world and how to conduct primary research on their chosen issue to better inform their project.

Agree milestones for reflection

Create a sense of commitment and accountability by agreeing on milestones, as well as what good would look like at each stage.

- When pupils reach these milestones, encourage reflection on what went well, what could have gone better, and what have they learnt that could help them achieve the next milestone.
- Organise awards and recognition, which help to create a school culture where youth social action is valued as much as other forms of achievement and learning.
- Where possible, consider how pupils can understand the impact of their actions on the community. This might include a meeting with the foodbank staff to find out how many families benefitted from pupils' donations or a survey to find out how the care homes' residents felt receiving the happiness cards.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6 Conclusions

Through this action-research, we endeavoured to find out what is possible when primary schools engage with high-quality youth social action.

We found that primary-age pupils are capable of taking on an active role as young citizens in our communities. Not only do they have clear ideas about the issues they care about, but they also understand how they can make a difference. Our research reinforces existing evidence that pupils derive direct benefits from participating in youth social action, including developing leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills, as well as a sense of social responsibility, civic self-efficacy, with signs of developing a habit of service.

We have seen teachers going to great lengths to enable pupils to reap the most of these benefits. There are of course a number of practical and ethical challenges to this work, however all of the schools that participated in RSA4 have shown that there is a way around if you remain committed. This report is a celebration of their efforts and achievements, and we hope that with the practical guidance, it inspires more teachers to lead youth social action in their own settings, empowering pupils to be socially responsible citizens of now.

Schools can play a role in empowering children and young people to be ‘citizens of now’ through high-quality youth social action.

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