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Make it authentic: Teacher experiences of youth social action in primary schools

REPORT

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JULY 2023

We would like to thank the Pears #iwill Fund for their generous support of this report and all our work on youth social action over the past few years. The Pears #iwill Fund is created by Pears Foundation, and match funded by the #iwill Fund, a £66m joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities.

We are especially grateful to all the schools who took part in the project: Barrowford Primary School, Kenyngton Manor Primary School, Prescot Primary School, Queensmead Primary Academy, St Bernard's RC Primary School, St Oswald's CE Primary School, University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS), Wilsden Primary School, Yeadon Junior School, plus ASSET Education Multi-Academy Trust. This report was only possible because of the amazing youth social action work that pupils and staff across all these schools have been doing on their own terms. We would like to thank all the teachers and staff who were generous enough to share their time and expertise: Carole Jones, Clare Flintoff FRSA, Eleanor Trefusis, Emily Reid, Georgina Hall, Helen Dearing, James Biddulph FRSA, Jean-Michel Ballay, Karl Cross, Lee Herdman, Liz Latham, Lucy Withams, Luke Rolls, Sian Bentley, Simon Ingall. And a special thanks to every pupil who also took part and shared their inspiring youth social action work with us.

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About the RSA

We are the RSA. The royal society for arts, manufactures and commerce. Where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions. We're committed to a world where everyone can fulfil their potential and contribute to more resilient, rebalanced, and regenerative futures.

The RSA has been at the forefront of significant social impact for over 260 years. Our research and innovation work has changed the hearts and minds of generations of people. Central to all our work are our mission-aligned Fellows; a global network of innovators and changemakers who work collectively to enable people, places and the planet to flourish in harmony.

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Our vision

A world where everyone can fulfil their potential and contribute to more resilient, rebalanced, and regenerative futures.

How we deliver our work

We do this by uniting people and ideas in collective action to unlock opportunities to regenerate our world.

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About our partners

Proudly supporting youth social action



Department for Culture, Media & Sport



Pears Foundation

The Pears #iwill Fund is created by Pears Foundation, and match funded by the #iwill Fund, a £66m joint investment from the National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities. The #iwill Fund supports

the aims of the #iwill Movement - to make involvement in social action a part of life for young people, by recognising the benefit for both young people and their communities. By bringing together funders from across different sectors, the #iwill Fund is taking a collaborative approach to embedding meaningful social action into the lives of young people.

Context and aims

This report is a product of the RSA and Pears Foundation's third benefit enquiry into primary school educators' experiences of youth social action. We know that active citizenship has positive effects on young people and the communities they work in. However, very little has been done to explore how educators themselves benefit from participating alongside their pupils, especially since they are often key to facilitating these opportunities.

This project has sought to do three things:



These questions were explored through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, encompassing one-to-one interviews with teachers, workshops and a large-scale Teacher Tapp survey.

Content and structure

The report is split into two halves. In the first, we explore the question of educator experience, placing this within the context of the wider pressures affecting the education system in England. The second half consists of 10 case studies focusing on individual schools that are currently facilitating youth social action projects in their many forms. We showcase the

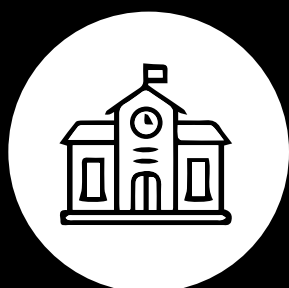
diversity of experience while drawing out practical advice. Rather than a prescriptive 'how to', the case studies instead highlight the knowledge and practice which educators found useful at their schools.

By giving an in-depth, experiential teacher's-eye view, we hope to help educators reflect on and navigate their own context.

Intended audiences



For **educators** who are curious about youth social action and want to know how they might embed socially conscious learning within their own school context. The case studies are the most relevant part here, being designed to give a narrative overview of how youth social action became a feature at individual schools, the things that teachers found helpful in embedding it, and how it affected teachers in the process.



For **school leaders** who are interested in what the benefits of youth social action might be for their pupils, teachers and wider school culture. The first half of the report and the 'What the case studies tell us' section in particular serve to highlight this.



For **policymakers** interested in seeing how youth social action can have a positive impact *in conjunction* with traditional academic education, and to understand the work that many schools are already doing themselves. We suggest that participating in experiential civic learning can have a positive impact on teachers, as well as pupils and communities, but that they need more support to make good on this.

Key insights from the report

We suggest that doing youth social action at primary school level can have a positive effect on educators, in addition to pupils and communities. We call this the triple benefit of youth social action. We also outline eight key findings for how educators are embedding youth social action in their practice.

- 1**
Schools are doing youth social action without knowing it
- 2**
Youth social action projects can start small and scale up
- 3**
Levels of pupil participation can develop over time
- 4**
External connections and partnerships are powerful
- 5**
Curriculum connections are even more powerful
- 6**
Authenticity is key
- 7**
Schools are part of the community
- 8**
Senior leadership team support is vital for embedding youth social action

The benefits of enabling and supporting youth social action are many and varied. My first action as a headteacher was to tell the children, staff and families, that I wanted us to be known as a 'listening school'. This was an open invitation to all for us to build active citizenship and to encourage engagement with school-based, community-based and national events in support of others.

The benefits of this are huge. It signalled that as a community through our collective endeavour we could achieve great things - the underlying message of hope and positivity buoyed us all. At the time the school was in special measures, so looking, not only at our own problems, but being open and generous beyond the school was also important.

The schools in these 10 case studies have embraced the energy that comes with a sense of group purpose and have experienced how much this matters to everyone. Building a learning environment that is infused with trust and co-agency provides the very best foundations for lifelong learning. Working alongside young people to support and enable their capacity for development and change is worthwhile, but witnessing the flourishing of children as they engage with this is priceless.

Dame Alison Peacock
Chief executive
Chartered College of Teaching

Previous work by the RSA has clearly established the benefits – for pupils and for communities – of increased youth social action as part of learning. This report looks at these benefits in greater detail, courtesy of 10 case studies. It does so through the lens of the opportunities and challenges facing educators when initiating and implementing youth social action.

The educators' perspective is a crucial one if these programmes are to succeed at scale. Many schools and their teaching staff are facing increasing pressures on their time, finances and resources. Simply adding to an already congested curriculum risks worthwhile initiatives getting lost, particularly among schools facing the most acute pressures whose pupils might benefit most.

The evidence in this report shows that youth social action need not absorb large amounts of resource. It can be put in place simply and quickly in ways which still harvest the full benefits in improved confidence, problem solving, and agency. I hope the experience set out in this and the accompanying reports makes clear not only that youth social action can be a triple win – for pupils, communities and educators – but that it is already happening in practice and with success. The task now is to achieve system-wide scale so that every pupil can reap the benefits.

Andy Haldane
Chief executive
The RSA

Chapter 1

Introduction

Project overview

Teachers know what their pupils are capable of. They see them daily, they hear their hopes and dreams, they witness them develop as learners and as young people. They also know that, if given the chance, children can do amazing things. This is the heart of youth social action, where pupils engage in activities designed to drive positive social change in their community, within the school walls and beyond.

Over the past few years, the RSA's work has highlighted the importance of young people participating in youth social action. In our Citizens of now¹ report, we worked alongside pupils and teachers to deliver youth social action projects in schools, showing that active citizenship can develop primary school pupils' sense of agency, as well as a range of important transferable skills. By participating in youth social action, we found that pupils reported improved confidence, problem solving, and teamwork, not to mention feeling more empowered and empathetic towards others in their communities.

And in Teenagency,² we found that young people are committed to social action and making the world a better place, even if the opportunities aren't always available to them.

One important aspect of Citizens of now was the role educators played in facilitating youth social action and guiding young people in their learning and social impact goals. This is especially true of educators at primary level, who are supporting very young pupils through potentially challenging projects. Citizens of now highlighted how primary educators are crucial for making social action projects a success, and for embedding a culture of pupil participation throughout their schools.

This report extends our work in Citizens of now to take a closer look at educators' experience of leading youth social action. We especially wanted to draw on the everyday experiences of educators, with a view to representing their knowledge and practical advice for other educators who might want to facilitate youth social action, but don't know where to start.

1 Tejani, M and Breeze, H (2021) Citizens of now: high-quality youth social action in primary schools [PDF]. Available at: www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2021/website-citizens-of-now-rgb.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: www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/teenagency.pdf.

Introduction

To this end, we posed three broad aims:

1

To understand how youth social action is experienced by teachers to help inform the wider picture of primary youth social action.

We felt it was important to understand how teachers engage with youth social action on the ground, especially given the wider pressures felt in the education system. We know that youth social action benefits young people and communities (*the double benefit*), but we wanted to examine how educators might also benefit.³

2

To encourage more schools to become involved in youth social action via demonstrating the broad benefits of engagement.

We have plenty of evidence that engaging in youth social action benefits all sorts of important, lifelong skills.⁴ Sharing positive stories about the amazing work schools are doing can be a catalyst to that.

3

To enable more educators to implement youth social action that benefits teachers, pupils and communities, and to identify practical forms of support and guidance.

Any co-curricular activity can take up time and resources in order to make it a success. We want to highlight practical, straightforward bits of advice directly from teachers themselves.

The core of this report is a series of case studies that centre on the experiences of teachers delivering youth social action in their primary schools. Through a combination of in-depth teacher interviews, school visits, and a workshop, the aim has been to give voice to educators and the pupils they work alongside. In doing so, we show the realities of youth social action in English primary schools while highlighting key bits of learning that made the projects tick.

³ Arthur, J, Harrison, T, Taylor-Collins, E, Moller, F (2017) A Habit of Service: The Factors that sustain Service in Young People. The Jubilee Centre & University of Birmingham [PDF]. Available at: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/A_Habit_of_Service.pdf.

⁴ Tejani, M and Breeze, H (2021) Op cit.

What's in this report

Our work shows that youth social action is happening every day in schools around the country and that educators are going the extra mile to provide civic learning opportunities for their pupils.

Teaching is rarely as neat and tidy as exemplar lesson plans or reports make out, and youth social action work is no different. Despite numerous challenges, the educators in this report are managing to thread youth social action into the school day, into the curriculum, and ultimately into the heart of their communities. Pupils are having the opportunity to make a difference and lead social change in a meaningful way.

This report is split into **two sections**, both of which can be engaged with independently of the other.

In the first, we outline the importance of exploring the benefits of youth social action in the context of a challenging time for schools and teachers. Drawing on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, we outline the potential benefits to teachers in doing youth social action alongside their pupils, touching on issues of autonomy, satisfaction, and wellbeing. We go on to look at some of the perceived challenges around youth social action before outlining some of the key takeaways from our more detailed case studies stemming from in-depth interviews with educators on the front line.

The second section consists of our case studies. Each of these provides a deep dive into the experience of doing youth social action from the point of view of the educators. These case studies are designed to be inspirational accounts that draw directly from educators themselves: the tone is more personal and, where possible, we quote directly from them. Rather than providing a prescriptive 'how to' for youth social action, we hope that the case studies instead provide a more realistic experience of how co-curricular activity might go in practice. We draw out key learnings and nuggets of wisdom from educators as experts in their own right, and throughout we provide teaching 'sparks' that are drawn from experience. These encompass ideas for youth social action activities, how to reach out to partners, and bits of pedagogical reading that educators found useful.

We hope these case studies provide a catalyst for realising the possibilities of youth social action. It doesn't need to be something labour intensive or elaborate. Youth social action is happening in so many ways already, and where educators might not even realise it. At a time when the profession is under increasing pressure, we want to show the opportunities inherent in youth social action, a glimpse of a different way of doing learning, and another world of possibility for our young people.

What we did

The research phase of the project was designed to address our key aims by drawing on a wide range of experiences, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

- 1** An initial Teacher Tapp survey exploring over 2,000 primary school teachers' experience of youth social action. This took place on 6 and 7 October 2022.
- 2** A structured workshop with six teachers leading youth social action within their schools from around England to understand how this is done at their schools. The workshop provided a space for teachers to reflect on their experience, their motivations for pursuing youth social action, and what support needed to be in place to let it take root.
- 3** Case studies, which were comprised of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers at 10 schools, ranging from classroom teachers to a chief executive of a multi-academy trust. This number also included follow-up conversations with six of the teachers who participated in the workshop. This was followed up by in-person visits to four of the schools and further semi-structured interviews with both pupils and teachers.

Teachers and schools for the workshop and case studies were selected through a combination of background research, youth social action partner outreach, and an open call out via the RSA's website and other platforms.⁵ All the schools we contacted were already engaged in youth social action to some degree.

All learnings in the report stem directly from what teachers and pupils have told us as experts in their own right. Through positive narratives of change at individual schools, we hope that readers will be inspired to take their own youth social action projects forward.

This report is largely informed by the **10 case studies, focusing on each of our partner schools and drawing directly on teacher voice wherever possible.**

⁵ Partners included: The Chartered College of Teaching, #will, Kitemark and schools that participated in RSA4/Citizens of now.⁴ Tejani, M and Breeze, H (2021) Op cit.

Why now?

It's better to know about the world around you. It's not just what's going on with you.

Year 6 pupil

As it stands, there are structural barriers to participating in youth social action in English schools. While the national curriculum framework states that its purpose is to provide pupils with “the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens”, there is no statutory citizenship education before key stage 3.⁶ As Citizens of now and the present case studies show, youth social action works best when it can be tied into curriculum learning, which requires time and resources that teachers don't always have.

This limitation contrasts with a UK policy landscape that is beginning to recognise the importance of active citizenship and learning with a global perspective. The Times Education Commission report, which has called for a reset of education in England, highlights the importance of building “happy confident citizens with an understanding of themselves and an empathy for others”, as well as a wider understanding of the world and their place

within it.⁷ The new Curriculum for Wales, which took effect from autumn 2022, also embeds preparing young people for ‘active citizenship’ as one of its key motivations.⁸ The purpose of the curriculum includes supporting young people to be “ethical, informed citizens... [who] are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world”. This corresponds with a wider interest across the third sector in youth social action, with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation recently publishing a joint vision on the future of youth-led changemaking.⁹ On an international level, the Open Schooling movement is placing future citizenship and a reconsideration of learning boundaries at the heart of its purpose.¹⁰

In the academic world, there have also been calls to centre global citizenship education skills in all teachers undergoing initial training.¹¹ There is evidence that teachers see teaching civic engagement as part of their responsibilities and that schools themselves should encourage active citizenship.¹² The University of Kent's Centre for Philanthropy is currently undergoing a major piece of research on philanthropic and citizenship education in English primary schools in conjunction with the Economic and Social Research Council.¹³

6 The National Curriculum in England: Framework document (2014) [PDF]. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381344/Master_final_national_curriculum_28_Nov.pdf

7 Times Education Commission (2022) [PDF]. Available at: nuk-tnl-editorial-prod-staticassets.s3.amazonaws.com/2022/education-commission/Times%20Education%20Commission%20final%20report.pdf.

8 Curriculum for Wales [online]. Available at: hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/introduction/ [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

9 Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (2022) Youth-led Change: Vision for the Future of Youth-led Changemaking and Activism [PDF]. Available at: www.phf.org.uk/publications/vision-for-the-future-of-youth-led-changemaking-and-activism/.

10 Make It Open (2021) [online]. Available at: makeitopen.eu/wp-content/uploads/Open-Schooling-Information-Packs.pdf [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

11 Witt, A (2022) Postpandemic futures of Global Citizenship Education for preservice teachers: Challenges and possibilities. Prospects [PDF]. Available at link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-022-09599-5 [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

12 Peterson, A, Durrant, I, Bentley, B (2015) ‘Student teachers’ perceptions of their role as civic educators: evidence from a large higher education institution in England’, *British Educational Research Journal* 41: 343–64 [PDF]. Available: bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3141 [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

13 Body, A, Lau, E, Cameron, L, Cunliffe, J (2023) Educating for Social Good, Part 1: Mapping children's active civic learning in England. University of Kent [PDF]. Available at: <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/99554/>.

Introduction

The first part of this research, *Educating for Public Good: Part I*, echoes that educators see youth social action as a priority, but also that there are time and financial constraints to being able to prioritise civic learning. Clearly there is an appetite for youth social action in schools and an understanding of the benefits it can bring pupils.

This systems-level interest in the purpose of education, and the role active citizenship plays within that, coincides with a period of crisis for teaching in England.¹⁴ As of April 2023, the National Education Union (NEU) reports that up to 41 percent of its members plan to leave teaching within the next five years.¹⁵ While workload remains by far the biggest issue according to the NEU, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has found that autonomy also plays a major role in job satisfaction, and by extension retention rates.¹⁶ While autonomy over professional development had the biggest positive effect on satisfaction and retention, autonomy over preparing and planning lessons/schemes of work, the use of time in the classroom and what teaching methods are used all have an impact.

There is some reason to believe that the autonomy and creativity that youth social action can afford may positively impact on teacher satisfaction. Our case studies show what is possible when educators have the time, support, and resources to do youth social action alongside their pupils. They also demonstrate that educators themselves are potentially benefitting from facilitating social action projects. By opening space for autonomy and creativity, there is reason to believe that youth social action can positively impact teacher satisfaction, and potentially be part of a way out of the current crisis.

¹⁴ Long, R and Danechi, S (2022) Teacher recruitment and retention in England. House of Commons Library [PDF]. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7222/CBP-7222.pdf.

¹⁵ NEU (2023) State of education: recruitment and retention [online]. Available at: neu.org.uk/press-releases/state-education-recruitment-and-retention [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

¹⁶ Worth, J and van den Brande, J (2020) Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention? NFER [PDF]. Available at: www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3874/teacher_autonomy_how_does_it_relate_to_job_satisfaction_and_retention.pdf [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

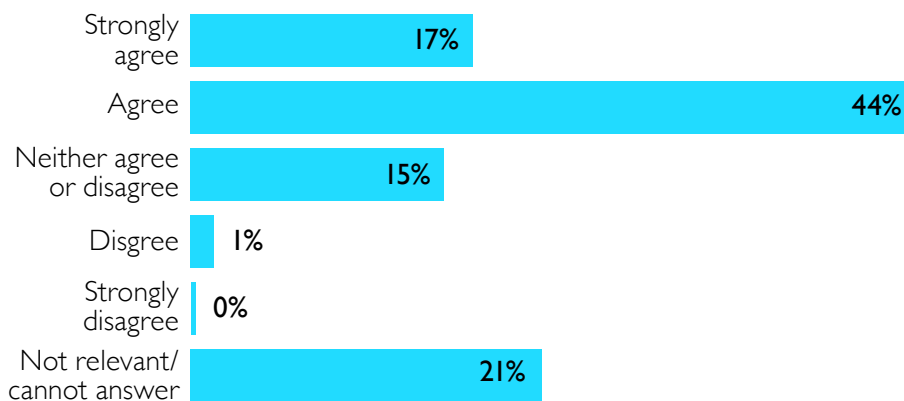
Chapter 2

Teacher experience of youth social action

Teacher experience of youth social action

Figure 1: Over 60 percent of educators agree that teaching and non-teaching staff benefit from supporting youth social action

“Teaching an non-teaching staff experience benefits alongside pupils and communities when supporting youth social action”



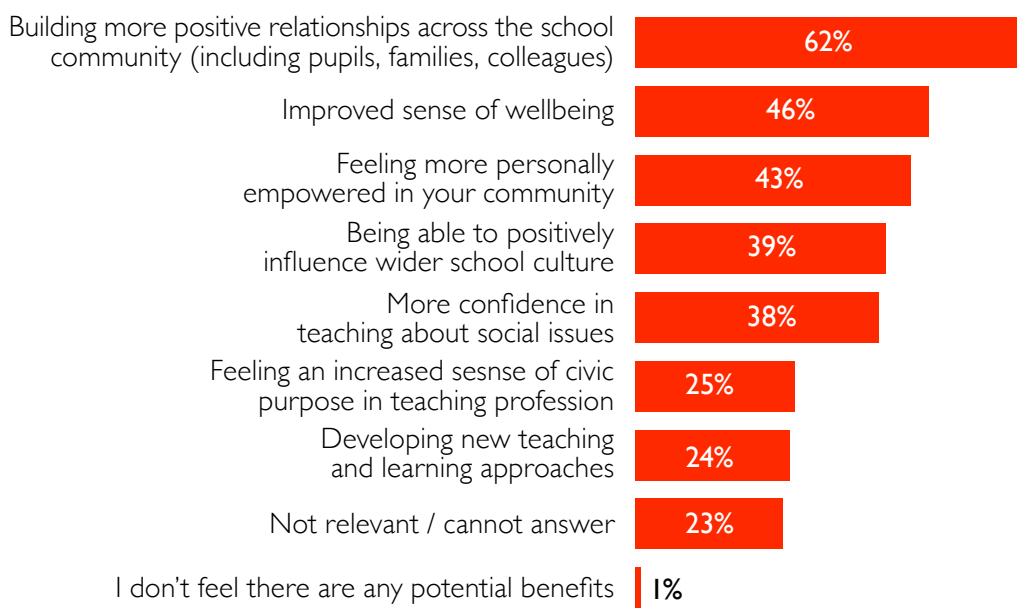
Question answered by 2,133 teachers on 7 October 2022
(results weighted to reflect national teacher and school demographics)

When asked about what the **potential benefits** might be, 62 percent of respondents thought that youth social action would help them to build more positive relationships across the school community. Other popular responses to our question also reinforced this, with 43 percent suggesting that they themselves would feel more empowered in their community

and 39 percent saying they thought youth social action would be a positive for school culture. At 46 percent, the second-most popular response suggested that teachers felt participating in youth social action would contribute to improved wellbeing. The link between strong community relationships and improved wellbeing is also reflected in academic literature.²¹

Figure 2: 62 percent of educators think youth social action can help to build positive community-wide relationships

What might be the benefits for educators when supporting youth social action with pupils and communities? (select up to three responses)



21 Stewart, K and Townley, G (2020) How Far Have we Come? An Integrative Review of the Current Literature on Sense of Community and Well-being.

American Journal of Community Psychology 66: 166–89 [PDF]. Available at: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ajcp.12456.


Teacher experience of youth social action

These findings were shared with educators in our follow-up workshop, who highlighted other benefits that weren't included in the survey:

- Participants discussed that youth social action made them reconsider the constraints of the curriculum and how 'achievement' can be demonstrated in a variety of different ways beyond traditional assessment.
- They also talked about their experience of getting a better understanding of both their own and their pupils' agency as learners. Teaching was seen as a fluid, two-way process between educators and pupils, cutting through heated debates around whether teacher-led or pupil-led learning is 'better'.
- Participants also discussed coming to see the importance of the civic aspect of their profession and how they can nurture citizenship values in young people.


Our later one-to-one interviews with educators built on some of the data points from the Teacher Tapp survey, as well as revealing some different potential benefits. Some of these benefits are particular to individual experience, but there are some emergent themes:

- Educators shared that staff felt energised when doing youth social action, allowing them to tap into their passions and take risks with teaching that might not be possible in the context of the normal school day. Academic studies indicate that creative freedom in the classroom aligns with educator wellbeing, and this is also reflected in some of our case studies.²² For a couple of teachers, youth social action had led to professional development opportunities, such as studying for a postgraduate diploma and taking the lead on the Forest School initiative.

 We found that the staff were just buzzing to come into school, were passionate about what they were doing.

*Emily, SLT member,
St Bernard's Primary School*

- Some educators also mentioned the opportunity to learn alongside pupils, rather than simply imparting knowledge. Many of the topics that youth social action raised weren't necessarily that familiar to the educators themselves, so it gave educators the opportunity to learn about interesting topics of social justice and bring them to their pupils.

 We're finding this out together and how we're going to make this impact together.

*Lisa, SLT member,
Prescot Primary School*

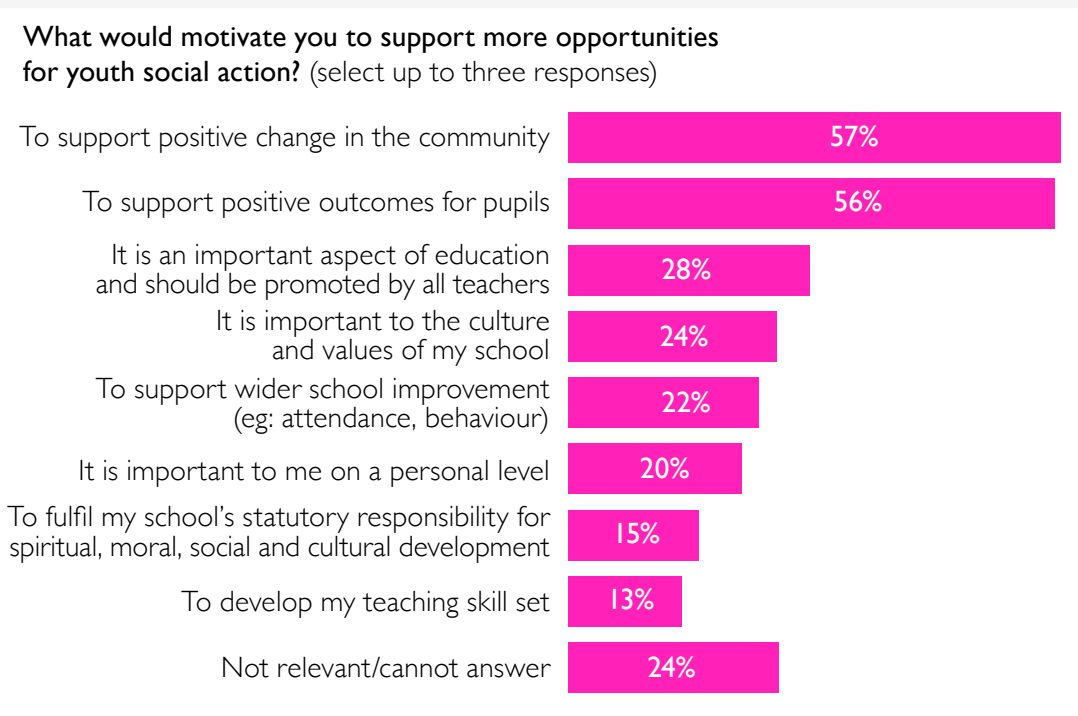
- In alignment with the survey findings, connecting with the community was an emergent theme in each of the case studies presented here, whether it's building connections with parents, local partners, or their own pupils.
- Educators also mentioned a number of other potential benefits, which can be explored in the 'teacher experience' section of each individual case study.

22 Stoloff, S, Boulanger, M, Lavallée, É, Glaude-Roy, J (2020) Teachers' Indicators Used to Describe Professional Well-Being. Journal of Education and Learning 9(1): 16–29. Available: files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1241009.pdf.

Motivations and challenges to pursuing youth social action

Our Teacher Tapp results show that more than half of survey respondents indicated they would be motivated to engage in youth social action by a desire to support positive outcomes for their community and their pupils. The perceived potential for the double benefit for pupils and communities aligns well with our findings from our Citizens of now work.²³

Figure 3: Youth social action motivates educators to support positive community change and better outcomes for pupils



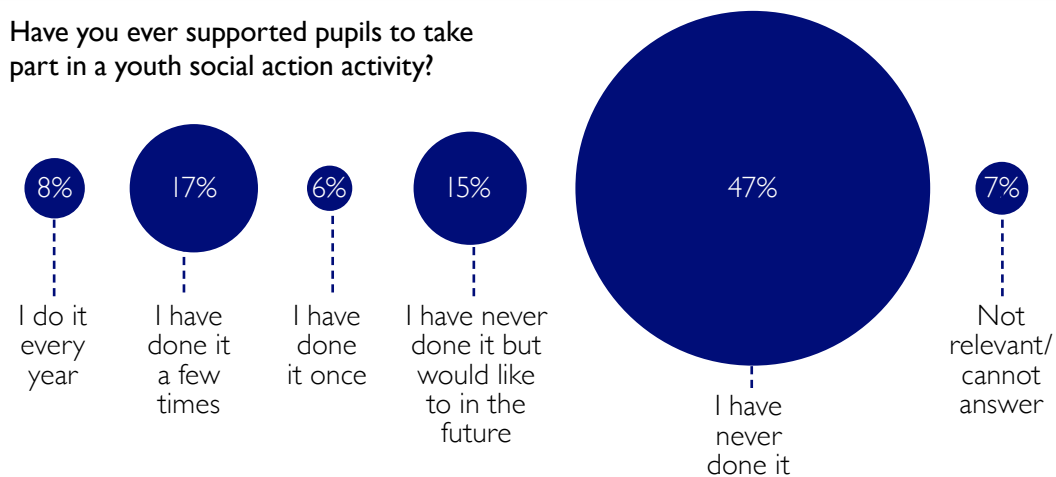
Despite the majority of respondents perceiving potential positive benefits for themselves, their pupils, and their communities, **nearly half had never facilitated youth social action**. Only 23 percent said they had done youth social action with their pupils at least once in their career; and 8 percent reported doing youth social action each year.

²³ Tejani, M and Breeze, H (2021) Op cit

Teacher experience of youth social action

Figure 4: Almost half of educators have not supported youth social action

Have you ever supported pupils to take part in a youth social action activity?

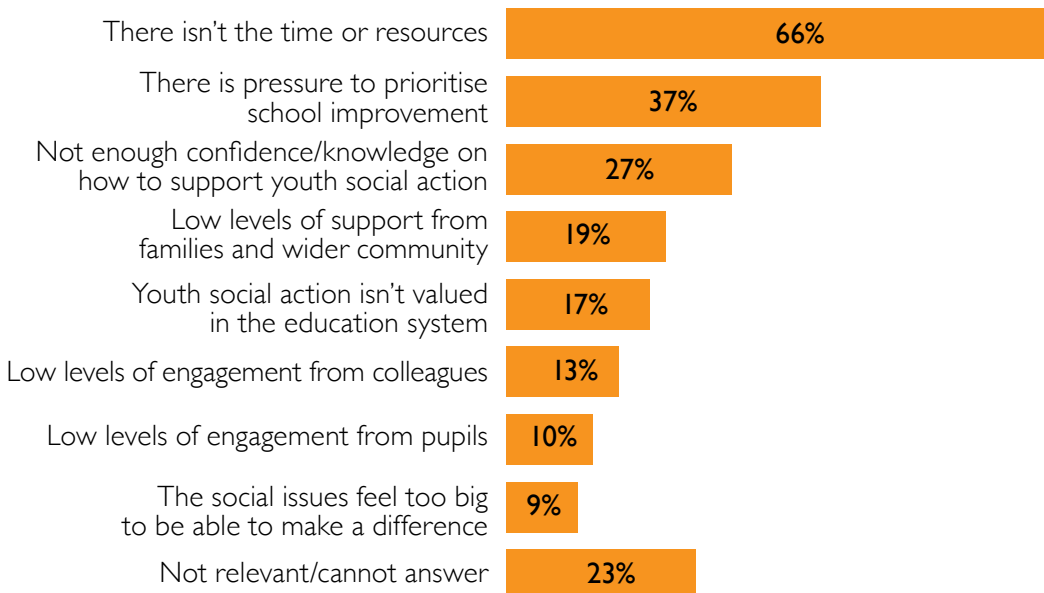


Question answered by 2,198 teachers on 6 October 2022
(results weighted to reflect national teacher and school demographics)

We also asked about potential barriers and found that lack of time and resources were identified as the biggest barriers to facilitating youth social action for two out of three respondents.

Figure 5: Educators identify a lack of time and resources as the biggest barrier to supporting youth social action

What might hinder your motivation for supporting youth social action?



Question answered by 2,121 teachers on 06/10/2022
(results weighted to reflect national teacher and school demographics)

Despite the range of challenges, our case studies show that some schools are managing to find the time and resources to make youth social action part of their offer to pupils, as well as overcome other

barriers. Using qualitative data from our interviews and workshop, the next section draws out some of the ways in which educators have been able to overcome some of these barriers.

What the case studies tell us

“ Youth social action is not an add on, it's what we do.”

Karl, SLT member,
Barrowford School

1

Schools are doing youth social action without knowing it

Our case studies show that schools are already doing a huge amount that comes under the umbrella of youth social action.

- Schools are doing activities that fall under the youth social action banner without necessarily being recognised as such. As one teacher at our workshop put it, “**We began a long time ago with youth social action but didn't know it was youth social action**”.
- Activities like community exhibitions (see **Prescot, Barrowford**), fundraising for local refugee charities (see the **University of Cambridge Primary School**), and recycling (**Queensmead, Wilsden**) are all the kinds of projects that count as youth social action that schools might already be engaged in. Identifying what schools are doing could provide a foundation to start building in things like greater participation.
- Sometimes activities are so embedded in what the school does that they're no longer recognised as social action. At **St Bernard's**, pupils reported building and maintaining 'bug hotels' within the school grounds, but no one knew who had started them or how long they had been going.
- If the school is already engaged in youth social action, then **shout about it**. Many of the schools mentioned throughout the report have sections on their websites devoted to the various co-curricular projects their pupils are doing. **Queensmead** even reported that one class teacher joined because they'd noticed the school was part of Forest Schools. They subsequently became the lead for the initiative.

2

Youth social action projects can start small and scale up

Closely related to the previous point is the fact that **youth social action doesn't have to be elaborate or large-scale to offer a meaningful experience for pupils**. As Lee Jerome puts it, 'small is beautiful'.²⁴

- Modest youth social action that is **embedded into other school activities can save time while still having impact**. Running a school assembly to raise awareness about a recycling (see **Queensmead**) or giving a presentation to parents to raise awareness about an issue (see **Prescot, Barrowford**) also engages pupils in civic learning.
- Smaller projects can also be a learning space for both pupils and educators to gain experience, and to think about how to scale to more ambitious projects later. Can an assembly presentation featuring song and dance be scaled to a full-blown community flash mob like at **St Bernard's**?
- **Kenyngton Manor** identified their annual Mental Health Awareness Week as the perfect way to embed a day of youth social action—and accepted that things might not go smoothly the first time around.

3

Levels of pupil participation can develop over time

Starting projects in a more facilitated way and then **growing participation once pupils and staff gain confidence** is a legitimate way of developing youth social action.

- At **Prescot**, staff chose youth social action topics before going on to give pupils a vote on what they did.
- The act of participating in—or leading on—a youth social action project is a learning process in itself. Let pupils make mistakes, but be on hand to ask questions, guide learning, and intervene if need be.
- Participation can be embedded culturally at the whole-school level through school councils like at **Kenyngton Manor** or the **University of Cambridge Primary School**, but these need to be accountable and transparent. Pupil voice can't just be heard, it has to be incorporated into decisions that affect them.

²⁴ Jerome, L (2006) Critical citizenship experiences? Working with trainee teachers to facilitate active citizenship in schools. *Teacher Development* 10(3): 313–29 [PDF]. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13664530600921858 [Accessed: 16 March 2023].

4

External connections and partnerships are powerful

Linking up with schools and external partners can help **pool knowledge and catalyse youth social action**.

- Prescott took inspiration from **St Bernard's** work with Chester Zoo, but given local circumstances and distance from Chester, they were able to develop their youth social action in their own distinct way.
- As part of the Linking Network, **Queensmead** and **Wilsden** have been connected to other schools in their local area. At Queensmead, pupils and teachers were linked to another school in Leicester to help

pupils explore diversity, equality, and community. Teachers also benefitted from CPD opportunities.

- At several schools, teachers reached out to external partners to help facilitate youth social action. These partnerships included explicit youth social action organisations like the #iwill Movement (**Yeading**), but also a range of other learning partners who could help foster skills essential to active citizenship. These range from environmental organisations (**Queensmead**) and homeless charities (**Yeading**) to theatre groups (**Prescot**) and oracy specialists (**Barrowford**).

5

Curriculum connections are even more powerful

This was also a key lesson from our Citizens of now report: **making links to the curriculum is a good way of embedding youth social action**.

- At **Barrowford**, making links to the curriculum has been an ongoing process, rather than something that was done instantaneously.
- Throughout the report, teachers have mentioned the links they've been able to make with literacy (**University of Cambridge Primary School**) and science (**Prescot**), but there's no reason why other subjects can't be threaded into youth social action.

- One consistent theme of all the schools featured here is that youth social action projects can provide a good outlet for the arts at a time when arts subjects are under increasing pressure from cuts. Teachers mentioned art, music, dance and creative writing as part of their projects.
- One teacher in the workshop mentioned that having a curriculum that is more adaptable to local school and community context would help to embed youth social action, but this is dependent on the nature of the school in question (ie whether it is an academy or not).

6

Authenticity is key

Making youth social action an **authentic experience** for pupils is something that teachers in our case studies have strived to do.

- Whether it's writing letters to the powerful (**Wilsden, Prescott**), doing small-scale protests within the school (**University of Cambridge Primary School**), or being knowledgeable advocates for good causes (all our schools), these activities can give pupils a sense of agency and a voice.
- 'Authentic' doesn't just mean 'real world' and imagination can be a powerful tool as well, from **St Bernard's** dramatising what it's like

to live through an ecological crisis or the **University of Cambridge Primary School's** use of fiction to engage with difficult topics.

- Authenticity is ultimately about making the issue real and meaningful for pupils—the sort of stuff that teachers think about and do all the time.

“ We could make speeches and protest. We went in front of assembly and did a speech about deforestation. And I think we could do that outside of school and ask people to spread the message. ”

Year 6 pupil

7

Schools are part of the community

Discussion of youth social action tends to centre on the way it can act as a benefit to both pupils and their community — but **it's important to emphasise that 'community' also includes the school itself.**

- Many of the schools showcased here use internal youth social action projects as a steppingstone to more externally facing activities. This provides a space for pupils and teachers to test things out, make mistakes, and exercise their knowledge and skills in a safe environment. Whether it's **University of Cambridge Primary School** pupils organising an internal protest or **Queensmead** pupils looking after their school grounds, these projects encourage civic action and care for one's community.

- If a key element of learning is making material relevant, then the school is probably one of the most relevant places for a young person. Identify what you can connect to good social action — environmental stewardship, whether that's recycling or rewilding, offers a clear way to engage pupils in school life. **Queensmead** also used this as an opportunity to draw on non-teaching expertise among their staff, involving their site manager and his knowledge of gardening and other practical outdoor activities.
- Schools are a safe place for pupils to play out their activism and share their learning with parents and the wider community. Evidence shows that even 'simulated' activism can have a positive impact on encouraging participation.²⁵

25 Jerome, L, Hilal, Y, Hyder, F, Kisby, B (2022) Effective Teaching for Active Citizenship: A systematic evidence review. London: Association for Citizenship

Teaching [PDF]. Available at: www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ACT_Teacher-Briefing-Final_Nov22.pdf [Accessed: 16 March 2023].

8

Senior leadership team support is vital

Having support from figures with the authority to make positive changes within schools is vital to getting youth social action off the ground.

- Educators at our workshop underlined the fact that **support from senior leadership was vital to embedding youth social action in their schools**. Some also mentioned the importance of having buy-in from governors and parents.
- This was echoed by educators in case studies, even where it wasn't mentioned directly — in most case studies, senior leaders were themselves the drivers of youth social action and were active in taking projects forward.
- Senior leadership have the ability to foster school-wide democracy and a culture of pupil participation, which can provide important soil for youth social action to take root in.
- Workshop participants agreed that youth social action needed to be seen as a core part of their work rather than a co-curricular add-on, especially by organisations like Ofsted. One educator mentioned there was some move towards this in recognising the benefits of character education, which is a benefit of youth social action.²⁶

²⁶ Arthur, J, Harrison, T, Taylor, E (2015) Building Character Through Youth Social Action: research report. The Jubilee centre & University of Birmingham [PDF]. Available at: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/Building_Character_Through_Youth_Social_Action.pdf

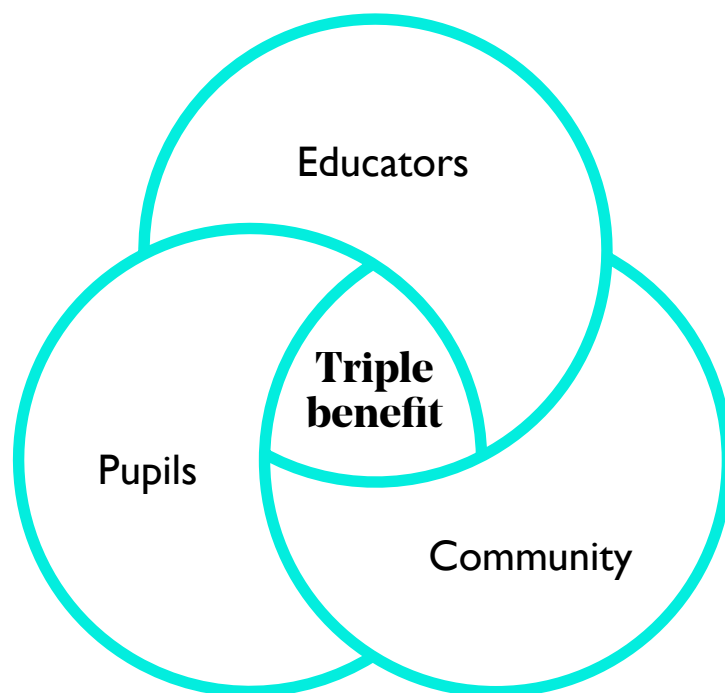
The triple benefit of youth social action

We originally conceived the potential positive impact of teachers facilitating youth social action as a 'third' benefit alongside the double benefit to pupils and schools. Youth social action doesn't impact these three parties individually, however, and from our work with educators we think it's instead important to think in terms of a **triple benefit**.

have been able to build positive relationships and gain an improved sense of wellbeing. Each of these elements are closely interrelated and educators are often the catalyst for building these connections and facilitating positive change for young people. Our case studies illustrate the myriad ways this shows up in context.

While **pupils** benefit from the associated skills and experiential learning that youth social action brings, and **communities** feel the rewards of engaged young people, **educators** have signalled the ways they

Figure 6: The triple benefit of youth social action



Chapter 3

Case studies

The case studies presented here are a product of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with educators from across nine schools and one multi-academy trust. Each of the schools have experience of facilitating youth social action, though all of them are at slightly different stages in their journey. The result is an eclectic mix of case studies which speak to the different challenges and opportunities teachers experienced in delivering youth social action alongside their pupils.

How to read these case studies

The case studies have been designed so that reader can dip into them as they see fit. To this end, they have been organised according to four broad themes that speak to some of the characteristic features of what made youth social action work at that school:

-  **Nurturing strong partnerships:** youth social action at these schools is characterised by partnerships with a range of external organisations, from charities to other schools.
-  **Taking every opportunity:** these schools have multiple and varied youth social action projects ongoing which are characterised by relationships with a number of external partners.
-  **Start small and scale:** the school in this category demonstrates that it is possible to start youth social action at a small scale, with ambitions to scale later.
-  **Social justice values in the classroom:** these schools have a culture that embeds citizenship and social consciousness in a classroom context.

It's worth emphasising that each of our case study schools could fit into any one of these categories, but we classified them based on the strongest theme emerging from their experience.

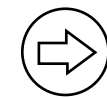
Each case study is broken down into the following key parts:



School context. An overview of the school, including data around percentage of pupils receiving free school meals (FSM) and other key information. All this information is taken from the 'Get information about schools' section of the UK Government website.²⁷



What were the key ingredients? Some headline takeaways on what made youth social action at the school possible.



How did it start? An overview of the school and how youth social action took root there.



What happened? The different youth social activities that teachers facilitated at the school, as well as any knock-on effects such as awards and changes to classroom teaching.



Teacher experience. Key highlights of individual teacher's experience of doing youth social action projects alongside their pupils.

The case studies are designed to be teacher-led, and wherever possible we quote directly from the teachers interviewed. All insights or learnings come directly from their work. While each case study provides a narrative of the school's youth social action journey, we have also annotated where teachers mention potentially useful bits of practical guidance. Some teachers have opted to use pseudonyms rather than their real names for the case studies.

Sparks

We frame this guidance as 'sparks' designed to provide insight into some practicalities around doing youth social action. Rather than prescriptive direction, the sparks can be engaged with, depending on what is most relevant to individual context, needs, and interests.

While sparks can be engaged with individually, they stem directly from the journey of individual teachers, so are best read alongside the narrative of the case studies. However, they can also be read independently, in which case a full list is provided below.



Ideas sparks: these highlight where educators mention reading or teaching that they found particularly useful in helping to implement youth social action.

1. [Thrive: The Purpose of Schools in a Changing World](#) by Valerie Hannon and Amelia Peterson
2. [Bill Lucas, Guy Claxton and Ellen Spencer's Creative Habits of Mind](#)
3. [A Curriculum of Hope](#) by Debra Kidd
4. [Botheredness](#) by Hywel Roberts
5. [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#)
6. [Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert](#)
7. [School values](#)
8. [Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation](#)
9. [Routledge's Unlocking Research](#)
10. [Storytelling for social change](#)



Engaging partners sparks: these highlight where educators worked with external partners to deliver youth social action.

1. [Keeping it Local](#)
2. [Drama for social change](#)
3. [Talking to other schools](#)
4. [UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools](#)
5. [Voice 21](#)
6. [The Linking Network](#)
7. [Intergenerational learning](#)
8. [Eco-Schools](#)
9. [Forest School](#)
10. [#iwill Movement](#)
11. [Challenging topics for youth social action](#)



Activities sparks: these highlight the different youth social action activities that educators mention having done with their pupils, including classroom learning.

1. [Pupil participation](#)
2. [Make it authentic](#)
3. [Making good use of the summer term](#)
4. [School exhibitions](#)
5. [Arts for social change](#)
6. [Action in the community](#)
7. [Encouraging pupil choice](#)
8. [Nature-based learning](#)
9. [School democracy](#)
10. [Identifying key points in the school calendar](#)

²⁷ Get information about schools (2023) UK Department of Education [online]. Available at: www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/.

Case study contents

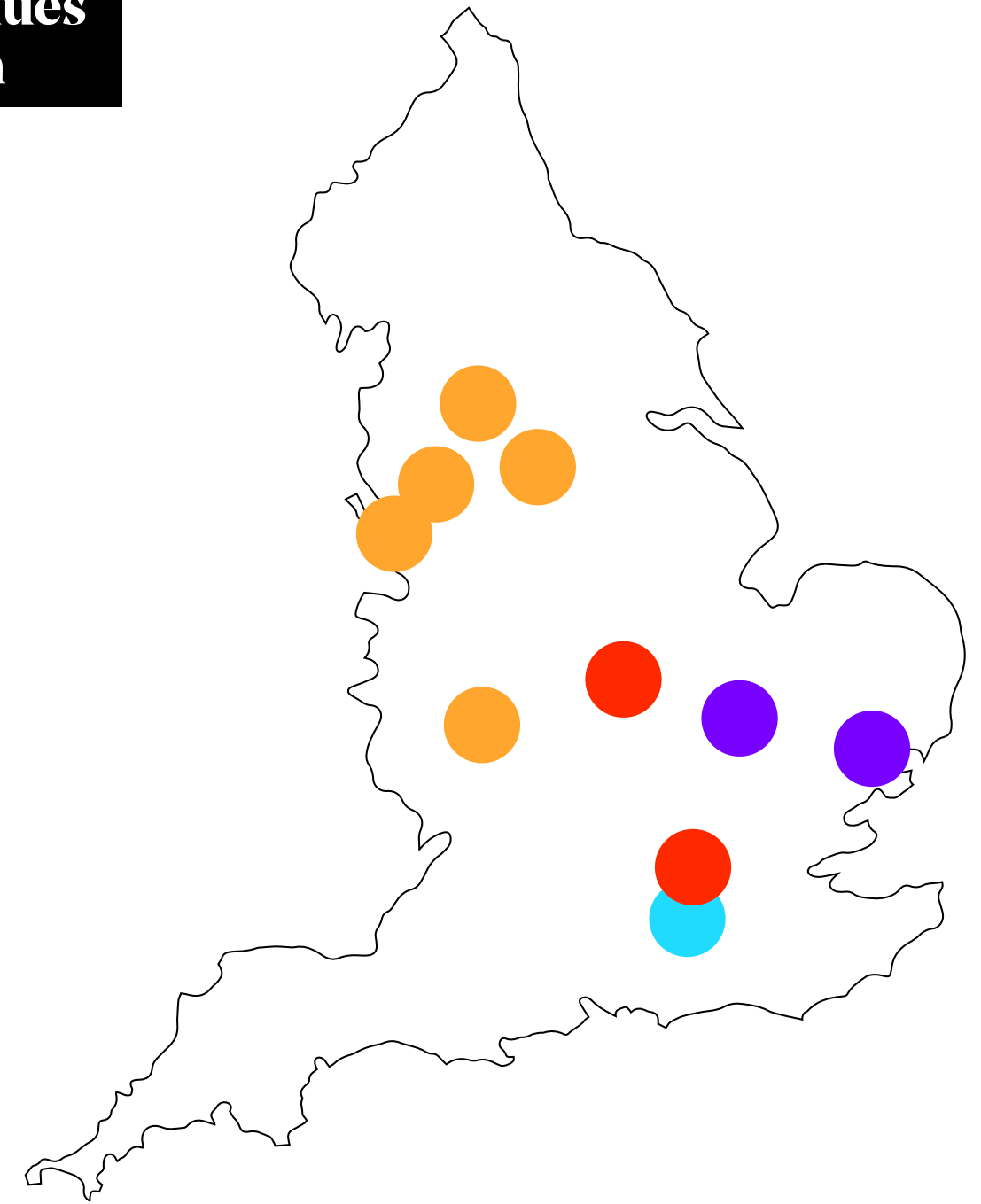
Click to read each case study:

Nurturing strong partnerships

Taking every opportunity

Social justice values in the classroom

Start small and scale



St Bernard's Roman Catholic Primary School, Cheshire



What do we want our children to achieve once they leave St Bernard's? We want them to be confident learners, we want them to be resilient, we want them to be able to use their voice effectively.

Emily, SLT member

Context

LA: Cheshire West and Chester
Age range: 2–11
School type: Academy
Pupils: 203
FSM: 32 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- A local partner with a stake in the community and a strong education offer.
- Authentic youth social action experiences that give pupils a sense of agency.

How did it start?

St Bernard's started its youth social action project in partnership with Chester Zoo (**Engaging partners spark 1**). The zoo has a community-facing education team who regularly work with schools on ecological and conservation topics. They initially worked with St Bernard's on the Sing for Songbirds project focusing on the songbird crisis in Indonesia, where songbirds are suffering from habitat loss and illegal trade.

We wanted our children to have a great curriculum where you get the knowledge and the skills that you need, then to be able to go forward and use their voice and do something and make a difference.

Emily, SLT member

Staff got together to design an eight-week curriculum around conservation in order to provide a coherent learning experience for pupils. The curriculum was filtered through Valerie Hannon's **Thrive model (Ideas spark 1)** and the **Centre for Real-World Learning's Creative Habits of Mind framework (Ideas spark 2)**.



Ideas spark 1 Thrive: The Purpose of Schools in a Changing World by Valerie Hannon and Amelia Peterson

Valerie Hannon's work focuses on giving young people the learning they need to thrive in a changing world.²⁸ This approach centres four interdependent levels that are central to youth social action: the global, the societal, the interpersonal and intrapersonal.

When planning youth social action, it might be useful to consider the following:

- **How does the topic relate to the global and local levels?**
For example, if you're facilitating youth social action on litter-picking in the local area, it's possible to zoom out to think about plastics pollution in the oceans during lessons. This could encourage pupils to see the bigger picture while maintaining a sense of agency over their ability to make a difference locally.
- **How does the topic build interpersonal and intrapersonal development?**
Many youth social action projects might require communication or teamwork, while participation might help pupils build confidence. It might be worth considering doing simple evaluation after a project has ended to gauge how pupils feel they have benefitted.



Ideas spark 2 Bill Lucas, Guy Claxton and Ellen Spencer's Creative Habits of Mind

This framework was developed at the University of Winchester's Centre for Real World Learning.²⁸ Youth social action projects can nurture transferable skills like problem solving and creativity is a key part of that.²⁹ Creative Habits of Mind provides a framework that treats creativity as an emergent product of being collaborative, disciplined, imaginative, inquisitive, and persistent. For teachers facilitating youth social action projects, it provides a series of behaviours and stances that you can use to evaluate pupil participation, from 'daring to be different' to 'cooperating appropriately'.

- **Ensuring that youth social action facilitates the development of these habits.** Most projects involve these habits in some form: at St Bernard's the songbirds project involved collaboration (staging a flash mob), discipline (designing and crafting handouts), and inquisitiveness (exploring a new topic). Identifying where projects might develop individual habits at the outset might help with evaluating how pupils have benefitted (see below).
- **Judging whether youth social action is having a positive outcome?** Research suggests participating in youth social action nurtures a range of positive outcomes in young people, but knowing how to collect evidence can be challenging. Simple scaled-response questionnaires can help to understand how pupils feel in terms of confidence and capabilities. The RSA's Cultural Learning Evidence Champion's Handbook provides an accessible introduction to gathering impact evidence.³⁰



Engaging partners spark 1 Keeping it local

St Bernard's were able to work with a local partner that had an education offer. A zoo might not be the most obvious partner for youth social action, but Chester provided the support to engage in activism around an interesting, global topic that broadened pupils' skills and knowledge.

When starting out with youth social action or considering scaling an existing project, it can be worth asking which local partners might be able to lend support. In addition to charities, organisations like museums often have an education offer that might help to enrich youth social action while also feeding into curriculum learning.

²⁸ Lucas B, Claxton, G, Spencer E (2013) Progression in Student Creativity in School: First steps towards new forms of formative assessment. OECD Education Working Papers 86 [pdf]. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/education/ceri/5k4dp59msdvw.pdf> [Accessed 14/3/23].

The diagram is from: The creative habits of mind wheel (2018) Arts Council of Wales [online]. Available at: https://arts.wales/sites/default/files/2018-12/Creative_Habits_of_the_Mind.pdf

²⁹ Tejani, M and Breeze, H (2021) Op cit

³⁰ The RSA (2019) The Cultural Learning Evidence: Champion's Handbook [PDF]. Available at: www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/the-rsa-cultural-learning-evidence-champions-handbook.pdf

³¹ Kidd, D (2020) A Curriculum of Hope: As Rich in Humanity as in Knowledge. Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press.

St Bernard's Roman Catholic Primary School, Cheshire

What happened?

“ [It's important that] the children feel empowered to share what they know, and feel like they're making a difference in the world... And it's just phenomenal how articulate they were, because they'd learnt all about the habitats and what the birds needed. ”

Emily, SLT member

- Pupils engaged with their local community, staging a flash mob. The flash mob was the headteacher's idea as a musician and music lover, but the idea to hand out leaflets and raise awareness of the plight of the songbirds was the pupils' **(Activities spark 1)**.
- Teachers engaged other third parties to enrich the curriculum experience, inviting a local theatre company **(Engaging partners spark 2)** along to enact different scenarios touching on the lived experience of Indonesian people experiencing the crisis.
- More recent projects have used English classes to write letters to people and organisations who have the power to shape our response to environmental crises, such as MPs and major corporations **(Activities spark 2)**.
- SLT member, Emily, suggested that learning like this “gives real authenticity to what they're doing — they're not just doing something within the schools walls.

Teacher experience

“ When all these changes in climate impact come along, you know, they'll still be there, they'll still be fighting for it. And you know, for them it's their future. So, it's making it relevant to them. ”

Emily, SLT member

- **Energised staff:** Emily reflected on the effects of leading youth social action in schools in the context of the ongoing retention crisis. Engaging in important environmental questions energised staff about their teaching, with that passion in turn rubbing off in the classroom.

“ We found that the staff were just buzzing to come into school, were passionate about what they were doing. ”

Emily, SLT member

- **Creative, real-world teaching:** this sense of excitement and urgency contrasted with teacher training that could often be what Emily described as 'dry'. Youth social action allowed teachers to focus on creativity with their pupils' learning and the 'humanity-rich curriculum' that Debra Kidd **(Ideas spark 3)** has promoted.

“ I mean, it's made me think really a lot about what the purpose of education is as well, and reflecting on that, and understanding about curriculum and why we do what we do in the classroom. ”

Emily, SLT member

- **Unexpected continuing professional development (CPD):** participating in youth social action sparked opportunities for professional development, with Lauren studying for a postgraduate certificate in conservation and sustainability education as a direct result of participating in youth social action.



Activities spark 1 Pupil participation

Figuring out how to give pupils agency can be tricky. Throughout our case studies, educators talk about coming up with an overarching idea for youth social action, but then giving pupils agency about where they might go from that point (the Barrowford and Kenyngton Manor case studies also exemplify this). For St Bernard's, this was a case of the head coming up with the idea of a flash mob based on their own interests and expertise, but then letting pupils develop their own activities — in this case leafleting the community.

This can be a good middle ground to 'pure' agency, allowing teachers to ensure a coherent and safe learning experience for all pupils. Once pupils have done some smaller pieces of youth social action, it might then be possible to give them more choice over what they do in the future (see Barrowford and Prescott, for example).



Engaging partners spark 2 Drama for social change

St Bernard's had success engaging with a local theatre group during their Sing for Songbirds project. Connecting with local theatres or drama groups could potentially help enrich youth social action project?

St Bernard's employed the theatre group to help pupils imagine a context that was unfamiliar to them, as well as how the people who lived in that context might react. Drama and other arts-based subjects can strengthen and reinforce many of the skills that youth social action already encourages, like self-confidence and communication. It can also be combined with the Mantle of the Expert pedagogical framework (Ideas spark 6).



Ideas spark 3 A Curriculum of Hope by Debra Kidd

Debra Kidd's name was mentioned in several interviews in schools in the north-west. St Bernard's Primary School features as a case study in her book *A Curriculum of Hope* as an example of how to connect classroom knowledge with real-world action.³¹ The book itself provides guidance for teachers on how to embed youth social action-friendly topics into their school curriculum, offering a range of different ideas around curriculum building that tie in real-world issues and make learning meaningful to the lives of pupils.

Kidd highlights learning strategies that can be brought to bear on youth social action projects, from the power of building narrative to the importance of play as learning. She also echoes what a number of teachers recount in our case studies about the experience of learning and working alongside pupils.

“Teachers and children are taking risks together — adopting roles can be deeply exposing for both parties. This aspect of vulnerability requires teachers to play, experiment and demonstrate not only the extent and limitations of their knowledge, but also to have the agility to adapt to the unexpected. It is not easy or simple, but it is deeply powerful and memorable.”³²



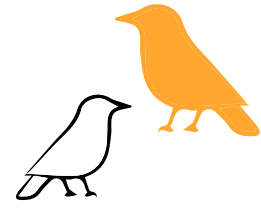
Activities spark 2 Make it authentic

Ensuring that pupils have agency and a sense of impact is a repeated theme from teachers. Pupils engaging with people or institutions in positions of power can potentially encourage further civic engagement while also bridging classroom learning and real-world scenarios. In this case, pupils practiced their persuasive writing skills through letters, but other formats (such as blogs) or media (like videos) could be used to similar effect.

³² Kidd, D (2020) Ibid.



Prescot Primary School, Merseyside



Make it authentic. Don't make pretend, like we're not going to pretend to write a letter to the mayor or whatever it is. We're going to do it.

Lisa, SLT member

Context

LA: Knowsley
Age range: 3–11
School type: Community
Pupils: 425
FSM: 27.1 percent

How did it start?

There was no conscious effort to do youth social action at Prescot, but the school had a firm commitment to an ethos of pupil responsibility and a tradition of pupil leadership within house teams at years 5 and 6. Prescot's story reflects the importance of building good relationships to other schools through its link to our first case study — St Bernard's in Ellesmere Port.

Prescot's head and deputy head visited St Bernard's to find out about the youth social action projects they'd been organising. SLT member, Lisa, felt 'a real vibe of excitement' and was struck by the way children were talking confidently about their work, the whole-school involvement, and community engagement. They came away thinking wondering how they could reproduce the same effects at Prescot.

We're not in a particularly wealthy area. There's a definite balance between having an impact through financial means and having an impact through using the children's voice and getting that community spirit going.

Lisa, SLT member

What were the key ingredients?

- Powerful interschool connections for sharing ideas and best practice.
- An understanding that the school itself is a key focal point for youth social action in the community.
- Effective use of timetabling — in this case using summer term as an opportunity for youth social action, and as a 'celebration' of pupil learning across the year.

What happened?

- Prescot staff arranged CPD days in partnership with St Bernard's (Engaging partners spark 3), along with educators Debra Kidd and Hywel Roberts, to learn about their youth social action projects.
- Staff devoted an inset day to planning a youth social action project for the summer term (Activities spark 3), using Chester Zoo's Sing for Songbirds project as a foundation for their own projects. Lisa discussed the project in terms of 'reimagining the end of the year' at school and, as a celebration of pupil achievement in what can otherwise be a quiet term.
- Prescot found a guiding principle in Hywel Roberts' idea of 'botheredness' (Ideas spark 4) — in other words, why should we be bothered about songbirds half the world away and what can pupils gain from their learning and social action?

Engaging partners spark 3 Talking to other schools

The partnership between St Bernard's and Prescot was important for both schools in their youth social action journey. For St Bernard's, it was an opportunity to share learning and best practice, while for Prescot it was the spark for their own journey. The strength of this connection also meant that Prescot could benefit indirectly from Chester Zoo's support before driving their own youth social action projects forward.

Many schools will have informal connections with one another, so it's worth thinking about how to make the most of them. Taking time to understand what's going on elsewhere that can be learnt from and can potentially open up new opportunities. What scope might there be for joint CPD days? And how might school experience and learning around youth social action be shared?

Activities spark 3 Making good use of the summer term

Several teachers mentioned that they tended to save their youth social action for the summer term. While no summer term is quiet, it is can potentially provide a window for integrating youth social action and other co-curricular enrichment activities, while also providing an opportunity to celebrate the year's learning and channel it into active citizenship.

Ideas spark 4 Botheredness by Hywel Roberts

Hywel Roberts' 'constructed' word resonated with several teachers we interviewed (Prescot Primary makes 'be bothered' an overarching core value).¹⁵ At its core, botheredness is about why we should care about the material we're teaching, and by extension why pupils should care. For teachers, Roberts highlights three crucial ingredients: stories, stance, and pedagogy.

Stance asks us to consider our values as teachers, while pedagogy refers to how we choose to teach. Stories are the essence of botheredness because narrative is how we communicate the importance of something. For youth social action, Roberts' formula of 'people + place + problem = story' is a simple framework for helping to shape projects in a way that is meaningful for pupils.

In the case of the Sing for Songbirds project at St Bernard's and Prescot, it had a clear sense of who was affected by the crisis, how it was both a local and global issue, and what the problem was — in this case environmental degradation and illegal trade.

Consider what story pupils might engage with and how they themselves have the agency to shape it.

When you say 'bothered' it's just not a word, it's a word that says you can do anything. You can just do it even if someone else might not. It's your passion.

Year 6 pupil

[You should be] loud and proud and bothered. You can protest against something you don't think should happen.

Year 6 pupil

Prescot Primary School, Merseyside



What happened? (continued)



- During the summer term, pupils worked towards putting on a final exhibition (Activities spark 4) at the school that was open to the community, welcoming parents, former Prescot pupils and even the local mayor. The exhibition was designed to share their learning while advocating for their chosen cause.
- The exhibition incorporated art, design, music and creative writing (Activities spark 5) that pupils had worked on and gave them the agency to share their learnings with adults.
- Because Prescot isn't close enough to Chester Zoo to foster the same sort of close relationship, youth social action has since taken on a life of its own, with teachers identifying their own topics. Pupils have worked on projects about ocean plastics, Madagascar and, for the first time in 2023, teachers will be allowing pupils to choose their own topics.
- The school has become a UNICEF Rights Respecting School (Engaging partners spark 4).



Teacher experience

- **Learning alongside pupils:** Lisa reflected on the way that engaging in youth social action encouraged a collaborative ethos between pupils and teachers. Teachers come to youth social action topics with only a little more knowledge than pupils themselves, which opens space for co-learning and development.

“The one thing that everybody's sharing is that we want to make a difference. So, we're not going to learn it if it's not going to make a difference. So, it's a very powerful time of year actually. You do start hearing chanting coming from different places and placards being made and all of those really powerful things that I think before we might have been a bit too scared to do [before].”

Lisa, SLT member

“We're finding this out together and how we're going to make this impact together, rather than when we're doing maths lessons, or English, or science. The rest of the year is very much teacher-led, isn't it? And I think that the children go, 'Oh, okay. I perhaps know more about this than Miss does on this occasion' ... And it's much more a level playing field going into that project.”

Lisa, SLT member

- **Learning for social change:** many of the teachers we talked to in our case studies recognised the importance of core teaching — literacy, numeracy, science and so on — but also emphasised the need for learning to give pupils that sense of making a difference.

“I think when I look back at when I started to teach — I'm old now you see, so that's 20 something years ago — and you did just see it as learning in those hours that they were in your classroom. And you didn't really give them that responsibility.”

Lisa, SLT member



Activities spark 4 School exhibitions

Both St Bernard's and Prescot demonstrate the strength of bringing the community to the school in the course of conducting youth social action. Exhibitions that are open to parents and the community can provide a safe space for pupils to share their learning, advocate for a cause, or do fundraising. Since fully pupil-directed youth social action at primary level can be challenging, keeping things within the school can be a way of facilitating pupil agency within a familiar environment.



Engaging partners spark 4 UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools

This UNICEF scheme works to put the tenets of the UN's Convention of the Rights of the Child at the heart of school values, giving every pupil 'the chance to lead happy, healthy lives and to be responsible, active citizens'.³³ Schools that pursue the award commit to ensuring that four key areas of impact are felt by children: wellbeing, participation, relationships and self-esteem.

³³ UNICEF. For more information see: www.unicef.org/uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rsa/about-the-rsa/



Activities spark 5 Arts for social change

Arts education has come under increasing pressure in recent years across both primary and secondary schools.³⁴ One recurrent theme throughout our case studies is the way that youth social action can be a great way to combine active citizenship with arts subjects.

- How can pupils use art and design to further a cause? Could they make placards, or posters, or leaflets?
- What creative writing might they do? Can they write a persuasive letter to the local councillor? Or write a short story about the plight of an endangered species?
- How can they use dance or music to communicate a subject? Can they get together to sing a protest song during assembly?

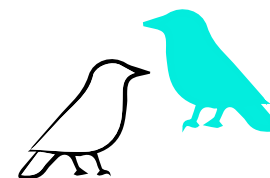
“You can express your feelings in art.”
Year 6 pupil

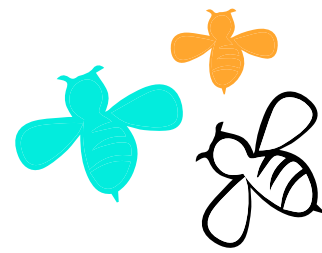
³⁴ Cooper, B (2019) Primary Colours: The decline of arts education in primary schools and how it can be reversed. The Fabian Society [PDF]. Available at: <https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FS-Primary-Colours-Report-WEB-FINAL.pdf>

“Children do a job with more enthusiasm, more energy, and more botheredness sometimes than adults. [Youth social action] ticks lots of boxes, because they've grown in independence, they've grown in competence, they're mingling with children from all the year groups. And they're learning new skills all the time.”

It is a citizenship thing. It's a human thing. They need to learn to be really kind, well-rounded adults. And I think all the softer skills that we teach them around the edge are really important. And I don't think we ever fully recognised that way back when. We certainly do now.”

Lisa, SLT member





Barrowford Primary School, Lancashire

“ All the things that we want to make our society better — better health care, jobs, better standard of living, more harmonious societies and communities, where there's no prejudices and people are accepted, not tolerated — all of those things can be achieved through education and through schooling, and can be achieved through working on projects like this because they bring people together. ”

Karl, SLT member

Context

LA: Lancashire
Age range: 5–11
School type: Community
Pupils: 347
FSM: 28.8 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- A willingness to give teachers the freedom to foster youth social action and a participatory ethos.
- A project-based curriculum that was easily adapted to youth social action.
- Firm support from senior leadership to support youth social action and learning about social justice.

How did it start?

“ How can we empower our children if we ourselves don't understand or know about the issues that the world faces, and how we can educate and address them? So that's where it started off. ”

Karl, SLT member

Barrowford's promotion of youth social action was motivated by the headteacher's experience at a conference, where they learnt about the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (**Ideas spark 5**). The head returned to the school with a new-found understanding about the urgency of the goals and was keen to share these with the schools' staff. SLT member, Karl, mentioned that a lot of the issues the goals spoke to were new to many of the teachers themselves, including to him. They were united on their importance — the next step was figuring out how to bring this before their pupils.

What happened?

- Staff initially took responsibility for an individual SDG that they felt passionate about and presented these anonymously to pupils, who then picked the projects that mattered to them most (**Activities spark 6**).
- After choosing their projects, pupils were split into different groups that cut across year groups. They would work on their individual projects every afternoon for two weeks, with mornings reserved for core curriculum teaching.
- By the end of the fortnight, pupils had produced a learning experience for both classmates and the wider community. Pupils took the lead in educating attendees, raising awareness, and showing how social issues could be addressed.



Activities spark 6 Action in the community

Youth social action can vary in terms of the scale of issues it addresses, which in turn might inform what a project looks like. Global topics, such as St Bernard's Sing for Songbirds project or Prescott's work on ocean plastic, might involve advocacy and pupils spreading awareness of the particular issue. The resulting project might bring the community to the school.

Once teachers have built up confidence, however, it can pay to think about more place-based local activities. Various schools mentioned that projects focused on littering and recycling can be a good way for pupils to volunteer within their community, and they are easily transferable to different school contexts. There are also various organisations that can help you facilitate this kind of local work.



Ideas spark 5 The UN's Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals are a global call to action to end poverty, protect the environment, and ensure that everybody can enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The goals span everything from 'no poverty' and 'zero hunger' to 'gender equality' and 'climate action'.

The SDGs can provide a good platform for thinking about the sorts of action that pupils might engage in. They can also give pupils a sense of impact and of being part of something larger, linking their local community work to much larger international goals.

UNESCO provides a range of pedagogical supporting material for educators, including ideas for classroom activities and how you might integrate the SDGs into the curriculum.³⁵



Activities spark 7 Encouraging pupil choice

One consistent challenge for teachers is facilitating pupil agency in directing their own work. As our case studies demonstrate, there are various ways educators have managed this challenge, and one simple way of beginning to do this is by giving pupils a number of options to choose from. This doubles as a good learning opportunity in itself, allowing pupils to ask questions and reflect on the various merits of pursuing different avenues for their youth social action.

³⁵ United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals – Resources for educators [online]. Available at: en.unesco.org/themes/education/sdgs/material [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

Barrowford Primary School, Lancashire

What happened? (continued)

“ We had like a bit of a community showcase where each project, each group would have produced something within their room. And we had parents and community members come in, visit, and we had children from each group there to talk about what they'd been learning about. ”

Karl, SLT member

- Karl suggested that Barrowford's project-based curriculum is well-suited to time-limited projects with a youth social action focus. This culture of learning in turn made integrating the SDGs into the day-to-day curriculum easier over time, though Karl emphasised this wasn't done overnight. It required time to get right, not to mention firm SLT support.
- Today, the SDGs are integrated into core curriculum subjects throughout the school year, which provides a solid platform for youth social action.
- Youth social action has also moved beyond the SDGs, incorporating projects with a more local focus (**Activities spark 7**) around food waste and fostering sustainable environments for bees.

Teacher experience

“ Our head wants us to be creative and gives us the opportunity to be so. And she really creates the idea that you can be flexible with your approach and your project. And you can be a little bit out there and take risks with it as well. And, you know, in a lot of cases go where the children want to go. ”

Karl, SLT member

- **Freedom to take risks with teaching:** one emerging theme from our interviews and teacher workshop was concern over increasing centralisation and micromanagement of teaching practice at a wider systems level. Youth social action was fostered in an environment where teachers felt they had the freedom and SLT support to take some risks and give pupils the agency to make decisions.

“ Obviously, as teachers, we like control. So, with my class and our year group this year, we're trying to build a more democratic classroom. Because I think that's something that teachers just generally would struggle with completely giving over. And [...] yeah, there has to be some degree of a teacher's guide in facilitating. But I think it's just having that open conversation with the children in terms of where are we going, what can we do next? What's really interested you about that? What have you heard there? And then then just having the freedom to say, well, let's go and explore that then. And then what can we create to show that learning or to solve that problem? ”

Karl, SLT member

- **Giving pupils the freedom to direct learning:** Karl emphasised that giving pupils some freedom in their learning needn't be daunting. Being open, asking questions and giving pupils the space to solve problems themselves can help to give them a sense of agency and co-discovery with their teachers. Along with some other teachers interviewed, Mark cited Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert (**Ideas spark 6**) approach to collaborative, embodied learning as being helpful, as well as Debra Kidd's work on linking classroom knowledge to lived experience.
- **Youth social action can ignite teacher passions:** from a professional perspective, Karl mentioned that, as an NQT, he had relished the challenge of bringing topics around social change and social justice to the pupils. Barrowford's headteacher 'was pushing on an open door with the staff' when she presented the SDGs to them, and the relevance they had on pupils' lives, both now and in the future, was a big part of the appeal to teachers.
- **Youth social action can bring up difficult topics:** an inherent challenge in taking social action is that it is necessitated by a real pressing problem, such as hunger or environmental loss. How to frame potentially difficult information to pupils in a way that was accessible and objective was a key challenge. Giving pupils hope and highlighting how they could help effect change was crucial in avoiding disillusionment, both for teachers and pupils. See **Engaging partners spark 11** for more on this.
- **Youth social action can help with developing oracy skills:** allowing pupils to form their own opinions on subjects helped them in developing a strong personal voice, and Karl was keen to emphasise the way that youth social action was the perfect space to nurture oracy and pupils' reflective ability. To this end, the school connected with Voice 21 (**Engaging partners spark 5**) to help them.



Ideas spark 6 Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert

The Mantle of the Expert is a pedagogical approach developed by academic and drama teacher Dorothy Heathcote. Learners take on the role of an expert team tasked with approaching a particular problem, studying it in detail, and developing solutions.³⁶ This approach lends itself well to project-based learning, and Debra Kidd gives some examples of how it might work in practice in her Curriculum of Hope.³⁷

Mantle of the Expert can be used to link together different parts of the curriculum, as well as developing key literacy and numeracy skills.³⁸ It also engages a range of transferable skills like communication, imagination, and teamwork. When developing youth social action projects with pupils, framing the issue within the Mantle of the Expert could be a useful way of getting pupils to plan their work.



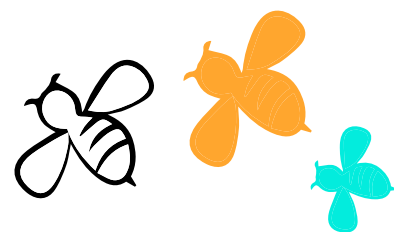
Engaging partners spark 5 Voice 21

Oracy has become an important element of primary education, helping pupils to develop their spoken language and communication skills. Barrowford found that oracy development paired well with youth social action, especially when it came to discussing challenging and complex topics. Voice 21 can help schools to embed good quality oracy teaching, and provide bespoke support that takes into account pupil needs and school context.

³⁶ Heathcote, D and Bolton, G (1995) Drama for Learning: Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education. London: Heinemann.

³⁷ Kidd, D (2020) Op cit.

³⁸ MoE: Mantle of the Expert [website]. Available: www.mantleoftheexpert.com/what-is-moe/introduction-to-moe/ [Accessed: 6 June 2023].



St Oswald's CE Primary School, Kidderminster

Obviously as a citizen, you try and give money to charity, or help people that need help, or donate food to the food bank, but I hadn't thought of it in any of the depth or detail. And for me to then be able to share a little bit of that with the children, and almost sprinkle that little bit of kindness amongst my class, so they can go and sprinkle out somewhere else, it's quite a nice feeling to be able to facilitate and do some good in the world.

Amy, class teacher



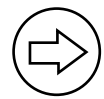
Context

LA: Worcestershire
Age range: 2-11
School type: Academy
Pupils: 171
FSM: 34.5 percent



What were the key ingredients?

- School values that lend themselves well to youth social action.
- A focus on understanding the local community.



How did it start?

When the headteacher of St Oswald's Church of England Primary School saw other schools in the same trust experiencing the benefits of youth social action through Citizens of now, they quickly encouraged teachers to participate. Teachers soon also saw the value of the project for building relationships in the local community and in enabling children to engage with the diversity of local people and perspectives.

Youth social action was a natural fit: conceptually, it built upon school values of friendship and inclusion, as well as the school's Christian vision and ethos (**Ideas spark 7**). Practically, it fit with the school's personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) curriculum and its year 4 history curriculum, where pupils design and deliver a project based on the local history of Kidderminster.



What happened?

- Youth social action at St Oswald's is entirely pupil-led: children choose the topics to organise projects around, and then communicate their thoughts to the headteacher, the rest of the school, and to parents.
- In the second year that youth social action ran, pupils decided they wanted to run a project about supporting homeless people in Kidderminster, so teachers contacted a local homeless shelter and children organised a sponsored run to raise money.



Teacher experience

- **Youth social action strengthened trust:** class teacher, Amy, reflected on the fact that giving pupils agency over their own projects also helped to strengthen class relationships.

To be the one that actually says, 'yeah, go on, be brave, go and do that: write that letter, go and speak to the headteacher, go and do it', it's really lovely. To see their independent growth, I think it does improve the relationship, it does provide that bit more trust. I am giving them the control to do it right and to do it well.

Amy, class teacher

- **Youth social action can deepen community knowledge:**

I didn't grow up here. I've lived in Kidderminster for 10 years. [To] find out that there is a food bank in Kidderminster - I'd no idea it was there - [to] find out about this charity I'd never heard of, or working with homeless young people... I think it opens your eyes and broadens your horizons a little bit as well.

Amy, class teacher



Ideas spark 7 School value

Most schools will have a set of values that informs their ethos and approach to learning. Using these to inform youth social action could give life to how the why your pupils are doing what they're doing. They can also be linked explicitly to character education and the development of positive values in pupils. The government has provided non-statutory guidance on character education, which emphasises positive outcomes also associated with youth social action like increased self-confidence and wellbeing.³⁹

³⁹ Department for Education (2019) Character Education: Framework Guidance [pdf]. Available: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904333/Character_Education_Framework_Guidance.pdf.

Wilsden Primary School, Bradford

I think as a teacher, you've got to really make things happen. Because if the children are passionate about it, you as a teacher need to know where to take that. You've got to have someone [with] that mindset that will take the children seriously, that [ensures] their voices have been heard, and then celebrate those achievements.

Helen, SLT member

Context

LA: Bradford
Age range: 5–11
School type: Academy
Pupils: 304
FSM: 10.5 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- A focus on linking youth social action to local, 'real life' issues.
- An understanding that threading youth social action activities and topics into the curriculum requires long-term planning.

How did it start?

Wilsden Primary School's journey into youth social action was born of a relationship with The Linking Network ([Engaging partners spark 6](#)). SLT member, Yvonne, joined the network while at a different school, motivated to do so from personal experience of growing up in Bradford and feeling disconnected to other nearby communities.

What happened?

- Wilsden pupils have carried out projects fostering **intergenerational connection** ([Engaging partners spark 7](#)) between pupils and local retirement homes around topics such as recycling and experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- They have campaigned on environmental issues that affect the wider community, such as the impact of vehicle congestion on air pollution. They've even lobbied local MPs to close roads near the school during drop-off and pick-up time.



Teacher experience

- **Bringing 'real life' into learning:** staff at Wilsden are encouraged to 'bring real life into the curriculum' by maintaining awareness of events outside school. This extends to ensuring that local context and history feeds into the way lessons are planned and delivered.
- **Planning for the long-term:** supportive advocacy from SLT is highly valued, especially since they can set long-term plans for the day-to-day curriculum to encompass youth social action. Identifying staff expertise and passion is important to making this work.

[Our headteacher] has always been someone that advocates for it as well... she listens to our ideas, as long as we've got a rationale for why we're doing certain things. She's been open-minded and trusting.

Helen, SLT member

- **Raising the school's profile:** staff are confident that pursuing youth social action has raised the school's profile within the local area. Teachers also feel it has had a big impact in terms of the recognition they've received for their teaching.

Engaging partners spark 6 The Linking Network

The Linking Network was set up to help build confidence in young people through forging community connections.⁴⁰ This can take the form of linking pupils to children at other schools from different backgrounds, or alternatively connecting younger and older people to share learning.

The Network is driven by four key questions, all of which are relevant to youth social action: who am I? Who are we? Where do we live? And how can we all live well together? Once your school has become a member, the Network can offer a range of teaching resources, including around facilitating social action.

While the Network is currently focused on specific geographical regions within England, their staff are happy to support schools who fall outside these areas.

Engaging partners spark 7 Intergenerational learning

A few schools mentioned the benefits of linking up with care homes during the course of their social action. There is evidence that we're becoming more segregated by age, despite the fact that younger and older people have a lot to learn from one another.⁴¹ Intergenerational programmes are beneficial for both children and older people.⁴²

Care homes and independent living communities are almost guaranteed to be in your local areas, and most will be used to coordinating activities with external partners. The Linking Network (Engaging partners spark) also offers an Intergenerational Linking programme that can connect schools with a care home.⁴³

⁴⁰ The Linking Network – Intergenerational Linking [website]. Available at: thelinkingnetwork.org.uk/intergenerational-linking/ [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

⁴¹ Winkler, R. (2013) Segregated by Age: Are we becoming more divided? Population Research and Policy Review 32: 717–27.

⁴² Holmes, CL. (2009) An Intergenerational Program with Benefits. Early Childhood Education Journal 37: 113–19.

⁴³ The Linking Network – Intergenerational Linking [website]. Op cit.



Queensmead Primary Academy, Leicester

“ We’re always very keen to jump on board anything that involves fundraising or doing something that gives back to the community. ”

Liz, SLT member

Context

LA: Leicester
Age range: 3–11
School type: Academy
Pupils: 432
FSM: 38.4 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- Seeking out multiple partners to embed youth social action at different school levels.
- Engaging parents in a positive way that strengthens relationships with both children and teachers.

What happened?

- Among the many things that the school has sought to embed, environmental activism and care for the natural world is a key element of the offer for its young people. Staff have connected with **Eco-Schools (Engaging partners spark 8)**, an organisation which helps schools in teaching environmental topics through hands-on activities. Pupil ‘eco warrior’ representatives facilitated action with their peers to improve the school environment, planting trees around the playground alongside the community and overhauling the school’s recycling policy. The school consequently achieved a Green Flag Award.
- This pupil-led transformation and move to a regenerative model for the school has been combined with other initiatives that complement pupil learning. Pupils have participated in a local ‘grow your own grub’ pumpkin garden competition, and taken part in workshops with a local arts and nature charity Buzzing Roots. Centring outdoor learning in the school’s day-to-day activities has clear benefits for young people, not least by fostering confidence, communication and other important skills **(Activities spark 8)**.
- The school is also part of the **Forest School Association (Engaging partners spark 9)** and is currently in the process of applying for accreditation as a quality provider.



How did it start?

“ Sometimes, you don’t actually realise how much you’re doing until people start talking. ”

Sian, SLT member

Queensmead is a good example of how schools can be doing youth social action without realising it. The key driver at Queensmead has been a staff body that is active in forging connections with external organisations that can help to facilitate youth social action activities. The result is a primary school that offers its pupils a range of enriching participatory experiences that span everything from charitable fundraising projects to the cultivation and protection of the local environment.

“ I would say that anybody who works in this building is very well aware of what life is like for pupils and is already going above and beyond ordinary relationships with children to make sure that those children have got the very, very best because that’s what we should be giving to our children, because that’s what they deserve. And that’s a real strong moral commitment to be working here in the first place. ”

Liz, SLT member

- The school has established links with local care-homes **(Engaging partners spark 7)**, giving pupils the opportunity to practice their reading with older people while providing vital social connections to a population that is vulnerable to social isolation. During Covid, social distancing turned the relationship into one of pen pals, with pupils exchanging letters with older people who couldn’t leave the home or take visitors. In both cases, the civic engagement the pupils pursued tied social skills to literacy learning.



Engaging partners spark 8 Eco-Schools

The climate crisis is a pressing issue, so it’s little wonder that youth social action often focuses on this. It’s meaningful to young people and spans the local to the global. Environmental issues are complex to navigate, so that’s where an organisation like Eco-Schools can step in.

The organisation empowers young people to take action in their local area and is able to engage with both early years and primary school contexts. Schools can eventually apply for Eco-School Green Flag accreditation, which recognises the hard work pupils are doing. Engaging Eco-Schools can support youth social action projects with knowledge and resources.



Engaging partners spark 9 Forest School

The Forest School scheme is designed to support outdoor ‘play, exploration and supported risk taking’.⁴⁴ Forest School encourages children to connect with and understand the natural world, with the aim of developing emotional, social and physical wellbeing.

Forest School has a set of six principles that converge with the aims of youth social action, from promoting ‘resilient, confident, independent and creative learners’ to creating ‘a community for being, development and learning’.

⁴⁴ Forest School Association [website] For more information see: forestschoollassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/.

Queensmead Primary Academy, Leicester



Teacher experience

“ We’re both helping each other... We’re putting our ideas together and it turns into a really good idea. Sir helps us to put together different ideas to help the environment. ”

Year 6 pupil

— **Work with pupils to bring youth social action to life:** both pupils and teachers emphasised that the relationship that they built was one of co-creation and parallel learning. Giving pupils agency is one of the most difficult steps in enacting youth social action, but the lesson from Queensmead is that giving pupils space to make mistakes is, in itself, a crucial learning experience.

“ It’s not about what I want, it’s what they want. What do they want to improve in the school? ”

Simon, site manager

“ We’ve gradually taken more of a backseat because the children have become much more vocal and articulate and confident. And that’s exactly what they should be doing. You know, we’re now taking the lead from them, rather than the other way around. And obviously, we’re there to support, but the initial ideas are usually generated from them. And the last year, when the Ukraine crisis first started, we had children in year six come in saying, can we please do something about this? Okay, right. Well, what would you like to do? And then they organised what they wanted that to look like. And the response was phenomenal from our community. ”

Liz, SLT member

Enabling agency has also had a subsequent effect on the way pupils have been able to make their voices heard and pitch their own ideas for social action projects. At every point, teachers have been instrumental in facilitating change through discussion and guidance.

— **Youth social action can strengthen relationships with parents:** in keeping with the results from our Teacher Tapp survey, staff at Queensmead emphasised the positivity that youth social action work has had in building connections with parents, especially where they were more difficult to engage. Parents were more likely to participate in hands-on, experiential activities alongside their children, especially those focused on local **ecology and gardening (Activities spark 8)**.

“ It has been a very positive thing with the parents. We often find that parents don’t really come into school very often. So, if we had a phonics meeting or things like that, we wouldn’t necessarily get very many people there. ”

Sian, SLT member



Activities spark 8 Nature-based learning

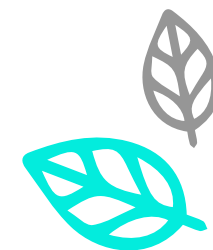
There is a clear evidence base that nature-based learning is beneficial to young peoples’ development. Among other things, it can increase creativity, communication skills and self-confidence.⁴⁵ Many of our case study schools place emphasis on outdoor activities and looking after their school grounds. Working on improving the natural environment within the school can be a way of facilitating youth social action within a safe, familiar environment.

45 Arup/Real Play Coalition (2022) Nature-Based Play: Fostering connections for children’s wellbeing and climate resilience [PDF]. Available at: www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/promotional-materials/section/nature-based-play

“ I do think most teachers are ‘control freaks’. And that is a bit of an issue. I support the children who are doing events. They choose the events, they organise events, they run the events, I’m supporting them... But it’s up to them. So sometimes, I know I have to step a little bit further back. And it is quite challenging for us sometimes to just take that step back and let it go, and I have learned a lot from that. ”

Actually, these children who are 10 and 11 are quite capable and come up with the most amazing ideas. And when they’re telling me it will work, I have to trust them. And if it doesn’t work, they need to find that out for themselves.

Sian, SLT member



Yeading Junior School, Hayes

“ We have a duty and the responsibility as a profession to guide and support children in all sorts of ways... We were able to help and support children to understand that we have a place in society and what we do makes a difference. ”

Carole, former SLT member

Context

LA: Hillingdon
Age range: 3–7
School type: Community
Pupils: 448
FSM: 28.5 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- Strong school values underpinned by a desire to empower children in their community.
- A commitment to letting youth social action grow organically, with pupils stepping in to help.

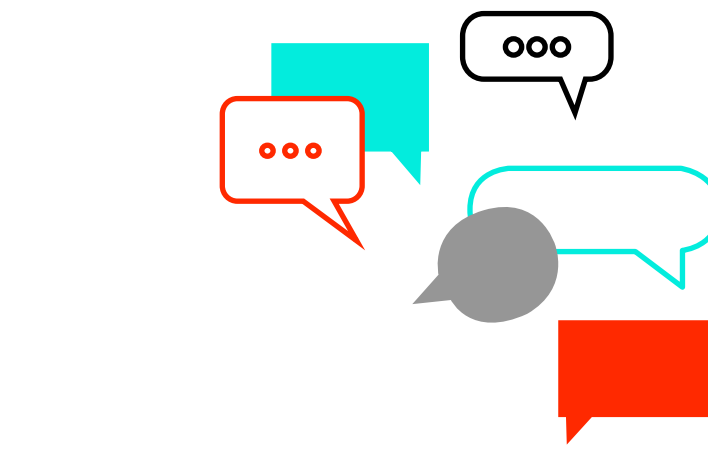
How did it start?

Former SLT member, Carole, stated that Yeading had been doing youth social action long before they knew that’s what it was. As head, she’d ensured that the school’s mission was devoted to empowering their children, posing them the questions: who are we? What is our community? How can we make our community even better?

The spark for youth social action at Yeading had ignited when a young teacher set up a ‘pyramid club’ for pupils struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. Pupils took an active interest in this, to the extent that they took the lead on arranging the club in their own time, with staff helping to facilitate and providing safeguarding. What has since become a much more externally-facing approach to youth social action started with something that was very much pupils looking out for their own school community.

What happened?

- Today, the school is heavily involved with all sorts of external partners who can help to facilitate youth social action opportunities for their pupils. The **#iwill Movement (Engaging partners spark 10)** has been central to that support, but various other third-party organisations have also been integral, from WeSchool to the Greater London Authority’s Building Strong Communities Fund.
- Pupils’ work on youth homelessness was supported by the **Depaul Trust (Engaging partners spark 11)**, which provided invaluable guidance on a challenging topic, encompassing general safeguarding, engaging with families, and helping pupils to make survival packs.



Teacher experience

- **Giving pupils hope for the future:** Carole discussed the importance of having an understanding of pupils’ place in society, both in the local community and the wider world. Participating in youth social action can give pupils a ‘better vision’ for the future.

“ It’s knowing where the children are coming from and knowing where the children will be going and knowing that it’s not just in your local area, but you can change things more widely for society, and give them a better vision. And I think once the staff understood all of that and that it was part of the whole child, [there] was real sign up. ”

Carole, former SLT member

- **Schools are part of the community:** this will seem obvious to anyone who works in a school, but the school isn’t just somewhere pupils go to learn. Schools are integral parts of the community, as well as being little communities in themselves.⁴⁶ Our case studies consistently highlight that youth social action can happen in-school, rather than having to be necessarily externally in the community.

“ I think that’s why it became hugely important, because we’re talking to the children about society. We’re all individuals within society, they needed to know and understand that and the positive and negative effects they can have in the school was a microcosm in itself. ”

Carole, former SLT member

Engaging partners spark 10 #iwill Movement

The #iwill Movement is one of the main advocates for the benefits of youth social action in our education system.⁴⁷ The movement emphasises the importance of taking small positive actions within the community and the huge difference that can make to society overall.

#iwill offers practical resources that can be adapted to a primary school context, including ideas around fundraising and putting together a petition. In addition to this, schools can also sign up to the Power of Youth Charter, which commits to giving young people greater power over their future and the ability to make a difference.

Engaging partners spark 11 Challenging topics for youth social action

We know from Citizens of now that educators are understandably concerned about the sorts of topics that they might cover, especially where pupils themselves have maybe experienced the issue in question.⁴⁸ Approaching organisations like the Depaul Trust, a youth homelessness charity, can potentially help you to engage with challenging issues. Many charities will have an education and learning team who might be able to support in this area.

Guidance on approaching tricky topics can also be taken from organisations like the NSPCC.⁴⁹ The collective experience of educators is also important here: talking through how to approach difficult subjects with colleagues might be a good approach to ensure consistency across the school. And finally, individual educators know their own pupils more than anyone and are best placed to consider how they might respond to a topic—there’s no harm in following gut feeling.

⁴⁶ Cleveland, B et al (2023) Schools as Community Hubs. Singapore: Springer.

⁴⁷ #iwill Movement [website]. Available at: www.iwill.org.uk/ [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

⁴⁸ Depaul [website]. Available at: www.depaul.org.uk/ [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

⁴⁹ NSPCC. How to have difficult conversations with children [online]. Available at: learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/how-to-have-difficult-conversations-with-children [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

Kenyngton Manor Primary School, Surrey

You want children to feel positive about social action, and improving things for others... because people don't always remember the words that they're taught, but they do remember how things have made them feel. And I think that's pretty key.

Lee, SLT member

Context

LA: Surrey
Age range: 2–11
School type: Academy
Pupils: 457
FSM: 37 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- A desire to embed meaningful decision-making and participation for all pupils.
- An understanding that youth social action can start small and still offer meaningful learning and participation.
- Existing calendar events that the school marks, like Children's Mental Health Week, can act as a catalyst for pupil-led action.

How did it start?

We're definitely on a journey. And I think as a school, I've got a staff who are on board with really engaging children in matters of social justice.

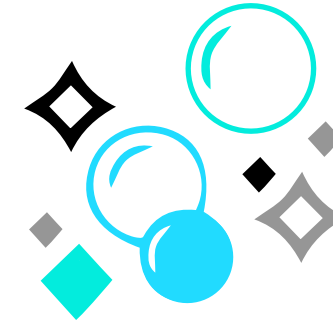
Lee, SLT member

Kenyngton Manor is still at the outset of its journey. But youth social action has to start somewhere, and Lee, a member of Kenyngton Manor's SLT, is planting the seeds for a flourishing culture of engaged citizenship at their school. Having been in teaching and leadership positions for a number of years, Lee reflected that **school councils (Activities spark 9)** were often tokenistic with little real influence. But at Kenyngton, he has put in a lot of work to ensure that pupils can not only be heard, but also drive changes that they want to see.

And last year, we're having a discussion [with the children] about the things that the school does well, because the school council has a focus on our school improvement priorities. So children are at the heart of setting what those priorities should be. And then they help to bring about change within the school.

Lee, SLT member

Every year the school marked **Children's Mental Health Week (Activities spark 10)**, a process that was mostly teacher-led up until 2022 when Lee asked the children: what do you want to do this year? The pupils stated that they wanted to have a 'wonderful day' at the school, and with prompting were able to shape an event that spoke to the work around wellbeing they'd done in PSHE lessons.



What happened?

- Children at the school had learnt the importance of arts and craft to mental health and personal wellbeing. And with the facilitation of teachers, the pupils' 'wonderful day' incorporated art projects, gardening, music performances and aerobic sessions that highlighted ways of encouraging good mental health. The day was rounded off with mass bubble-blowing.

We want them to stretch and reach inwardly, so they have a sense of who they are, and what they need, which links to their mental health, their wellbeing, being able to express themselves, and being able to develop and grow personally. And then we want them to stretch and reach forward with a spirit of adventure.

Lee, SLT member

- Kenyngton's journey shows that youth social action can be easy to kick off with only limited resources and time, but with the potential to scale activities later. Lee stated that, having gained confidence as a staff body that pupils can direct their own projects, the school would be willing to test out giving the children even more agency in future.
- Youth social action doesn't necessarily have to be externally facing to be meaningful in its impact. While teachers guided pupils to do some fundraising for a mental health charity, the 'wonderful day' centred wellbeing and mental health awareness across the school community, giving life to the learnings that pupils had engaged with throughout the year.



Activities spark 9 School democracy

Many schools have school councils that give pupils the opportunity to participate in decision-making over issues that affect them. Encouraging a culture of democracy can give pupils a stake in their own community and the sense that they have agency to make change. Key stage 1 (KSI) and 2 citizenship guidance suggests that giving pupils space to take responsibility, participate and make real choices and decisions is important in showing them the breadth of opportunities available to them.⁵⁰

As Lee experience shows, school councils can also be a space to understand what pupils care about and what sorts of things they'd like to work on. It can therefore be worth thinking about how to use the school council to shape youth social action.



Activities spark 10 Identifying key points in the school calendar

The key to getting youth social action off the ground at Kenyngton Manor was identifying a point in the school year when pupils were already marking something. In this case, Children's Mental Health Week proved a good point for pupils to engage in social action around mental health and wellbeing.

Identifying points in the year where it might be possible to develop youth social action can be a good starting point. Events like Earth Day or Black History Month could potentially be good times to tie in active citizenship while also giving the opportunity to tie learning back to the curriculum.

⁵⁰ Department for Education (2015) Citizenship programmes of study: Key Stages 1 and 2 [PDF]. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/402173/Programme_of_Study_KS1_and_2.pdf [Accessed: 6 June 2023]

Kenyngton Manor Primary School, Surrey



Teacher experience

— Pupil participation is a developmental process: Lee's professional experience was integral to sparking youth social action at Kenyngton. They were open about their own journey towards understanding true child participation. It wasn't until they pursued SENCO accreditation and encountered **Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation (Ideas spark 8)** that they really reflected on whether school councils were functioning in a tokenistic or meaningful way.

“ My genuine belief is, if we have something good going on here, we've got a duty to share it. And if somebody's got something good going on down the road, I've got a duty to learn about it. So I can make it happen here. ”

Lee, SLT member

— Pupil participation can be a risk — but a worthwhile one: the pursuit of youth social action as a learning journey for individual teachers is something we encountered in each of the case studies in this report. Along with other teachers, Lee mentioned the potential risks involved in giving children agency, especially if staff aren't used to pupil-led activities. Using moments when things might go wrong as emergent learning opportunities has a good evidence base, especially where the learning context is relatively 'low stakes'.⁵¹ Giving children some flexibility in this, and understanding that you might have to intervene at certain points, is crucial for giving teachers confidence as facilitators.

“ You know, if the children are at the front and everyone misbehaves, what are you going to do? When are you going to step in? And when are you just going to let them learn and see for themselves? And even if it goes wrong, you know, how happy are you for that to happen? And then afterwards to talk to the children and get their reflections so that they actually grow and learn from it? ”

Lee, SLT member



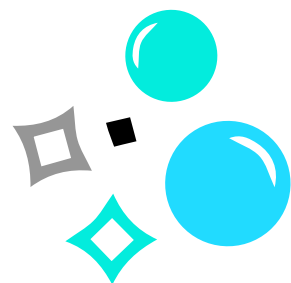
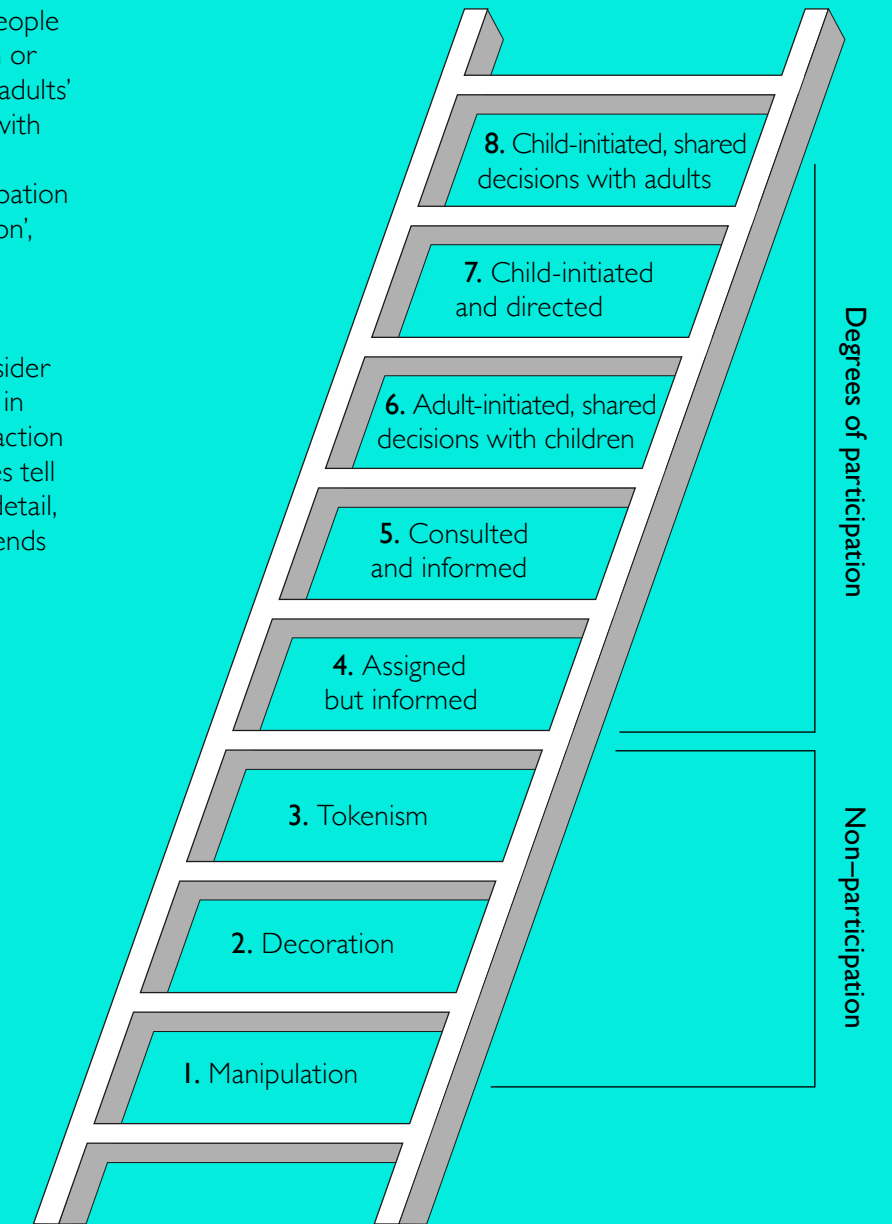
Ideas spark 8 Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation

Roger Hart's framework describes different 'rungs of participation' ranked according to the relative degree of agency afforded to young people in a given context.⁵² The ladder runs on a scale from 'manipulation' at the bottom (where young people don't understand what they're participating in or why) to 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' at the top (where pupils share responsibility with adults). The framework is further divided into three 'non-participatory' rungs, where participation doesn't factor, and five 'degrees of participation', which encompass different rungs of child participation alongside adults.

The ladder provides a useful template to consider the extent to which pupils are being involved in meaningful participation in their youth social action projects. The section on what the case studies tell us focuses on levels of participation in more detail, emphasising that we shouldn't equate either ends of the ladder in terms of 'good' and 'bad'.

Figure 7: The Ladder of Participation

Figure based on Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation.



⁵¹ Metcalfe, J (2017) Learning from Errors. Annual Review of Psychology 68: 465–89 [PDF]. Available at: www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-psych-010416-044022.

⁵² Hart, R A (1992) Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship. UNICEF [pdf]. Available at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf [Accessed 5 July 2023].

University of Cambridge Primary School, Cambridge

“ [The pupils are] the ones who are going to make this change. I can teach them as much as there is, but if they don't decide that they want to make that change, then they won't be part of that in the future. So it's giving them the access to be able to lead it in that way. ”

Ellie, class teacher

Context

LA: Cambridgeshire
Age range: 4–11
School type: Free
Pupils: 621
FSM: 6.1 percent

What were the key ingredients?

- A curriculum that embeds social justice-oriented topics can itself act as a prompt for pupil-generated ideas for youth social action.
- The arts can be combined with youth social action to good effect.
- UCPS is the only university training school in the country, which encourages free flow of ideas, putting research into practice, and the development of a broad curriculum for pupils.

How did it start?

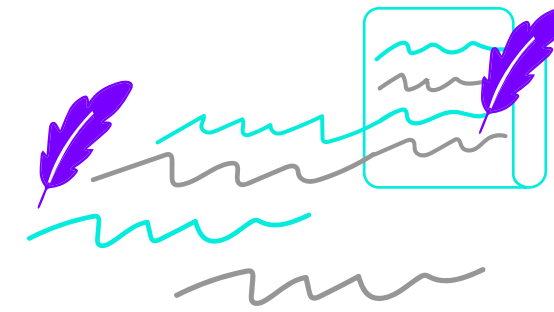
The University of Cambridge Primary School opened its doors to pupils in 2015 with the aim of crafting an ambitious and innovative learning experience. The school's open and inclusive ethos is reflected both in its striking architecture — the school loops around a central green space — and its unique connection to the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education. This relationship fosters a research-informed and research-generating culture, with the school's executive head, James Biddulph FRSA, and curriculum lead, Luke Rolls, having co-edited individual volumes of the **Unlocking Research (Ideas spark 9)** series of books. As the UK's only university training primary school, this encourages a free flow of ideas and research into practice, which feeds into a broad curriculum for pupils.

“ I think it's incredible that we have the opportunity to be able to kind of put youth social action into place and kind of explore things that we are passionate about as teachers as well. And we're given a lot of trust as teachers with what we kind of do with the curriculum from what's obviously like being planned out. ”

Ellie, class teacher

“ We can make speeches because they do quite a lot to help. I'm really influenced by Greta Thunberg because she's quiet but she started off by sitting on the street and gathering people to make a change. ”

Year 4 pupil



What happened?

“ We're a research school, everything we do is backed by research. One of our main aims was creating compassionate citizens. And that's a core aspect of our curriculum. ”

Ellie, class teacher

- As a free school, UCPS's curriculum has been designed in a way that fits its unique ethos. Projects run every half term, and each one has a specific outcome at the end that pupils orient their learning around, such as a creative response (a play, poem, or speech) to the topic. Teachers hold curriculum meetings each Monday to ensure that each project will connect to the next, ensuring that knowledge is built cumulatively year on year.
- The school's unique set-up is fertile ground for emergent youth social action. One whole-school, cross-curricular project focused on the experience of refugees, centring around Francesca Sanna's book *The Journey*⁵³ (**Ideas spark 10**), as a result of which pupils were inspired to create an 'around the world' dance in their PE lessons.
- The project in turn led to pupils pursuing their own fundraising activities for a local refugee charity, collecting enough donations to buy seven refugee children school uniforms and PE kits for a year.

“ We created an around the world dance, which was great. And the creative aspect of that made the children really passionate about the topic, and maybe the children that wouldn't necessarily find it as easy a topic to understand. Because obviously, there was so much depth there, we did a lot of looking at migration and the difference between migrants and refugees. ”

Ellie, class teacher

Ideas spark 9 Routledge's Unlocking Research

The Unlocking Research series of books is designed specifically for primary school educators. Showcasing contributions from both academics and teachers, the books draw on real-life examples of teaching practice and focuses on a range of different educational topics. The most recent volume, edited by two staff from the University of Cambridge Primary School, focuses on pupil participation and experience.⁵⁴

Ideas spark 10 Storytelling for social change

University of Cambridge Primary School pupils mentioned having read *The Journey*, which tells the story of a refugee family forced to leave their home from the perspective of the young daughter. Fiction is a powerful pedagogical tool⁵⁵ and Amnesty International uses the example of *The Journey* as a route into teaching pupils about human rights.⁵⁶

Fiction can be a way of helping to communicate challenging topics to children, and there are increasingly books relating to issues like the climate crisis being published. Stories themselves can be a spark for youth social action and can be integrated into literacy lessons.

⁵³ Senna, F (2016) *The Journey*. Flying Eye Books, UK.

⁵⁴ Biddulph, J, Rolls, L and Flutter, J (2022) *Unleashing Children's Voices in New Democratic Primary Education*. London: Routledge.

⁵⁵ Landrum, RE, Brakke, K, McCarthy, MA (2019) The pedagogical power of storytelling. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology* 5: 247–53. Available at: psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/stl0000152

⁵⁶ Amnesty International. Exploring the Journey Together [online]. Available at: www.amnesty.org.uk/files/exploring_the_journey_together.pdf [Accessed: 6 June 2023].

University of Cambridge Primary School, Cambridge



Teacher experience

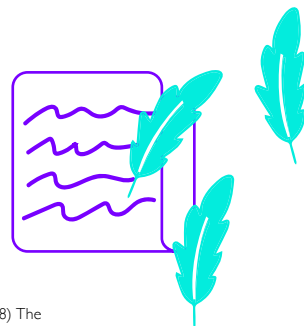
- **Teacher passions can feed into successful youth social action:** Ellie's own background is in charity and social action, having volunteered abroad in Cambodia and South Africa. Working with vulnerable children made Ellie want to be a teacher, and because social action is so integral to the school, it encourages Ellie and other teachers to learn more — the school nurtures teacher as well as pupil creativity.
- **The arts and youth social action go hand-in-hand:** Ellie also highlighted the way that youth social action linked up neatly with the arts, echoing some findings we heard from teachers and pupils elsewhere. There is extensive evidence that arts subjects are a significant contributor to childhood development and learning, and active citizenship projects provide a good platform to fuse artistic expression with purpose.⁵⁷
- **School contextual factors can bring advantages:** teachers at UCPS are open about the fact that they're fortunate to be situated in an affluent, well-connected area. Many of the parents work as academics at the university, and so are able and willing to offer their support and expertise. In this way UCPS benefits from the social and cultural capital of the local area. The university too brings clear benefits in terms of internationally respected research.

“ If all of us go back to our parents and go ‘this is what’s happening’ in the world, you can show them what’s going on because they might not realise. ”

Year 6 pupil

“ I did drama as my undergrad. And I love using creative outlets like drama, singing, art, which are also main focuses in our school, to help the children express themselves and learn more about the world. And we always feel like we’re able to suggest things which are exciting for us to move forward. ”

Ellie, class teacher



⁵⁷ Cultural Learning Alliance and Association of School and College Leaders (2018) The Arts in Schools: Why the arts matter in our education system. Cultural Learning Alliance Briefing Paper No. 4 [PDF]. Available at: www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Arts-in-Schools-Briefing-A4.pdf [Accessed: 15 March 2023].

ASSET Education Multi-Academy Trust, Suffolk

“ We have a vision in our trust, that’s to equip and empower the next generation of children to create a more compassionate, equitable and sustainable world where they personally and collectively thrive. ”

Clare, SLT member

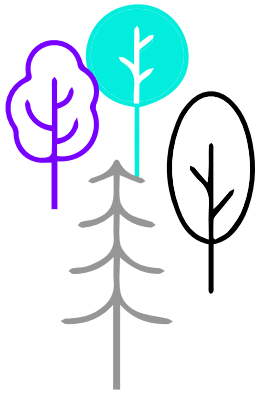
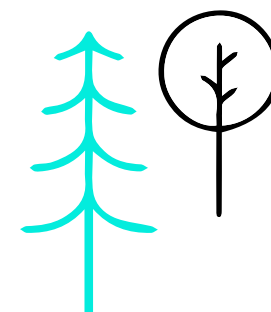
ASSET takes its values seriously, embedding them throughout their schools. Clare has made it a central part of the trust’s mission to have pupils as active participants in shaping their own futures. A pupil parliament was established to ensure pupil voice from across the trust was taken into account with decision-making, including helping to develop a charter for all the schools within the trust.

ASSET schools work closely with local partners like WildEast to facilitate youth social action across all of their schools, bringing pupils close to nature while at the same time driving environmental change by reclaiming up to 30 percent of school land for nature.

Clare emphasises that the ethos of the trust — encompassing empowerment, engagement and equity — is important for maintaining healthy school communities for both pupils and staff. Giving staff autonomy and flexibility to live out their values is seen as a vital aspect in light of the ongoing recruitment and retention crisis in schools.

“ You have to be idealistic for young people. And because there are too many problems in the world that we have to solve, and the survival of the planet itself depends on our young people having the skills, expertise, knowledge, and all of those things. But also a sense that they can make a difference. ”

Clare, SLT member



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