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DESIGN LAB

#iwill Fund Learning Hub Evidence Workstream

Youth Social Action and Outcomes for Young People
Dartington Service Design Lab
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Executive Summary

Youth social action is said to promote a range of outcomes for young people, from enhanced employment prospects to improved wellbeing. This paper reviews research evidence on outcomes for young people from participation in youth social action, drawing out implications for stakeholders in the #iwill Fund as well as the wider youth sector. We have clustered these outcomes into four areas to aid discussion. The clusters align with the outcomes on which youth social action has been most frequently evaluated, or hypothesised to promote. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub's Evidence Papers are iterative, and we will continue to review the evidence as more becomes available.

1. Socio-emotional / Character outcomes

- A broad range of socio-emotional outcomes (also referred to as non-cognitive or character outcomes) have been associated with youth social action participation.
- Our review of the evidence finds small positive effects on some of the measures used. However, we do not have a good understanding of *how* these effects are caused or *who* is most likely to benefit and in what way.
- The principal challenge for the evidence base around youth social action and socio-emotional outcomes is the lack of clearly or consistently defined outcomes. Given the policy focus on this area, standardised and validated measures, such as those held in the Education Endowment Foundation's SPECTRUM database, could be more widely used.

2. Civic / Societal outcomes

- Findings from longitudinal studies we reviewed suggest that youth social action participation can influence young people's civic and societal behaviour including political knowledge and further social action participation.
- Untangling the effect of social action on civic and societal outcomes is challenging not only because social action participation can be expressive of civic engagement, but also because both these things can result from the same motivation to help others.

3. Employment outcomes

- Our review of the evidence finds participation in youth social action is likely to have some positive effect on employment outcomes, including via the attainment of job skills.
- However, we do not have a good enough understanding of *how* these effects are caused or *who* is most likely to benefit and in what way.
- The effect is unlikely to be simple. Youth social action is hypothesised to help young people become more employable, but also to encourage them to select careers with social impact, which may be less well rewarded financially and offer less job security.

4. Education outcomes

- Based on our review of the research evidence, we cannot conclude that youth social action participation has a consistent, positive impact on young people’s educational outcomes.
- However, there is some evidence that youth social action contributes to the development of non-cognitive skills that are relevant for success in the classroom.

Summary: conclusions and recommendations

1. In general, the evidence base for the impact of youth social action on young people’s outcomes is in the early stages of development. Particular areas of confidence, however, are around job skills and civic and political engagement, where evidence suggests that youth social action can be effective. We cannot conclude that participation in youth social action improves attainment in educational assessments, although there is some evidence it can affect non-attainment outcomes such as teamwork and self-confidence.
2. To make it feasible to summarise the evidence to date this paper focuses on experimental trials. However, we recognise that experimental trials are often not proportionate or desirable ways to understand how youth social action is working - a broader view of evidence contributes a lot to our understanding of how to deliver youth social action and the effects it may be having on outcomes for young people, although it cannot support strong causal statements. We will incorporate more of this evidence into future #iwill Fund Learning Hub papers, including from evaluations of funded work.
3. There is a significant gap in the evidence base around the ways in which youth social action can contribute to young people’s outcomes. To address this, and generate valuable learning for the sector, programme designs should be more explicit about which components of their programme they expect to contribute to *which* outcomes for the young people they serve. Funders and partners should ask (and help) programmes they support to identify and explain plausible ways in which their social action activity might lead to a desired outcome for young people. These more precise theories of change can help us to make more sense of monitoring and evaluation data generated through delivery.
4. For example, programmes’ own monitoring could be designed to identify the contribution of youth social action to changes in young people’s outcomes. Specifying and measuring intermediate outcomes which contribute to ultimate outcomes can develop confidence about which parts of a social action programme are supporting which outcomes. Collecting feedback from participants and practitioners to understand how the programme has had an effect can complement this.
5. External evaluations of youth social action practice would benefit from a reduction in the variety of measures used to monitor programme outcomes. The Education Endowment Foundation’s SPECTRUM database – a review of how non-academic and essential skills are conceptualised and measured in relation to child and adolescent outcomes – is a good starting point for this.

Introduction

This is an Evidence Paper written by the Dartington Service Design Lab as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was commissioned to support, and build on, the activities of the #iwill Fund. It has two strategic objectives: to inform the strategic and investment direction of the #iwill Fund and Match Funders; and to strengthen and connect the youth social action sector by enabling and facilitating the sharing of learning, data and insights across delivery partners.

Youth social action is hypothesised to promote a range of outcomes for young people, from enhanced employment prospects to improved wellbeing.^{i,ii,iii} Increased policy focus on youth social action has led to a growth in research into these hypotheses which builds on more established evidence bases for particular forms of social action, namely, volunteering and service learning, an approach that connects community service to classroom learning.¹ This paper reviews the research evidence on outcomes for young people from participation in youth social action, drawing out implications for stakeholders in the #iwill Fund as well as the wider youth sector.

The paper is structured in four sections. Firstly, we present a typology of the different outcomes for young people that youth social action is hypothesised to promote. Secondly, we summarise the present state of the evidence base. Thirdly, we work through the typology of outcomes outlining for each group of potential benefits: (i) the mechanisms by which youth social action is believed to promote the outcomes; (ii) the research evidence on the impact of youth social action on the outcome; and (iii) the work supported by the #iwill Fund and Match Funders in this area. Finally, we offer conclusions and recommendations for stakeholders in the #iwill Fund as well as the wider youth sector.

Before moving into the main body of the paper, it is important to highlight the distinction between **outcome-driven Match Funders** that are interested in supporting youth social action because they see it as a means to promote outcomes for young people and **values-driven Match Funders** that support young people's participation in social action because they view this as an end in itself.^{iv} The distinction is reflected in the Match Funders' evaluation plans. Outcome-driven funders' evaluation plans are designed to determine whether funded programmes have a positive impact on participants. Value-driven funders' evaluations typically aim to share learning and best practice across their grantees around sustainably embedding youth social action opportunities and encouraging wider and longer-term participation in youth social action. While this paper may be of most use to the former category of Match Funders, it will be interesting to stakeholders across the #iwill Fund because of the importance of double benefit to the #iwill campaign's definition of high-quality youth social action.

¹ The major components of service learning include active participation, thoughtfully organised experiences, focus on community needs and school/community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge, extended learning opportunities, and development of a sense of caring for others.

Typology of outcomes

Youth social action is hypothesised to promote a range of outcomes for young people. Our analysis of Match Funder evaluation documents and research from outside the #iwill Fund identified over 70 different outcomes that have been associated, at least in theory, with participation in youth social action. The full list can be found in Appendix 1. We have clustered these outcomes into four areas to aid discussion. The clusters align with those outcomes on which youth social action has been most frequently evaluated, or hypothesised to promote.

1. Socio-emotional / Character outcomes

Socio-emotional and character outcomes refer to a broad range of skills, behaviours and character traits. This breadth is demonstrated by the number of different concepts included in Appendix 1. While we use the terms 'socio-emotional' and 'character' outcomes here, these outcomes have also been called 'non-cognitive skills', 'elements of character', 'character traits', 'virtues' and 'essential life skills'. We tentatively group these outcomes into seven clusters.

1. **Resilience** – including determination and social resilience.
2. **Self-concept** – including self-esteem, self-efficacy and personal aspirations.
3. **Interpersonal skills** – including communication and leadership.
4. **Trust and respect for others** – including neighbourliness and a sense of belonging.
5. **Practical skills** – including time management and self-organisation.
6. **Pro-social attitudes** – including curiosity, honesty and conscientiousness.
7. **Wellbeing** – including mental health and managing emotions.

In this paper, we also include mental health and individual wellbeing among socio-emotional outcomes for young people. This decision is based on our observation that youth social action programmes aiming to promote these two outcomes typically describe a mechanism of change in which wellbeing and mental health are supported by improved socio-emotional skills or character traits including improved self-concept and being more able to manage emotions. Our literature review did not identify any social action programmes that target clinical indicators of mental health.

2. Civic / Societal outcomes

Youth social action's most distinctive set of potential outcomes are changes in young people's civic and societal understanding, participation and actions. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub's Evidence Paper on the community benefits of youth social action has considered civic and societal outcomes from the perspective of their potential benefit for society as a whole.^v Table 1 in Appendix 1 lists over 20 different perspectives on these outcomes, which we summarise in four broad categories.

1. **Change agency.** A belief in the importance and possibility of social change, and the young person's own ability to affect it.
2. **Civic skills.** An increased understanding of society and the political system.
3. **Social cohesion.** Increased social cohesion at the individual level, for example, greater participation in civil society, being more comfortable with people from different backgrounds.
4. **Habit of service.** A habit of service that manifests through further social action participation or a choice of career that is perceived to have social impact.

3. Employment outcomes

Volunteering, an important type of social action, has long been associated with employment outcomes and is often motivated by a desire to improve one's job prospects. People who are unemployed sometimes volunteer specifically to gain experience and improve their job prospects.^{vi} In the 2017 National Youth Social Action survey, 15% of young people who participated in youth social action reported that they did so because it added to their CV or job opportunities.^{vii}

Youth social action programmes have been evaluated for their impact on employment outcomes such as income and occupational status as well as intermediate outcomes including skills development, work readiness and attainment of accredited qualifications and training. These outcomes are typical of any programme, not just social action, that targets employment outcomes. A potential outcome that is more distinctive of youth social action is the impact on young people's career choices and aspirations. Youth social action participation has been hypothesised to encourage young people to choose occupations that are perceived to have a positive social impact.

4. Education outcomes

Youth social action has been evaluated for its impact on academic outcomes ranging from improved attitudes to education and more concrete measures of engagement such as attendance, to progress made at school and improved attainment in national tests. Some youth social action programmes aim to support young people to achieve accredited vocational qualifications and training while others attempt to raise young people aspirations to attend further and higher education.

Summary of the evidence base

Due to time limitations, we did not undertake a systematic review of the literature. We searched two major databases and were also guided by existing review articles and conversations with topic experts. As a result, we may have omitted some useful sources from our analysis. However, the #iwill Fund Learning Hub's Evidence Papers are iterative, so we welcome suggestions for programmes and studies to include in future versions of this paper.

There is a significant body of research and evaluations investigating the outcomes for young people from youth social action participation. Our literature review identified over 40 studies and reports that address this issue and also drew on existing reviews of outcomes evidence relating to established forms of social action, namely, volunteering and service learning.

However, the methodological quality of the evidence base is mixed, ranging from well-designed randomised control trials to snapshot, self-report surveys. As further illustration, only a small minority of pieces we cite in this report are peer reviewed publications. The consequence of this is that while there are some strong findings, the *generalisable* evidence base for the impact of youth social action on young people is not strong overall. There is an opportunity to develop the evidence base for youth social action. Several steps can be taken towards this, which we set out in the concluding section of this Evidence Paper.

This paper examines the evidence for claims that youth social action causes changes in certain outcomes for young people. Our review of the literature sought to identify outcome studies: quantitative studies that estimate the causal effect of youth social action programmes on specific outcomes. Due to the challenges inherent in isolating causal effects (detailed in Appendix 2) we only included experimental studies, including randomised control trials, that measured outcomes at two or more time points and employed some form of control group in the design. We also drew on observational studies based on longitudinal data.

While we also looked at qualitative research and survey responses, this was not to identify the causal effect of youth social action programmes, but rather to understand the mechanisms of change that might explain any causal effects identified by outcome studies.

These decisions were taken to make it feasible to summarise the evidence base. It's important to note that the Learning Hub does, and will in forthcoming Evidence Papers, take a broad view of what evidence is useful - including studies without an experimental design, and user and practitioner views. Further, experimental studies are often impractical or non-proportionate within youth social action due to the small scale and early developmental stage of much delivery. Further Evidence Papers will examine emerging evidence from Match Funder evaluations.

Socio-emotional / Character outcomes

Mechanisms

A broad range of socio-emotional outcomes (also referred to as non-cognitive or character outcomes) have been associated with youth social action participation. Programmes that target these outcomes are often vague about the mechanisms of change – more specificity would be helpful. We list five potential ways in which youth social action might affect socio-emotional outcomes, which we identified based on our analysis of programme and evaluation materials.

1. **Relational factors.** Youth social action participation may improve young people's socio-emotional outcomes by strengthening their attachment to peers, school and their wider community and helping them become, and feel, more socially integrated.
2. **Practicing skills.** Following the model of service learning popularised in the US, youth social action is hypothesised to provide young people with practical opportunities to exercise socio-emotional skills or character traits.
3. **Reflection.** One of the six principles of quality youth social action identified by the #iwill campaign is that space is provided for young people to reflect on their actions and impact. Through reflection, it is hypothesised that young people will improve their socio-emotional skills and wellbeing.
4. **Social impact.** Where young people perceive that their social action has had a positive effect, they may experience positive feelings and better wellbeing, as well as gaining greater confidence and self-efficacy upon seeing the impact they can make.
5. **Role models.** Some youth social action programmes identify role models (programme staff, famous people) who demonstrate socio-emotional skills and character traits.

Evidence

The principal challenge for the evidence base around youth social action and socio-emotional outcomes is the lack of clearly or consistently defined outcomes. The best quality evidence finds small positive effects on the measures used. The ways in which youth social action causes these changes are not well understood. Given the policy focus on this area, standardised and validated measures, such as those held in the Education Endowment Foundation's SPECTRUM database, could be widely used. SPECTRUM is a review of how non-academic and essential skills are conceptualised and measured in relation to child and adolescent outcomes.

The Education Endowment Foundation has published two sets of randomised control trials that found small positive effects from youth social action on socio-emotional outcomes. Compared to pupils in the control group, those who took part in the Children's University programme were more likely to report higher levels of communication, empathy, self-confidence, resilience, and happiness after the intervention.^{viii} The second trial looked at the effect of participation in

uniformed youth groups. Young people who received the intervention made small additional improvements in their self-confidence and teamwork compared to the control group.^{ix}

The Team Social Action programme in Newham was the subject of a randomised control trial published in 2019. The programme is designed for Year 8 and 9 pupils with a mild or moderate emotional, behavioural, attention, or relationship difficulty. Over the 10-12 weekly sessions, pupils identify a topic and then co-develop a social action project to deliver in school or the community. The study measured the programme's impact on young people's wellbeing, school connection and peer support. Team Social Action had no impact on those attending up to 9 sessions but had a small, significant and positive effect on the wellbeing and peer support of young people who attended 10 or more sessions. Conversely, the intervention led to a small, significant reduction in the school connectedness of the young people who attended 10 or more sessions. Qualitative data collected with young people during the trial highlighted that an incomplete social action project can lead to negative feelings of self-worth.^x This may explain the differential effect at 10 weeks participation.

The most recent evaluation of the National Citizen Service programme found that participation is associated with improved "life skills", resilience and wellbeing compared to a non-random control group. Other programme evaluations report positive effects on socio-emotional outcomes, but the findings cannot be relied upon due to many of the methodological weaknesses described in Appendix 2.

#iwill Fund Activity

Socio-emotional, character and wellbeing outcomes are common objectives stated by Match Funders supporting youth social action. For example, Sport England is funding sports participation and leadership programmes that aim to support young people's wellbeing. Spirit of 2012 are funding UK Youth's EmpowHER programme, which leverages social action to challenge structural issues that affect the wellbeing and self-efficacy of young women and girls, as well as addressing individual-level factors. The Co-op Foundation is focusing on the relational mechanism described above, aiming to impact young people's socio-emotional outcomes by reducing loneliness and social isolation through youth social action programmes.

Civic / Societal outcomes

Mechanisms

In their social profile of volunteers, Musick and Wilson list five logical mechanisms by which volunteering may promote “good citizenship”.^{xi} This is one study and should be treated with appropriate caution.

1. **Trust.** Volunteering builds trust in other people and public institutions; trusting people are more likely to get involved in politics.^{xii}
2. **Social impact.** Volunteering encourages the belief that a social contract underlies orderly social life; volunteers learn “that actions are interdependent, that group discipline serves a common purpose, that differences among participants can be negotiated, and that multiple perspectives can be coordinated.”^{xiii} This provides a framework in which people situate, explain and derive meaning for their voluntary actions.
3. **Civic network.** Volunteering gets people more intensely involved in voluntary and non-profit associations, which are associated with political and civic groups.
4. **Civic skills.** Volunteer work teaches people civic skills that are needed to engage in politics and civil society.
5. **Structural awareness.** Volunteering makes people more aware the structural nature of social problems and the need for political solutions.^{xiv}

Evidence

Untangling the effect of social action on civic and societal outcomes is challenging not only because social action participation can be expressive of civic engagement, but also because both can result from the same motivation to help others.^{xv} However, findings from longitudinal studies do suggest that youth social action participation can influence civic and societal behaviour. A further challenge is to turn this knowledge into an effective intervention. The findings of a qualitative study in Australia suggest that *compulsory* social action programmes may have little effect on social engagement and citizenship behaviours.^{xvi}

An observational study drawing on data from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study found that participation in political activities (debating clubs, student councils, elections for councils and mock elections) in Year 11 was associated with increased political action in later life, including voting, joining demonstrations and using social media for political purposes. The same study found that participation in political activities in Year 7 had an indirect effect on later political action because it increased the chances young people took up opportunities in Year 11. Attrition in the study was very high (96% of the initial wave were lost). While the authors accounted for this, and controlled for confounding variables, we can only have moderate confidence in these findings.^{xvii}

Niemi and Chapman in the US and Roker and colleagues in the UK have conducted longitudinal studies which confirmed the hypothesis that participation in voluntary action caused an increase in young people's political knowledge and understanding.^{xviii} An eight-year study following graduates of the AmeriCorps programme found participation in the social action project to be associated with persistently higher public service motivation compared to a non-random control group. The concept of public service motivation encompasses commitment to the public interest, attraction to public policymaking and civic awareness.

Youth social action programmes have not been evaluated by high quality randomised control trial for their effect on civic and societal outcomes. The most recent evaluation of National Citizen Service, which compares participants' progress against a non-random control group, found positive effects on pro-social attitudes, such as attitudes towards mixing with people of different backgrounds, and civic attitudes including intention to vote and volunteer in the future.^{xix}

International comparative studies have found that the relationship between volunteering and political and civic participation in young people is culturally specific, typically varying depending on how politics and voluntary action interact in each nation.^{xx} This suggests that caution should be advised when claiming that youth social action promotes civic participation. The relationship is likely to depend on factors that can vary across time and social groups.

#iwill Fund Activity

The most common civic or societal outcome that Match Funders are explicitly seeking to promote through the programmes they fund is further participation in youth social action, often articulated as volunteering. Some funders, such as Spirit of 2012 and Team London, are trying to achieve this by developing a habit of social action in the young people who participate in their programmes. Other funders, such as Ormiston Trust and Pears Foundation, aim to facilitate further social action participation by embedding opportunities for young people in institutions such as schools and hospitals. The Co-op Foundation is supporting schools to embed youth social action in the pursuit of civic outcomes.

Employment Outcomes

Mechanisms

Youth social action participation is hypothesised to lead to employment outcomes such as higher income and a greater likelihood of being employed. However, the effect is unlikely to be simple. Youth social action is hypothesised to help young people become more employable, but also to encourage them to select careers with social impact, which may be less well rewarded financially and offer less job security. Five key mechanisms of change are set out below.

1. **Education.** Youth social action is hypothesised to improve academic attainment which has implications for success in the labour market.
2. **Job skills.** Young people may learn skills while participating in youth social action that are valued by employers.
3. **Social network.** Youth social action opportunities provides sites where young people can expand their social network, increasing the chances they will hear about and be recommended for job opportunities.
4. **Signalling.** Rather than acquiring skills during youth social action programmes, young people may use their formal social action experience to evidence skills they already had to potential employers.
5. **Aspiration raising.** Youth social action programmes are hypothesised to increase young people's self-efficacy and sense of agency, which may encourage them to raise their employment aspirations.

Evidence

Our review of the evidence found that participation in youth social action is likely to have some positive effect on employment outcomes. However, we do not have a good understanding of *how* these effects are caused or *who* is most likely to benefit and in what way.

Survey and qualitative data suggest that many of the mechanisms described above may occur when young people participate in youth social action. 15% of youth social action participants surveyed by the National Youth Social Action Survey believed that taking part in the opportunity had improved their CV or job opportunities, while the same percentage reported gaining new skills during the opportunity.^{xxi} Surveys of young volunteers in the US and Canada found that young people believed volunteering gave them job skills (49% of Canadian respondents), got their foot in the door with an employer (28% of American respondents) and provided helpful contacts for their future career (29% of American respondents).^{xxii} A qualitative study with 16-18-year old girls in London found they framed youth social action as being helpful for their future university applications and careers.^{xxiii} Snapshot surveys and qualitative research are not sufficient, however, to tell us whether these mechanisms actually have an effect on employment outcomes.

A longitudinal study that recruited over 12,000 US college students found volunteering at university to be associated with higher income. This effect was partly due to college volunteers tending to continue their studies to achieve an advanced degree.^{xxiv} Two American cohort studies that analysed the same data on women returning to the labour force reported seemingly contradictory findings. One found volunteering to be associated with higher occupational status upon return to work, while the other reported that women who volunteered tended to earn less than non-volunteers.^{xxv} A possible explanation proposed by the study authors is that people who participate in social action are likely to choose occupations that are perceived to have social impact which often offer higher social status than financial reward.^{xxvi}

Evaluations of youth social action programmes in the UK that focus on employment outcomes tend to look for evidence of the job skills mechanism, measuring changes in young people's work and life skills. Several programme evaluations have reported large effects but due to methodological issues we cannot have confidence in these findings.^{xxvii} In 2016, the Behavioural Insights Team published the results of three randomised control trials investigating the effects of youth social action programmes on work and life skills. The trials found small, statistically significant improvements in 'life skills' such as empathy, problem solving and cooperation. Participants in the trial were also assessed during a mock job interview. Although young people who took part in social action performed better in the interview, the difference compared to the control group was not statistically significant.^{xxviii}

#iwill Fund Activity

While many Match Funders have specified socio-emotional skills that may be useful in employment contexts as potential benefits for young people from their funded programmes, only a few make employment outcomes explicit objectives of the youth social action they support. One Million Mentors aim to improve young people's employment outcomes by increasing their knowledge of job opportunities and raising their aspirations through youth social action participation supported by a mentoring relationship.^{xxix} Virgin Money Foundation is supporting youth social action projects that engage young people currently reluctant to take part by empowering them to address issues important to them. Their objective is to build these young people's long-term employability by developing routines of engagement. Finally, the Careers and Enterprise Company is creating a toolkit to support schools and colleges to use youth social action as part of their careers education.

Education Outcomes

Mechanisms

We identified two mechanisms in the literature through which youth social action participation may improve young people’s academic outcomes. First, youth social action opportunities may provide occasions for young people to apply and practice the skills, knowledge and understanding that will be assessed in national tests. Second, participation in youth social action may benefit young people by building their confidence, self-efficacy and other non-academic outcomes which are associated with academic engagement and attainment.^{xxx}

A process evaluation of the Children’s University programme, for example, identified both the opportunity to connect activities with classroom learning and the recognition of achievements to boost confidence as potential mechanisms through which social action programmes may impact academic outcomes.^{xxxix} The Education Endowment Foundation reviewed the evidence around peer-to-peer learning programmes and suggest that the peer tutor’s academic attainment may improve “due to the development of their meta-cognitive awareness and improvement in their capability to self-regulate their own learning.”^{xxxix}

Evidence

Based on the research evidence, we cannot conclude that youth social action participation has a consistent, positive impact on young people’s educational outcomes. However, there is some evidence that youth social action contributes to the development of non-cognitive skills that are relevant for success in the classroom.

Service learning is an approach that connects community service (i.e., volunteering) to classroom learning. Musick and Wilson review the evidence around service learning programmes in the United States and conclude that “[it] is unlikely that volunteering has much of an effect on young people’s cognitive abilities. It is much more likely that volunteering builds self-confidence, maturity, and poise, which are useful for successful performance in the classroom and in academic assignments.”^{xxxix} A large longitudinal study with a non-random control group found that improvements in school academic performance associated with service learning participation were small and not persistent.^{xxxix} However, service learning participation has been found by a longitudinal study to have a positive effect on status of university attended and degree performance.^{xxxv} These findings suggest that the benefits of social action participation for young people are not *directly* relevant to school assessments.

The Education Endowment Foundation has published the results from two sets of randomised control trials that measure the effects of youth social action programmes on academic and non-academic educational outcomes. The Youth United trials evaluated the impact of uniformed youth group participation and found a small negative effect on attainment that did not achieve statistical significance. The results suggested an improvement in self-reported, non-academic outcomes

including self-confidence and teamwork. The process evaluation of the uniformed youth groups did not identify key ingredients that may explain how this effect occurs, but it is notable that the groups taking part did not appear to make an explicit connection between their activities and educational outcomes.^{xxxvi}

The second randomised control trial evaluated the Children’s University programme which encompasses a range of learning activities beyond the normal school day, such as after-school clubs, visits to universities and museums, and ‘social action’ opportunities such as volunteering in the community. The study found that participation in the programme led to two months additional progress in reading and maths skills over two years. Participation was also associated with small improvements in non-academic outcomes: teamwork and social responsibility. While these findings are reasonably robust and promising, it is not clear what contribution was made by the social action component of the programme.^{xxxvii}

#iwill Fund activity

We reviewed the evaluation plans that Match Funders have shared with the #iwill Learning Hub and found that educational outcomes are not an important focus for the Match Funders. A funder that explicitly targets an educational outcome is Ormiston Trust. They identify improved literacy skills as a secondary outcome of the youth social action opportunities they are seeking to embed in Ormiston Academy Trust schools. Ormiston Trust aim to achieve this outcome by creating cross-curricular learning opportunities within youth social action activities.^{xxxviii} This approach aligns with the Education Endowment Foundation’s findings.^{xxxix} The WE Schools programme aims to increase academic engagement, and improve workplace and university readiness, as well as instil active citizenship.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. In general, the evidence base for the impact of youth social action on young people's outcomes is in the early stages of development. Particular areas of confidence, however, are around employment skills and civic and political engagement, where evidence suggests that youth social action can be effective. We cannot conclude that participation in youth social action improves attainment in educational assessments, although there is some evidence it can affect non-attainment outcomes such as teamwork and self-confidence.
2. To make it feasible to summarise the evidence to date this paper focuses on experimental trials. However, we recognise that experimental trials are often not proportionate or desirable ways to understand how youth social action is working - a broader view of evidence contributes a lot to our understanding of how to deliver youth social action and the effects it may be having on outcomes for young people, although it cannot support strong causal statements. We will incorporate more of this evidence into future #iwill Fund Learning Hub papers, including from evaluations of funded work.
3. There is a significant gap in the evidence base around the ways in which youth social action can contribute to young people's outcomes. To address this, and generate valuable learning for the sector, programme designs should be more explicit about which components of their programme they expect to contribute to which outcomes for the young people they serve. Funders and partners should ask (and help) programmes they support to identify and explain plausible ways in which their social action activity might lead to a desired outcome for young people. These more precise theories of change can help us to make more sense of monitoring and evaluation data generated through delivery.
4. For example, programmes' own monitoring could be designed to identify the contribution of youth social action to changes in young people's outcomes. Specifying and measuring intermediate outcomes which contribute to ultimate outcomes can develop confidence about which parts of a social action programme are supporting which outcomes. Collecting feedback from participants and practitioners to understand how the programme has had an effect can complement this.
5. External evaluations of youth social action practice would benefit from a reduction in the variety of measures used to monitor programme outcomes. The Education Endowment Foundation's SPECTRUM database - a review of how non-academic and essential skills are conceptualised and measured in relation to child and adolescent outcomes - is a good starting point for this.

Appendix 1 – detailed outcomes

Table 1 is based on our analysis of Match Funder evaluation plans and evaluations of programmes external to the #iwill Fund. The aim is to show, in detail, which outcomes people are looking for and talking about when they consider the potential impact of youth social action. The lists are long and some outcomes may seem very closely related. We have kept the lists in their entirety in order to demonstrate the breadth of outcomes that are targeted and the lack of clarity around some of the concepts.

TABLE 1			
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL/ CHARACTER	CIVIC/SOCIETAL	EMPLOYMENT	EDUCATION
1. Social resilience	34. Challenging limiting perceptions	56. Income	67. Attainment
2. Resilience		57. Occupational status	68. Attitude
3. Determination	35. Empowered to identify and lead social change	58. Readiness for work	69. Engagement (inc. attendance)
4. Grit		59. Develop employable skills	70. Accredited qualification
5. Perseverance	36. Ability to influence decision makers	60. Entrepreneurial skills	71. Training
6. Self-confidence		61. Experience of a professional workplace	72. Aspirations to further/higher education
7. Self-esteem	37. Intention to vote	62. Accredited qualification	
8. Agency	38. Public service motivation	63. Training	
9. Ambition	39. Commitment to public interest	64. Employment aspirations	
10. Aspirations	40. Learning more about candidates for elections	65. View of employment prospects	
11. Co-operation	41. Civic awareness	66. Choose career with perceived beneficial social impact	
12. Human capital	42. Social cohesion (from the young		
13. Teamwork			
14. Leadership			
15. Empathy			
16. Tolerance			
17. Respect			
18. Neighbourliness			
19. Community spirit			
20. Problem solving			
21. Getting things done			
22. Optimism			



<p>23. Motivation</p> <p>24. Drive</p> <p>25. Honesty</p> <p>26. Integrity</p> <p>27. Dignity</p> <p>28. Conscientiousness</p> <p>29. Curiosity</p> <p>30. Focus</p> <p>31. Mental health</p> <p>32. Wellbeing</p> <p>33. Managing feelings</p>	<p>person's point of view)</p> <p>43. Attitudes to people who are different</p> <p>44. Understanding others</p> <p>45. Mixing with people who are different</p> <p>46. Sense of community</p> <p>47. Social trust</p> <p>48. Sense of belonging</p> <p>49. Social capital</p> <p>50. Access to social supports</p> <p>51. Habit of service</p> <p>52. Attitudes to current affairs</p> <p>53. Social responsibility</p> <p>54. Hours spent volunteering</p> <p>55. Participation in clubs</p>		
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Appendix 2 – Methodological challenges

We set out the methodological challenges below for two reasons. First, to help the reader interpret the findings we report. Second, to help current and future research into the effects of youth social action acknowledge these challenges and, where appropriate and where resource allows, employ the methods suggested to address them.

1. Causal inference

When evaluating the impact of youth social action on young people, we are asking a *causal* question: 'Does youth social action cause this outcome for young people?' The most fundamental challenge we face in answering this question results from the fact that **the outcomes youth social action is hypothesised to promote can actually cause young people to be more likely to participate in social action in the first place.**^{x1} The #iwill Fund Learning Hub's recent Evidence Paper on the socio-economic participation gap in youth social action summarised how employment and education statuses are predictive of young people's social action participation.

In order to untangle the causal effects, youth social action outcome studies need to employ a high standard of design. **Robust causal inference will only be possible in studies and evaluations that have a control group (ideally with random assignment) and that collect outcome data at more than one time point.**

2. Measurement

A significant proportion of the outcomes that youth social action is hypothesised to promote are intangible, including young people's attitude to education, their wellbeing, self-efficacy and their intention to participate in social action again. These are **difficult concepts to measure** and are **typically approximated through self-report surveys** completed by youth social action participants.

Self-report surveys are often affected by social desirability bias, where respondents may give answers of which they know society is likely to approve. **The robustness of findings based on these questions could be enhanced by the use of validated survey instruments** such as those used by the Behavioural Insights Team to measure several outcomes in their Youth Social Action Trials.

In some studies identified during the literature review, there was a failure to consider the implications of attrition bias. Young people completing surveys at the end of a youth social action programme are more likely to report positive effects and experiences, since they have chosen to complete the programme. When this effect is not acknowledged, the impact of a programme is likely to be over-inflated in the final analysis.

3. The contribution of youth social action

A final methodological challenge results from the fact that **many projects incorporate youth social action as only one element of a wider programme**. In these cases, it is difficult to know how the youth social action component contributed to any outcomes that young people may have experienced. In order to estimate the contribution of social action to young people's outcomes, **qualitative research with young participants can be undertaken alongside quantitative measurement of outcomes in order to understand how young people experienced the change**. Examples of this mixed methods approach include UK Youth's evaluation, commissioned by Spirit of 2012, of the EmpowHER programme.^{xli}

Appendix 3 - About the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

This is a report by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was commissioned to support, and build on, the activities of the #iwill Fund. It has two strategic objectives:

1. To inform the strategic and investment direction of the #iwill Fund. This will ensure that the Leadership Board and #iwill Fund delivery partners are able to target funds into the right areas, ages and approaches, where it is really needed.
2. To strengthen and connect the youth social action sector by enabling and facilitating the sharing of learning, data and insights across delivery partners, including what does and doesn't work, and sharing key insights and learning more broadly within the wider youth social action sector.

The Learning Hub has developed three workstreams which will support its objectives. This will allow us to support funders in making decisions about how to support youth social action now, and to capitalise on the evidence generated through the #iwill Fund to create a legacy of evidence to support funding and delivery in the future.

1) Systems

This work will develop our understanding of barriers and enablers in building and strengthening sustained youth social action. It will support the identification of emerging practice and the testing of potential new solutions as well as help guide investment decisions.

(a) Systems Mapping

Co-production workshops, supported by research briefings, will build the understanding of barriers to, and opportunities for, embedding and sustaining youth social action in three priority themes: education, place, and the relationship between youth social action and 'all ages' social action. Workshops are attended by Match Funders, invited grantees, and other invited stakeholders (Sept 2018 – Mar 2019).

(b) Funder Collaboration

A series of 'Lab Storms' will be offered to Match Funders to enable a collaborative approach toward identifying common challenges, and to find and share actionable responses to them. The Lab Storms will support Match Funders to fund as effectively as possible (April 2019 – April 2021).

2) Sector Evidence Plan

This work will build on our understanding of what youth social action achieves; how to reach under-served groups and how to sustain youth social action (Aug 2018 – ongoing). It will draw on these four information sources to develop and evolve answers to key questions:

- Intra-fund evaluation aggregation
- Extra-fund research aggregation
- Match Funder returns to the #iwill Fund and data from Information Management System
- Results from other workstreams.

3) Quality Practice

This work will deepen our understanding of what it takes to deliver quality youth social action. It will illustrate how delivery organisations define 'double benefit' and how they attempt to both achieve and measure it. This work will support delivery organisations to improve their offer (September 2018 – ongoing). 'The Impact Accelerator', is an intensive process of impact support, challenge and development – up to 30 organisations will take part in this. Learning from these organisations will be shared more widely to spread knowledge about improvement across the youth social action landscape.

Appendix 4 – literature search terms

1. Ovid: PsycINFO

- a. (('young person' or 'young people' or adolescent or youth) and (outcomes or behaviour or character) and (volunteer* or 'social action')).ab.

2. ProQuest: Sociological Abstracts

- a. ab("young person" or "young people" or adolescent or youth) AND ab(outcomes or behaviour or character) AND ab(volunteer* or "social action")
- b. ti(volunteer* AND youth)
- c. ti(volunteer* AND outcome*)
- d. ti(volunteer* AND young)

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