

evidence in the youth sector review on social and emotional learning

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SUMMARY

This report supplements the University of Ireland Galway report, *What works in enhancing social and emotional skills development during childhood and adolescence?*, published as part of ‘Strand 2’ of Early Intervention Foundation, Cabinet Office and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission’s Social and Emotional Skills evidence review.

This report assesses the state of evidence in the youth sector, particularly those organisations which aim to build social and emotional skills through social action activities.

The key arguments presented are:

- Although the University of Ireland Galway report finds that the quality of evidence in the youth sector is ‘*emerging, albeit limited*’, the importance of having a ‘theory of change’ and an independent evaluation is becoming more widely embedded in the youth sector.
- This shift is being driven by initiatives such as Step Up To Serve’s #iwill campaign, Generation Change, and Cabinet Office’s investment in social action opportunities.
- A number of high quality evaluation studies involving control groups and randomised control trials (RCTs), such as the Cabinet Office and Education Endowment Foundation youth social action trials, have been or are due to be published soon but have not been included in the Galway review.
- Youth sector organisations should recognise that progression up standards of evidence frameworks should be gradual. If they do not yet have good measurement in place and have not tested initial ideas many should focus their efforts on first demonstrating Level 2 standards of evidence with standardised outcome measures and validated questionnaires, rather than in jumping to an RCT.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the University of Ireland Galway report published as part of ‘strand 2’ of the Social and Emotional Skills Review is to assess the quality of evidence of programmes and interventions based in the UK that seek to build social and emotional skills. In particular, assessment of evidence quality is determined based on the most rigorous standards, including the use of randomised control trials and quasi-experimental design studies.

In order to identify well-evidenced programmes, University of Ireland Galway undertook a review of academic journals, databases, grey literature and other sources. In addition to Galway’s broader literature review and package of case study evaluations, Demos disseminated a Call for Evidence to 134 organisations that work with children and adolescents to develop social and emotional skills. In total, University of Ireland Galway researchers identified 39 school-based interventions and 55 out-of-school interventions that aim to build social and emotional skills in the UK and meet certain criteria related to having a ‘theory of change’ and a robust evaluation. As Galway note in their report, the criterion for inclusion of out-of-school programmes was lower due to the overall lower quality of evidence in the sector.

51 organisations provided submissions to the Call for Evidence, 15 of which were ‘youth sector’ organisations that deliver social action activities for young people. The University of Ireland Galway report concludes that overall there is ‘good quality evidence from the school-based programmes’ but that the evidence for out-of-school programmes was ‘emerging, albeit limited’.

It also concludes that:

- *The current quality of evidence from UK studies is weak in many areas and there is a need for more comprehensive evaluations in order to support and enable best practice.*
- *The studies currently underway in the UK, the findings of which are not yet available, will be critically important in strengthening the existing evidence base.*
- *Out-of-school programmes can be strengthened further by investing in evidence-informed approaches with clearly articulated theories of change and explicit intervention strategies supported by staff training.*
- *The lack of quality evidence for some of the current out-of-school interventions reflects the poor quality of the evaluation studies conducted.*

This short paper provides context to these findings. The lack of quality evidence in out-of-school programmes is due to a number of factors, including a lack of funding in the sector to devote to higher quality evaluation studies and the absence of formal structure provided in the school system, which would lend itself to better-designed evaluation studies.

However, evidence standards in the sector are rapidly improving. These improvements are being driven by organisations including the #iwill campaign, Cabinet Office, ‘what works’ centres like the Early Intervention Foundation and the Education Endowment Foundation, and Generation Change. The findings of our Call for Evidence suggest a sector in which developing theories of change and undertaking external evaluations is becoming widespread, but still has some distance to travel in order to demonstrate impact at higher standards of evidence. We conclude by highlighting some of the challenges youth sector organisations face in running more robust evaluation studies, and argue that focusing on standardised outcomes and validated survey questions is particularly important to address some of the key points raised in University of Ireland Galway’s report.

CALL FOR EVIDENCE: A SECTOR IN TRANSITION

As noted above, 51 of the 134 organisations that received our Call for Evidence provided responses. Of these, 15 were youth sector organisations providing social action opportunities. A number of the organisations responding to the Call for Evidence were also included in the analysis within the Galway report, including Fixers, Raleigh International and vInspired. A full list of the youth sector social action programmes that are analysed in the Galway report, and those that responded to the Call for Evidence, are included in the table directly below.

University of Ireland Galway Analysis	Call for Evidence Responses
<p>Delivered in schools: Active Citizens in Schools.</p> <p>Out-of-school interventions: Fixers, Millennium Volunteers Programme¹, National Citizen Service, Supporting Inclusion Programme, Raleigh International, Step into Sport, Think Big with O2, UK Youth Voice, vInspired, Cashpoint Programme, vInspired Team V, vInspired 24/24 Programme</p>	<p>Delivered in schools: Citizenship Foundation, City Year, Free the Children</p> <p>Out-of-school interventions: UK Youth, Fixers, vInspired, Air Cadet Organisation, Ambition, CSV - Positive Futures Kent, Envision, London Youth - Athan 31, Raleigh International, Raw Material, Scout Association, Youth United.</p>

Those who are aware of the social action sector will notice that many organisations that are delivering social action in the UK are either not referenced in the Galway report, or indeed did not provide submissions to the Call for Evidence.

One reason for this is due to timing. As Galway note, ‘studies currently underway in the UK... will be critically important in strengthening the existing evidence base’.

The youth social action trials are funded by Cabinet Office and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), and include the use of RCTs. The first report by the Behavioural Insights Team has been [published recently](#) and a report on the work run by EEF will be published towards the end of the year.

Moreover, many of the organisations that have been funded as part of Cabinet Office’s Youth Social Action Fund or Journey Fund are due to report in Spring this year. As part of these initiatives, organisations are using standardised outcome measures and are attempting to demonstrate their impact using control and / or

match comparison groups. This will represent a significant improvement on the evidence base across the youth sector. Indeed, Demos is currently undertaking an evaluation for the organisation UpRising as part of the Journey Fund which includes the Cabinet Office pre and post questionnaire and analysis against a control group. This explains why a number of organisations that work to deliver social action were not in a position to submit responses to our call for evidence because they are currently in the process of being evaluated to a higher quality standard (in most cases, what we would expect to be Level 3 Standards of Evidence).

Another important and recent initiative is the creation of the Centre for Youth Impact, with Cabinet Office's support, which seeks to improve the evidence landscape through capacity building and practice development.

Nonetheless, those who were able to respond to our Call for Evidence were many of the organisations (though not all) that are leading the charge for evidence in the sector. Indeed, higher standards of evidence-based evaluation were evident for youth social action organisations than for other organisations that responded to our Call for Evidence.

Many of the evaluations mentioned were recently completed or had not yet reported their findings; many described an increasingly sophisticated evaluation process or highlighted the need to improve.

Among the youth social action organisations that did submit responses:

- All 15 had some evidence of formal evaluation processes.
- 87 per cent (13 of 15) of these organisations used an external organisation in a formal manner for the purpose of evaluation.
- 80 per cent used some kind of pre and post survey to evaluate their impact, though in some cases the samples of these surveys were small.
- Just under half of the youth social action organisations that responded to our Call for Evidence used control groups of any kind in their evaluations. Half of these were using randomised control trials.
- Perhaps most importantly, 47 per cent (7 of the 15) organisations had plans to improve their evaluations, or launch more sophisticated evaluation efforts in the near future.

This picture of a sector in transition should not be surprising. The relative infancy of this evidence movement can also be seen in the fact that many of the key organisations in this space were founded in the past five years. For example, The Education Endowment Foundation, which places a strong emphasis on randomised control trials and quasi-experimental designs, was established in 2011; The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) was set up in 2013.

Standards of Evidence frameworks are also relatively recent developments. For example, Project Oracle, which is a children and young person's evidence hub, was founded in 2012; Nesta's Standards of Evidence framework was announced in October 2013; and the EIF's in July 2014. Their lack of universal application across youth sector organisations should be considered with this in mind.

The concept of a 'theory of change' is a relatively new import into the UK charity sector. As New Philanthropy Capital note in the 2012 report *Theory of Change: The beginning of making a difference*:

A decade ago, the term 'theory of change' meant little to the UK charity sector. Seen as a piece of American evaluation jargon, it did not conjure up much enthusiasm. But today, more and more charities are using theories of change, and more and more funders are asking to see them.

The fact that the majority of organisations that responded to our Call for Evidence had a theory of change or some sort of logic model suggests how rapidly the sector is adapting to this new focus.

CHALLENGES FACING YOUTH SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

Nonetheless, despite the evidence of rapidly improving evaluative capabilities in the youth social action sector, it must be acknowledged that, for a variety of reasons, control groups and RCTs may not be appropriate or achievable for many organisations and programmes. The Supplementary Guidance to the Government's Magenta book on evaluation, entitled *Quality in Policy Impact Evaluation*, which can be accessed [here](#), outlines the pros and cons of different evaluation designs.

As the recent report from the Behavioural Insights Team has shown, these challenges associated with RCTs are not insurmountable. But they go a long way to explaining why the Galway report found that programmes delivered outside of school settings have less robust standards of evidence. While demonstrating more robust standards of evidence should remain a priority and an ambition for many, it is also important that youth sector organisations focus on improving their evaluations gradually – and do not rush into trying to demonstrate impact through poorly designed RCTs. The Early Intervention Foundation Standards of Evidence Framework is careful to make this point and stresses the value of evaluation at different stages, not just encouraging every organisation to rush into an RCT.²

NEXT STEPS

One important step in improving the quality of evaluation design as recommended by Galway is to focus on adopting standardised outcome measures across the sector and using externally validated survey questionnaires to measure impact. Efforts to accomplish both of these aims will come out of Cabinet Office's Youth Social Action Fund and Journey Fund, and from Generation Change. As part of their work with Cabinet Office, the Behavioural Insights Team has produced an externally validated questionnaire that can be used by other social action organisations. The Youth Social Action Fund and the Journey Fund also required organisations to use a set of standard survey questions to enable comparisons across interventions. The use of common indicators and sets of outcome measures is also a commitment of the 18 social action organisations that make up Generation Change. These initiatives represent positive steps forward.

Finally, it is worth noting that one of the key messages emerging from recent policy seminars undertaken as part of the Social and Emotional Skills Review is that organisations should focus on devising good performance management structures and data capture systems that help to structure and improve programme implementation. Indeed, as the Early Intervention Foundation evidence guidance makes clear, even demonstrating positive impact through one RCT is not sufficient evidence to ensure that the programme will have a positive impact in every setting, as implementation can vary. In an era of tight finances – and with a concern for evidence rapidly growing in the sector – there is a risk that organisations will invest too quickly in undertaking evaluations, when additional resources may be better spent developing detailed logic models, robust implementation structures, data capture and feedback management mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The University of Ireland Galway report represents an important contribution to our understanding of the programmes that are currently operating in the UK that aim to build social and emotional skills, and the quality of evidence across the sector. The report will be an extremely valuable resource to spreading best practice – and best practice approaches to evaluation – across the UK for years to come.

In this report we've attempted to provide some supplementary analysis focusing particularly on organisations that aim to build social and emotional skills through social action activities, to help draw out some of the more recent developments in this space.

Based on our Call for Evidence, and Demos' knowledge of the sector, this report highlights the fact that the UK youth sector is currently undergoing a period of significant development, with new programmes opening up and existing schemes developing their evaluative frameworks as they become established or expand. As such, a number of new or evolving youth action programmes are scheduled to publish detailed, externally commissioned evaluations in the near future. By the end of 2015, standards of evidence in the sector will have significantly progressed than they were during the period in which the Galway review was undertaken. It will be important to maintain this momentum to ensure that youth social action programmes are impactful, and of high quality.

This is understandable given the relatively recent focus on standards of evidence, theories of change and robust analysis using control groups. But a note of caution is needed: it is not necessarily the case that control groups – or RCTs – are appropriate or the best use of investment for every youth sector organisation. The EIF framework, and others, emphasise, the need to test concepts and develop good measurement frameworks, rather than jumping straight to an RCT before these things are well tested and understood by the organisation. This is especially important in the early stages of programme development or evaluation. The sector can continue to improve by ensuring that they are developing theories of change, and that they are using validated survey questionnaires and standardised outcomes for measurement.

In sum, challenges to improving the quality of evidence in the sector remain, but there have been extraordinarily positive steps in the right direction. It will be important to continue to build on this, to ensure social action programmes of the highest quality for young people.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

The Call for Evidence was disseminated on the 28th October and was closed on the 14th November. The full terms of reference can be accessed on the Demos website [here](#). The majority of the organisations that provided submissions work with adolescents or young adults. A much smaller number (around 8) focused on early interventions with children. Several (around 15) of the responding organisations ran programmes that involved both children and adolescents, or ran different programmes for different age groups.

11 of the submissions were from large organisations running programmes on a national scale, while a further 12 were running programmes across large sections of the country. The rest were being run on a smaller, local scale, or in just a few locations.

The majority of the programmes that we received submissions on appear to be targeted interventions aiming at young people who are vulnerable, have emotional and behavioural issues, or are at-risk of poor outcomes related to education, health, alcohol and drugs or employment.

Approximately fifteen of the submissions involved programmes or organisations seeking to develop social and emotional skills through social action projects. Those included in this category were: Ambition, Army Cadets, Citizenship Foundation Go Givers and Giving Nation, City Year, CSV, Envision, Fixers, Free the Children, London Youth, Raleigh International, Raw Material, Scouts Association, vInspired, and UK Youth.

NOTES

¹ *Millennium Volunteers Programme* is currently delivered by *vInspired* in England, *Saltire Awards* in Scotland and *Millennium Volunteers* in Northern Ireland and Wales.

² <http://guidebook.eif.org.uk/the-eif-standards-of-evidence>

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Developing social and emotional skills in childhood and adolescence is linked to a range of positive life outcomes, and as such, they are high on the priority list for policymakers. The Social and Emotional Skills Review, commissioned by the Early Intervention Foundation, the Cabinet Office and the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, represents an extremely important contribution to our understanding about what works to build these important skills.

The University of Ireland Galway report, published as 'strand 2' of this Review, presents a vital and comprehensive review of relevant programmes operating in the UK, and the strength of evidence demonstrating which programmes have a positive impact.

As part of 'strand 2', Demos disseminated a Call for Evidence to over 130 organisations in the UK that aim to build social and emotional skills in children and adolescents, with a particular focus on organisations providing social action opportunities.

Based on our Call for Evidence, and Demos' knowledge of the sector, this short report argues that the UK youth sector is currently undergoing a period of significant development with respect to evaluation. This is being driven by the Step Up To Serve's #iwill campaign, Generation Change, and the Cabinet Office's investment in social action opportunities.

The importance of theories of change, standards of evidence frameworks and external evaluation is spreading rapidly in the sector, and there are a number of high quality evaluation studies due to come out this year.

Responding to some of the findings from the Galway report, youth sector organisations should recognise that progression up standards of evidence frameworks should be gradual. In particular, organisations should focus on testing concepts and developing good measurement frameworks, rather than jumping to an RCT before these things are well tested and understood. The sector can continue to improve by ensuring that they are developing theories of change, and that they are using validated survey questionnaires and standardised outcomes for measurement.

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