

The impact of learning beyond the classroom



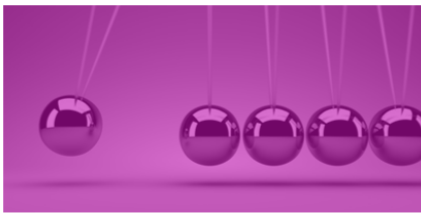
The State of The Nation 2023

A series of evidence-based reports examining the impact and importance of learning beyond the classroom in modern Britain

An annual research project from Children's University Trust

Written by Liam Nolan and Cordelia Howard with data analysis by Sukie Duhra

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This report is one of a series of evidence-based reports examining the impact of what goes on beyond the classroom on the lives of children and young people.

Based on extensive data collated from a bespoke digital platform, Children's University Online, the aim of the reports is to inform and improve provision by providing educators, policy makers and stakeholders of all kinds with a broad set of insights about the current state of learning beyond the classroom in contemporary Britain.

Our 2023 reports are informed by data from:

- 70,000 children
- 19,400 activities
- 704,000 hours of recorded participation.

Since 2021 our State of the Nation Reports have offered up an analysis of over 1 million hours of participation in learning beyond the classroom.

To download the rest of our reports, visit:

childrensuniversity.co.uk/stateofthenation

Learning beyond the classroom: Provision and Participation



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The role that learning beyond the classroom plays in skills development



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Children's University: Our reach



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Learning beyond the classroom: links and recommendations for policy makers



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The impact of learning beyond the classroom

Introduction

“How do you measure the impact of learning beyond the classroom in all its broad glory? It’s impossible to put a figure on the interests and passions developed, or a measurement of the incremental changes and choices that are made because of engagement in activities beyond school.”

In September 2023, Ezra Collective were announced as the first ever jazz band to win the respected Mercury Prize in over 30 years of the prize’s existence¹. In his award acceptance speech², band leader Femi Koleoso said

“We met in a youth club. This moment... is testimony to good special people putting time and effort into young people playing music. This is... a special moment for every single organisation across the country ploughing their efforts into young people playing music.”

Koleoso’s speech was a great moment of validation for youth organisations and those working with children and young people to see their impact recognised and championed on a contemporary and culturally important stage. Amongst the public replies on social media, alongside the congratulations of jazz fans, were messages of thanks and support from public educators, youth and wellbeing researchers, voluntary youth services, and music charities. Those working in this area know how important impact is and, conversely, how difficult it can be to measure.

For every Ezra Collective, there are countless bands who gain no recognition beyond the rehearsal room walls. Widening the scope beyond music, how do you measure the impact of learning beyond the classroom in all its broad glory? It’s impossible to put a quantitative figure on the countless interests and passions developed, or a statistical measurement of the incremental changes and choices that are made because of engagement in activities beyond school.

Yet impact and its measurement are crucial. Funding and support are so often linked to outcomes and measurable impact. Time, policies and public recognition and debate are given to initiatives that can demonstrate proven impact.

On the following pages we look at some of the contemporary evidence of the importance of learning beyond the classroom. From attainment to skills development and more.

It is, however, important to be aware of the impact that is not evidenced and the issues that do not get public debate and funding purely by the nature of their absence.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/ezra-collective-mercury-music-prize-winner-b2407696.html>
2. <https://twitter.com/MercuryPrize/status/1699906665976303733>

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“I think a lot of issues in society that people talk about tackling, I think a lot of those answers come from occupying young people with things like youth clubs.”

When interviewed by Channel 4 news¹ a few days after his band's Mercury Prize win, Koleoso was asked about cuts to youth services. He said:

“I've been making this point for a long time, but you rarely see headlines like 'Football academy player commits this massive crime', 'Young tennis player commits this massive crime'. You know, 'Chess champion decides to do this'. You don't hear that headline very often and I have the belief that when you occupy people's minds in the direction of something positive, it takes it away from negativity. I think a lot of issues in society that people talk about tackling, I think a lot of those answers come from occupying young people with things like youth clubs.”

In short, the success of youth services and the impact of learning beyond the classroom is often best evidenced in what is absent because of their existence. While it is encouraging to see the exploration of impact in crime prevention through initiatives such as the Youth Endowment Fund's recent open grant call² there is still a long way to go. For Children's University, we remain committed to collecting and sharing whatever data and evidence we can through our annual State of the Nation reports.

Footnotes:

1. <https://twitter.com/Channel4News/status/1701281059546001824>
2. <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/grants/testing-for-impact/>

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Learning beyond the classroom and attainment

“Children taking part in learning beyond the classroom through Children’s University made two additional months’ progress in reading and maths compared to children in the other schools.”

As this report is finalised, work is ongoing on an Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) evaluation of Children’s University due for publication in 2024. This follows, in 2017, the publication of an efficacy study of Children’s University¹. The randomised control trial looked at the progress of more than 2,600 primary-aged pupils from 68 schools to test whether extra-curricular activities, including social action, could help to improve pupil attainment and other attitudes and skills, such as motivation, confidence and team-working. The results of the trial showed a direct link between participation in Children’s University and increased achievement in Reading and Maths in KS2 SATS. Findings included:

- Children taking part in learning beyond the classroom through Children’s University made two additional months’ progress in Reading and Maths compared to children in the other schools. For those eligible for Free School Meals, additional progress in Maths increased to three months’ progress.
- Those in Children’s University schools made small gains in ‘teamwork’ and ‘social responsibility’ compared to children in the other schools.
- Compared to pupils in the control group, those taking part in Children’s University were more likely to select professional occupations as their future aspiration, and to report higher levels of communication, empathy, self-confidence, resilience, and happiness, after the intervention.

Footnotes:

1. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/childrens-university>
2. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/childrens-university-re-grant#:~:text=Children's%20University%20is%20listed%20as,cognitive%20outcomes%20in%20other%20schools>
3. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/childrens-university-re-grant>
4. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/2022-23>

The success of the trial was such that in 2018 EEF named Children’s University as one of just 18 Promising Projects². This was followed in 2020 with the announcement of a second larger scale effectiveness trial³ to see if such results would be replicated at scale. After inevitable pandemic delays, the new trial began in 2022 with over 5,000 pupils from more than 160 schools.

At present, the disadvantage gap index, as used by the government to track the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils, is 3.2 – only marginally below 2022’s recording of 3.23, which was the highest it has been in 10 years. Now is surely the time to recognise that learning beyond the classroom can play a role in reducing this gap.

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Learning beyond the classroom and skills

“Learning beyond the classroom and its role in skills development is robustly evidenced.”

With classroom education being largely the domain of knowledge, skills development is a key part of learning beyond the classroom. The breadth of non-curriculum activities for children allows extensive opportunities for the development and improvement of skills. As is documented in greater detail elsewhere in this report, learning beyond the classroom and its role in skills development is robustly evidenced.

In 2021, Children’s University, with guidance from the University of Sussex, published a report looking at skills development in children aged 11+¹. With the support of Nesta’s Future Ready Fund, Children’s University built a survey mechanism into *Children’s University Online* to interrogate participants about the use of the skills that each activity is tagged with. Each skill was attached to a Likert scale running 1 – 5. 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree. The study set out to find:

- the percentage of students that used the skills we said they would.
- of those that did use the skills, what percentage of those improved?
- of those that did improve, what percentage stated 5 (i.e. Strongly Improved)?

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/media/1329/full-report-the-impact-of-cu-on-the-development-of-essential-skills.pdf>
2. See above in this document on p18

Results (below) showed a direct link between participation in learning beyond the classroom (through Children’s University) and the use and improvement in essential skills development in line with the Skills Builder Framework. When the survey was repeated a year later on younger age groups, the results were similarly positive. 2023 results² on children of all ages show a consistent positive trend in the same way.

Age 11+ (KS3)

They used the skills activity providers said they would use

92 %

Those that used skills, said **skills had improved**

94 %

Those that used skills, said **skills had strongly improved**

73 %

Age 5+ (KS1&2)

They used the skills activity providers said they would use

89 %

Those that used skills, said **skills had improved**

86 %

Those that used skills, said **skills had strongly improved**

42 %

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Children's University's Outcomes for Children

“Our work is focused on ensuring that every child that participates in Children's University feels positively towards these outcomes.”

As an organisation Children's University has seven strategic desired outcomes for children. All of our work is focused on ensuring that every child that participates in learning beyond the classroom through Children's University feels positively towards these seven outcomes.

During August 2023, we surveyed participants about these outcomes. 462 respondents rated their feelings based on a Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree alongside each of the seven statements. A breakdown of these results is below.

Survey results

“Because of Children's University...”

I think learning is fun and is something that I want to keep doing



I now think there are lots of new and different ways that I can learn



I feel confident and believe in myself



I have gained lots of different skills



I know that I can choose what I want to do in the future



I feel more prepared to face new challenges



I know that there are people who are proud of me for what I'm achieving



Strongly Disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly Agree

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Additional impact and evidence

“Because learning beyond the classroom is such a broad church of additional learning, there is similarly broad impact that has been evidenced by different organisations.”

Because learning beyond the classroom is such a broad church of additional learning, there is similarly broad impact that has been evidenced by different organisations. Looking broadly at out of school learning, NatCen and Newcastle University, with funding from The Nuffield Foundation, also published a number of reports investigating how out of school activities help children's learning¹. They investigated how involvement in different types of activities varies for 5 to 11 year olds from different backgrounds and what this means for their educational achievement. Results showed that after school club attendance was associated with positive academic and social outcomes for disadvantaged children in particular. Organised physical activities were associated with higher attainment and better social, emotional and behavioural outcomes at age 11². Looking more specifically at uniformed groups, for example, research from the University of Edinburgh in 2016 found that people who had participated in Scouting or Guiding were less likely to experience mood disorders or anxiety later in life³.

With much learning beyond the classroom taking place outside of schools, there is a huge potential for engagement with Children's University and informal learning to have a positive impact on parental engagement. The charity Learning With Parents report that of the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better off peers, only 14% of the gap at age 11 is related to what happens at school. 49% of the gap is related to what happens at home⁴. Children's University is proud to record that 17% of participation through our programme is categorised as 'Family Learning'. To this end, children responding to our recent survey asking what they most enjoyed about Children's University included:

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/out-of-school-activities/>
2. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/out-of-school-activities-and-the-education-gap>
3. <https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/being-prepared-guide-and-scout-participation-childhood-social-pos>
4. <https://learningwithparents.com/about-us/>

“I really enjoy doing different types of activities. Mum always asks if our activities have a Children's University code.”

“I love doing random tasks and then my sisters telling me that that counts towards Children's University”

“I liked graduating this year. I enjoyed having my family watch me wear my hat and gown.”

“I love that I can add the activities that I do with mummy and daddy”

We need to ensure that all children and families have access to support to enable engagement like this.

Summary of findings

- 1. There is robust evidence that learning beyond the classroom has a positive impact on attainment**
- 2. Similarly, there is extensive evidence that learning beyond the classroom has a positive impact on skills development**
- 3. The impact that children self-report about their skills development through learning beyond the classroom increases as they get older**
- 4. Children directly report that engaging with learning beyond the classroom has a positive impact on confidence and preparedness for new challenges**
- 5. Children clearly enjoy participation in activities beyond the classroom and report a clear understanding of its value to them, well beyond it simply being fun**
- 6. Learning beyond the classroom holds potential for strengthening connections between families and their child's learning – more needs to be done to encourage and build on this.**

Want to take action or learn more?

Get your school involved

If you are a teacher or a parent of a child in an area with an operating Children's University, get in touch with them to find out how your school can get involved. Find your local contact [here](#)

Sign up your child

If your child's school is not already part of Children's University, you can still sign up your child through our online subscription service. Visit www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/subscribe

Contact your nearest Children's University

You can find your nearest Children's University online and contact them to find out more about the work they do locally. All Children's Universities are managed by socially-minded and community-based institutions who partner with local businesses, education providers and stakeholders of all kinds. Talk about how you could get involved and find your local contact [here](#)

Read more

- Read about Children's University's evaluations with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) [here](#) and [here](#)

