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Review

Youth Social Action Interventions in Young People Aged Between 8 and 16 Years: A Narrative Review

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Abstract: In recent years, youth social action has emerged as a novel concept which strives to empower young people, creating an engaged and socially aware youth population. The aim of this narrative review was to summarise, explain, and interpret international research evidence to understand the effectiveness of youth social action interventions implemented with young people between the ages of 8 and 16 years. This study followed the General Framework of Narrative Reviews. Peer-reviewed studies published in the English language that explicitly addressed ‘youth social action’ or ‘social action’ within the title or abstract were identified by means of electronic searches on EBSCOhost (Education Research Complete, MEDLINE and Child Development and Adolescent Studies databases). Search terms included “Social Action” OR “Youth Social Action” AND population (Child* OR Youth OR Adolesc* OR “School Child” OR Juvenile OR Teenag*) AND study design (intervention OR project OR evaluation OR initiative OR program*). Sixteen studies were included after full-text screening, detailing eight individual youth social action interventions. The findings revealed a range of psychosocial, health, and personal development benefits for youth who participated in social action interventions. However, the evidence base was limited by poor methodological reporting and a lack of process evaluations to confirm implementation fidelity. Future research should utilise stronger research designs, assess both individual and community outcomes, and include follow-up measures to determine the long-term impacts of youth social action projects.



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1. Introduction

Social action strives to bring communities together by increasing social cohesion and integration by empowering individuals to undertake positive action to tackle prevalent local and/or societal issues, such as vandalism, poverty, criminal activity, and others (Pedler, 2020). Social action can take a variety of forms, including volunteering, mentorship, fundraising, community engagement, active citizenship, or simple ‘neighbourly’ acts (Payne, 2018). United Kingdom (UK) government guidance states that there are three main ways to enable social action within the public sector: (i) ‘as part of existing services’, using previously established networks and organisations within schools and the community to support social action initiatives; (ii) ‘through new projects’, finding innovative ways to replace or complement an existing service, e.g., a funded after-school programme; and (iii) ‘by creating the right conditions’, putting things in place for people to lead their own social action projects independently, e.g., the provision of online resources and links to

support (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2017). While the term ‘social action’ has been used within the social work field since early 1920s (Richmond, 1922), in recent years the concept has been embraced by a range of sectors, including education, health and wellbeing, sport, and charities, to prompt positive cultural changes on a large scale (Baldwin et al., 2023; Cleverdon, 2020). A particular focus across these sectors is embedding social action principles in young people’s lives as a means of striving towards a more engaged and socially aware population that is equipped to tackle global issues, such as climate change (Harris & Johns, 2021). Youth social action has therefore emerged as a means of empowering young people to take positive action within their own lives and local communities (Bublitz et al., 2021) and is defined as ‘practical action in the service of others to create positive change’ (Pye & Michelmore, 2016).

While ‘youth social action’ projects may be presented as a contemporary approach to engage and empower young people (Spencer & Lucas, 2018), historically, there have been a plethora of initiatives promoting youth involvement, including civic engagement, service learning, volunteering, and mentorship programmes (Birdwell et al., 2013; Ockenden & Stuart, 2014; Buzinde et al., 2019; Brasta et al., 2019). Typically, youth programmes have had a focus on predetermined socio-political outcomes (e.g., equality, conservation) and have been prescribed by adults, whereas contemporary youth social action projects place the community at the heart of projects and encourage young people to lead the process (Davies, 2019). Within the UK, youth social action has been advocated for in both policy and practice across a variety of sectors (Pye & Michelmore, 2016), including education, with Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills in England) recently including “opportunities for youth social action” within national quality frameworks to assess educational establishments (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2021; Ofsted, 2016). Further, Pye and Michelmore (2016) suggest that, to achieve ‘high-quality’ or ‘meaningful’ youth social action, initiatives should adhere to the following principles: they should be youth-led, challenging, have social impact, allow progression to other opportunities, be embedded within a young person’s life, and enable reflection about the value of the activity. As such, the ‘Centre for Social Action’ encourages practitioners to embrace participatory action research principles such as co-production and collaboration (Gardner et al., 2019) to enable young people to take the lead and make meaningful changes within their own lives and communities (Arches & Fleming, 2006).

A key factor behind the growth of the youth social action movement has been the reported positive impact for both participating young people and their local communities; this termed the ‘double benefit’ (Pye & Michelmore, 2016; Birdwell et al., 2015; Ali et al., 2024; Arthur et al., 2015). Specifically, findings from the UK National Youth Social Action survey (Pye & Michelmore, 2016) highlighted that involvement in social action among young people aged 10–20 years was associated with improved personal development skills, such as confidence, communication skills, social skills, and resilience, alongside employability skills, such as teamwork, leadership qualities, and time management skills. In addition, young people who participated in youth social action initiatives reported an increased sense of belonging and a greater belief that they could make positive changes within their own communities (Pye & Michelmore, 2016). These positive outcomes closely align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a comprehensive international treaty that outlines the rights of children, including the rights to express their views and participate in decisions that affect them, and the obligations of governments to promote and protect these rights (United Nations, 2024). Despite the above-mentioned positive benefits of engaging young people in social action, overall rates of participation and involvement in meaningful social action in the UK decreased from 42% in 2014 to 36% in 2019, with disadvantaged populations in particular reporting a lack of opportunities

within their local area to access such projects (Pye & Michelmore, 2016). Youths' lived experiences are shaped by numerous factors, including their social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. These diverse and interconnecting social positionalities and identities influence how youth perceive and interact with the world, which in turn affects access to resources and opportunities and ultimately affects the success of social action initiatives aimed at supporting them (Ali et al., 2024). Taken together, there is a need to understand and investigate the existing empirical evidence base on effective youth social action interventions and their components in order to support participation in social action practices among young people. To the authors' best knowledge, the effectiveness of social actions interventions is yet to be synthesised within a review.

The aim of this narrative review was therefore to summarise, explain, and interpret the evidence from youth social action interventions implemented with young people aged 8–16 years internationally. This descriptive approach and synthesis were deemed appropriate given the likelihood of finding limited intervention studies published within the peer-reviewed literature. The focus on 8–16-year-olds aligns with UK compulsory educational stages (Key Stages 2–4) and captures a critical period in young people's social and emotional development (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2021; Ofsted, 2016), during which early engagement in social action may foster lasting behavioural and attitudinal change, encouraging young people to take on roles as active citizens from an early age. This focus is further supported by the inclusion of social action within the UK national curriculum, where citizenship education promotes active participation in community projects and social change initiatives (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2021; Ofsted, 2016). Additionally, the purpose of this review was to explore which theoretical frameworks have been used in previous youth social action interventions. This approach provides insights into how theory has been applied to guide intervention design, implementation, and evaluation, supporting future research and practice. The findings are intended to inform the development of future youth social action initiatives by highlighting examples of best practice and outlining strategies that effectively engage young people within meaningful social action initiatives.

2. Method

This study followed the General Framework of Narrative Reviews (Ferrari, 2015) to address the lack of formal methodological guidance for conducting narrative reviews.

Searching

Relevant studies were identified by electronic searches on EBSCOhost and through scanning reference lists of included articles. The EBSCOhost platform supplied access to the Education Research Complete, MEDLINE, and Child Development and Adolescent Studies databases. Each of the databases was searched independently by the lead author. An independent Google Scholar search was also conducted to ensure that any relevant publications were included. Publication date restrictions were not applied in any search, with the final search conducted on the 13 July 2024. Each publication was read thoroughly by the lead researcher, and the reference lists of included studies were also scanned to identify any additional appropriate studies. Search strategies used in the databases included combinations of key search terms, which were divided into three sections: context ("Social Action" OR "Youth Social Action") AND population (Child* OR Youth OR Adolesc* OR "School Child" OR Juvenile OR Teenag*) AND study (intervention OR project OR evaluation OR initiative OR program*). Database filtering was utilised to ensure that the search terms "Social Action" and "Youth Social Action" were present in either the title or abstract of publications to further ensure the relevance of studies. Given the exploratory nature of

this review, no specific regional focus was predetermined, and all eligible peer-reviewed studies were included regardless of geographical location. This approach was used to aid the identification of common elements and transferable practices in youth social action interventions, providing insights into intervention design that are applicable across multiple contexts. Moreover, by including interventions from diverse regions, the review aimed to capture a broad range of strategies and outcomes, supporting the development of adaptable and scalable approaches to youth social action.

Inclusion Criteria:

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

- Included a sample of young people with a reported mean age or age range between 8 and 16 years;
- Presented a study design utilising a randomised control trial, a cluster randomised control trial, a post-test assessment, a pretest–post-test assessment, formative assessment, or an impact/outcome evaluation;
- Presented an original article outlining a “youth social action” or “social action” intervention;
- Reported an outcome relating to youth social action, e.g., confidence, communication skills, social skills, or resilience;
- Included quantitative or qualitative analyses of youth social action outcomes;
- Was published in English and within a peer-reviewed journal;
- The full-text article was available within the searching period (6 January 2024 to 13 July 2024).

Exclusion Criteria:

Studies were excluded if the following criteria were met:

- Included book chapters, case studies, student dissertations, conference abstracts, review articles, editorials, protocol papers, third sector reports, and systematic reviews.
- Full-text articles were not available in English.

3. Results

A total of 179 papers were returned across three databases (Education Research Complete, MEDLINE, and Child Development and Adolescent Studies) and 2 more papers were included through back-searching the reference lists of included studies. Sixteen studies were included in the narrative review after full-text screening, detailing eight individual youth social action interventions (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009; Suleiman et al., 2006; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020). See Figure 1 and Table 1.

3.1. Participants

Participants included children between the ages of 9 and 12 years (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019) and older youths aged between 14 and 16 years of age (Jones, 2017; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). The sample size varied across studies from $n = 26$ (Berg et al., 2009) to $n = 840$ (Siddiqui et al., 2019). Gender was typically described as approximately a 50/50 split between male and female participants (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007), although Jones (2017) reported a 73% female participant base. Three studies did not report gender demographics (Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Berg et al., 2009). Only three of the included interventions provided sufficient detail on participant ethnicity (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007), reporting that most participants were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, i.e., Latino, Native American, and Asian. Six interventions targeted students from low socioeconomic status areas (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) or

students considered to be at risk (Jones, 2017; Block et al., 2005; Berg et al., 2009), with two interventions targeting the general youth population (Siddiqui et al., 2019; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020).

3.2. Location and Setting

Six of the included interventions were located within the United States (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009), while one intervention was located within the United Kingdom (Siddiqui et al., 2019), with one also conducted in Australia (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Schools were a key setting for intervention delivery, with programmes being delivered across both primary (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019) and secondary (Jones, 2017; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) school settings. The majority of studies described interventions that were offered as ‘extra-curricular’ and as such were facilitated as an after-school or lunchtime programme (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019) with ‘Social Action Youth’ (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) being the only intervention included to be delivered during class time. Community settings were infrequently utilised; however, two studies visited community spaces such as town halls, community centres, and leisure facilities as part of programme excursions (Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019).

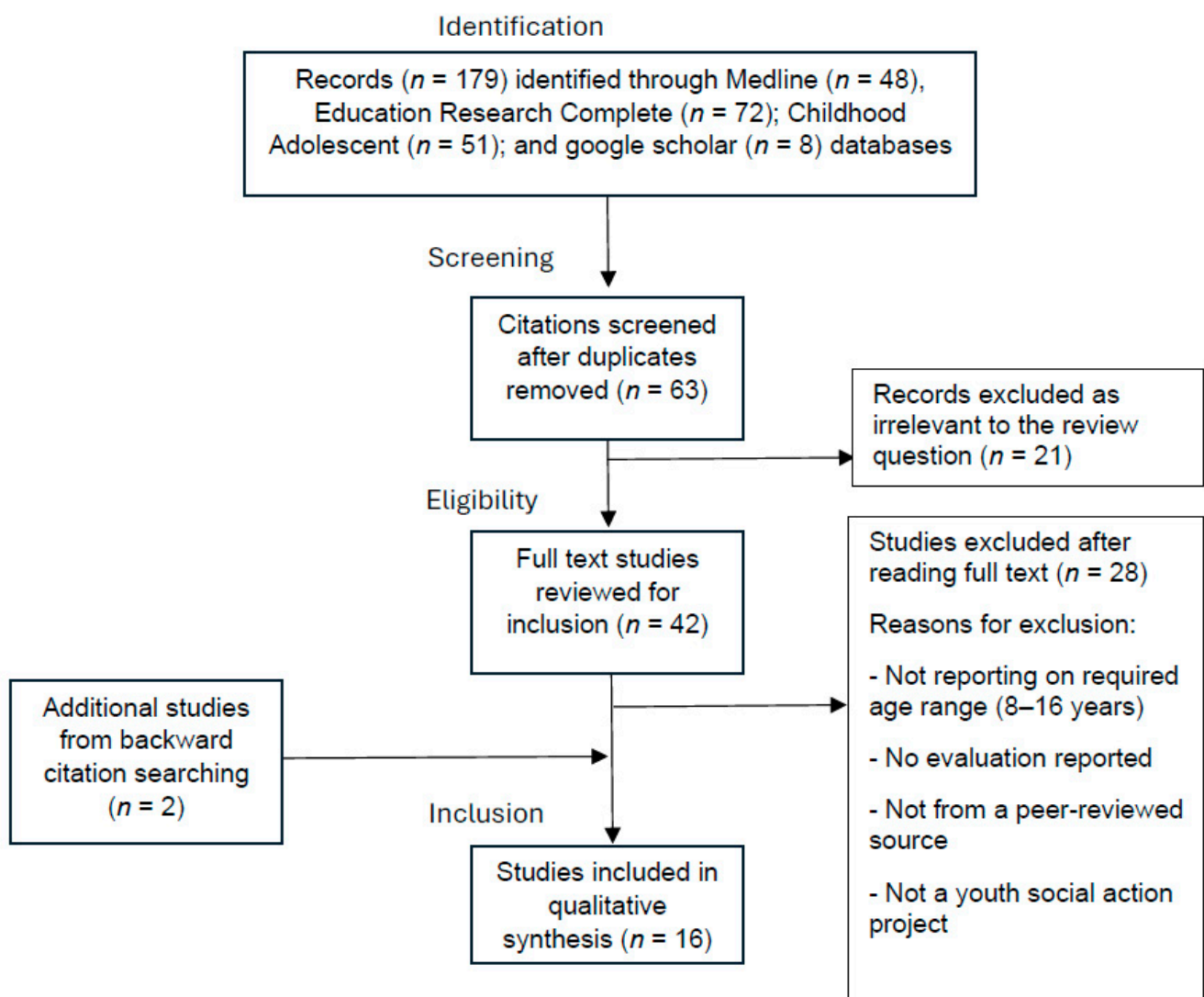


Figure 1. Flow chart of the literature selection process.

Table 1. Characteristics of Social Action Intervention Studies (n = 8).

Study Design and Setting	Participants	Target Outcomes	Underpinning Theory	Intervention Components	Intervention Duration	Evaluation Methods	Results
PeaceJam Ambassador programme (USA): Jones (2017)							
Outcome evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After-school club • Class project • Faith-based programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N = 717 • 14–16 years • 72% girls • 66% White • Low SES • ‘At-risk’ youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth purpose • Academic and community engagement 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups identify a pressing community problem and then design and implement a service project to affect positive change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 year • Dose not reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey (informed by the Purpose in Life Questionnaire and The Meaning in Life Questionnaire) • Interviews • Student example quotes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Sense of purpose + Individual meaning + Perspectives on community, national, and global issues + Reinforce their current goals and aspirations + Planned to continue community service
Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project (USA): Wilson et al. (2008)							
Formative evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary school • After school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N = 122 • 9–12 years • 53% girls • Latino 53.3%, Native American 2.5%, Caucasian 0.8%, African American 14.8%, Asian 16.9%, Other 11.5% • Low SES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of risky behaviours • Health-promoting behaviours • Substance use • Accidents • Antisocial behaviours • Violence • Depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles of empowerment participatory research • Academic community partnership approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups (6–10, split by gender) • Led by graduate student • 90 min per session • Curriculum guides: team building, photography, empowerment, and social action projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 years • 30–60 h • 25 sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photovoice • Free writing • Self-reflection 	92% project completion
Open Studio Project Art & Action (USA): Block et al. (2005)							
Brief report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various settings: • After-school and summer programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At-risk youth (n = >100) • Gender, Ethnicity and SES, not reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings and emotions • Self-expression • Community engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open Studio Process Model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups • Adult facilitators work alongside youth as artistic co-creators • Art therapy, including writing or dictation, artmarking with assorted materials, reflection, and group sharing • Celebration event and exhibition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9–12 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written statements 	Limited evaluation. Brief case studies and written submissions highlight positive feedback on programme.

Table 1. Cont.

Study Design and Setting	Participants	Target Outcomes	Underpinning Theory	Intervention Components	Intervention Duration	Evaluation Methods	Results
Children’s University (UK): Siddiqui et al. (2019)							
Randomised control trial • School and community settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N = 1840 (N = 654 intervention; N = 557, control) 9–10 years Ethnicity and SES, not reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teamwork Social responsibility Educational attainment 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led by community workers and teachers 15 h of activities 15 h of social action Learning passports School clubs, excursions, community days and games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 years 30 h 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre- and post-test survey (bespoke pupil survey instrument) Direct observation Formative evidence Interviews with teachers, parents and community workers 	+ Academic attainment (maths and reading) + Teamwork - Social responsibility
Social Action with Youth (SAY) high-school intervention (Australia): Morsillo and Prilleltensky (2007)							
Impact evaluation • Secondary school • Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N = 24 15–16 years 50% girls Anglo-Saxon, Indian, Italian, Greek, Macedonian, Maltese, Spanish Vietnamese Low SES 	Individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Socio-political awareness sense of control and participatory competence Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation and organisational skills Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of youth issues Problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action research orientation Based on the philosophy of psychopolitical validity (PPV) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Groups (2–8 students) Led by researchers Games, group posters, guided discussions, and guest speakers Teachers provided feedback Projects involved a community agency or local business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 weeks 4 h per week 3 sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-reported evaluations (via videotape) Ethnographic observations Open-ended questionnaires 	+ Socio-political awareness + Sense of control and social responsibility, hopefulness, community participation skills. + Independence and motivation, group effectiveness, cohesion and solidarity. + Community involvement

Table 1. Cont.

Study Design and Setting	Participants	Target Outcomes	Underpinning Theory	Intervention Components	Intervention Duration	Evaluation Methods	Results
Youth Action Research for Prevention (USA): Berg et al. (2009)							
Quasi-experimental <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary school Summer and after school Higher education setting (local colleges) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N = 316 (intervention, N = 114; control, N = 202) 14–17 years 51% girls American/Black (47%); Latino (41%); White, Bosnians and Iraqis (12%) Low SES 	Individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attitudes toward education Critical social analytic skill Self-efficacy Empowerment Drug and sex risks Group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collective efficacy Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change in policies and institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention, cognitive, and critical theory including ecological; identity; learning and instructional; and critical transformative models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth-led Trained to become ‘Youth Action Researchers’ Educational and career counselling/mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 years 4 h per day 7 weeks (youth training) 8-month AP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews with staff Ethnographic observation Youth focus groups Youth self-reflection Adapted questionnaires (Social and Health Assessment Instrument; modified 11-item scale on community efficacy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Self-efficacy + Disapproval of drug use + Educational expectations + Community level efficacy 85% graduation rate (norm 50%) - Decrease in alcohol use, sexual partners, and marijuana use
Youth in Focus (USA): Suleiman et al. (2006)							
Outcome evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N = 26 Underrepresented youth groups Low SES Age and gender not reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research skills Leadership Public speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using a “think globally, act locally” model of change Participatory action research model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Groups (2–6) Led by an adult facilitator from the host site Stepping stones (8-step curriculum): includes youth training, adult facilitator coaching and institutional/community capacity building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7–8 months 1 session per week 1–2 h 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post survey Interviews Case studies Ongoing reflections with the adult staff and student researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Leadership skills + Self-efficacy + Understanding of how to create a research tool and a research paper

Table 1. Cont.

Study Design and Setting	Participants	Target Outcomes	Underpinning Theory	Intervention Components	Intervention Duration	Evaluation Methods	Results
YPAR (USA): Caraballo and Lyiscott (2020)							
Formative evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary schools Universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N = 12 High school students Age, gender, ethnicity, SES, not reported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critical research skills Activism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participatory action research model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth-led Voluntary participation Creation of the 'Critical Literacy Toolbox' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 semester Weekly seminars (Duration not reported) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom and field observations Students' work and artefacts Semi-structured student and teacher interviews Focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Understanding and a more critical stance to inquiry + Ability to take on new roles within projects

3.3. Study Design

Only one study employed a randomised controlled trial (Siddiqui et al., 2019), while one study utilised a quasi-experimental design (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). The remaining studies used formative (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) and impact evaluation (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) study designs. While most studies (Jones, 2017; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) utilised mixed methods approaches, no study relied exclusively on quantitative measures. Three studies (Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) utilised predominantly qualitative evaluation techniques, including interviews (Jones, 2017; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020), open-ended surveys (Jones, 2017; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007), and focus groups (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020). Four studies (Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) also employed a range of direct and ethnographic observation methods. One intervention (Wilson et al., 2008) used the photovoice method as an evaluative technique, which encourages young people to document their journey visually. None of the studies included reported follow-up measures.

3.4. Intervention Effectiveness

Each intervention targeted multiple individual-level outcomes, including attitudes towards education and educational aspirations (Jones, 2017; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) and participation in social action (Jones, 2017; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009). Three interventions also targeted self-efficacy (Block et al., 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009), employability skills (Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007), and social responsibility (Jones, 2017; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020). Community-based outcomes were infrequently targeted, with most interventions focusing on individual-level youth-based outcomes (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020).

The reporting of intervention effectiveness varied across studies, with studies typically reported information pertaining to the characteristics of the intervention rather than evaluative outcomes (Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020). Three studies (Block et al., 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) reported an increased level of participant self-efficacy post-intervention. Two studies reported positive intervention effects on educational aspirations (Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) and one study (Jones, 2017) found positive effects on intentions to take part in community service initiatives. Siddiqui et al. (2019) reported that the Children's University treatment group was slightly ahead from the outset in terms of teamwork skills, but that there was no change in levels of individual social responsibility. The positive effects of community-level outcomes were reported within two studies through author anecdotes/field notes (Jones, 2017; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007); however, there was a lack of empirical evidence reported to further clarify these findings.

3.5. Intervention Components

Of the eight interventions included, five programmes were underpinned by prominent theoretical frameworks (Wilson et al., 2008; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Berg et al., 2009; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020), with critical transformative theories, including principles of empowerment and participatory action research, being the most commonly utilised. While engaging young people in social action was a key focus for all interventions, the activities within each programme varied across studies. Specifically,

four interventions (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) utilised a ‘training scheme’ approach where young people were mentored to take part in social action projects effectively through activities that developed research, communication, and teamwork skills. Alternatively, Children’s University (Siddiqui et al., 2019) and Social Action Youth (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) utilised a hybrid approach of games and excursions while striving to increase young people’s knowledge of youth social action through guided discussions, community days, group posters, and inviting guest speakers. Only two interventions (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) within the review described the social action intervention as being ‘youth-led’ with a variety of adult facilitators leading the other projects such as graduate students (Wilson et al., 2008), teachers (Siddiqui et al., 2019), or experts in art therapy (Block et al., 2005).

Intervention duration ranged from 12 weeks (Block et al., 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) to 2–3 years (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009). In addition, two programmes (Jones, 2017; Block et al., 2005) offered further ‘leadership’ opportunities for students who had participated in the original programme in order to continue to support youth social action initiatives, often acting as champions or mentors within the established network. The duration and mode of each intervention varied across studies, with contact time ranging from 1 session per week for 9–12 weeks and totalling 9–12 h (Block et al., 2005) to 36 sessions over a 12-week period, totalling approximately 48 h (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). All interventions delivered programmes in person, with four studies reporting that participants worked in groups to create and develop youth social action initiatives (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009). In the studies that reported detailed session information, groups would typically meet on a weekly basis (Block et al., 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009) with sessions lasting between 1 and 2 h (Wilson et al., 2008; Berg et al., 2009); however, programmes such as the Children’s University stated that young people were required to participate in at least 30 h of youth social action and activities (e.g., school clubs, games, community days, or excursions) in order to ‘graduate’ from the programme (Siddiqui et al., 2019).

4. Discussion

The aim of this narrative review was to explore the peer-reviewed youth social action literature in order to provide a detailed summary of the programmes that have been utilised with young people aged 8–16 years. Specifically, this review focused on intervention characteristics, effectiveness, and the methodologies employed within trials. From 44 studies, a total of 8 youth social action interventions (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009; Suleiman et al., 2006; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) were identified and evaluated through 16 studies (see Table 1). The findings from this review suggest that social action interventions can provide holistic benefits. However, such findings should be interpreted with caution. Youth social action is still an emerging concept within the academic literature and, as such, there is a lack of robust empirical evidence surrounding the effectiveness and long-term benefits of interventions. Further, with the majority of interventions focusing on outcomes related to young people, there is a need to further explore the benefits to the wider community and the impact of utilising community settings to support youth social action initiatives.

A key factor behind the successful progression of youth social action initiatives in recent years has been the ‘double benefit’ described for both participating individuals and their local communities (Pye & Michelmor, 2016; Birdwell et al., 2015; Ali et al., 2024; Arthur et al., 2015). The studies included reported increases in participant self-efficacy (Block et al., 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009), educational aspirations,

and attainment (Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). This is similar to findings reported within academic reports written for governments, which also highlight benefits to mental health and wellbeing (Arthur et al., 2017; Alma Economics, 2021). While it is positive to note that, within the studies included, a variety of outcomes were considered when investigating intervention effectiveness (i.e., academic attainment, employability skills, interpersonal skills, etc.), the evaluation and reporting of outcomes was often lacking in detail. Willmott and Rundle-Thiele (2021) state that the reporting of intervention effectiveness depends on the quality and clarity of the findings presented. However, within the studies included, there was a lack of information reported regarding evaluative methods, indicating that the reporting of effectiveness was not a priority. Due to the limited evidence available relating to the effectiveness of interventions, more studies focused on evaluating youth social action programmes are required, specifically ones utilising robust study designs, follow-up measures, and gold-standard methodological techniques. Furthermore, most studies did not report detailed demographic data in sufficient detail (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity) or conduct subgroup analyses to examine how personal characteristics and circumstances may influence intervention outcomes. This limitation restricted our ability to assess how lived experiences and social positionalities may have shaped intervention outcomes. Future research should prioritise the reporting of these characteristics to better understand how diverse lived experiences impact youth engagement and intervention effectiveness.

Within this review, only two interventions included children aged between 9 and 10 years (Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019). Contemporary research suggests that, for young people, having the opportunity to take part in social action at an early age is critical to promoting lifelong engagement (Arthur et al., 2017). Arthur et al. (2017) state that children who take part in youth social action opportunities before reaching the age of 10 are twice as likely to form a habit of service compared with those starting at 16–18 years. While the national youth social action campaign, #iWill, within the UK targets young people aged between 10 and 20 years (#iwill movement, 2021), recent evidence suggests that programmes should include younger children from within a primary school setting (Tejani & Breeze, 2021). Further, if programmes can engage children at younger ages, they are more likely to be involved in a diverse range of service opportunities and more likely to identify themselves with positive civic values such as compassion, hope, and open-mindedness, which are crucial for taking part in meaningful youth social action (Baldwin et al., 2023). Thus, given the benefits of early engagement in social action, more intervention research is needed.

The intervention content varied between age groups, with programmes targeted at younger age groups (i.e., Children's University) including elements of fun, such as the use of games and excursions to capture young people's interests (Siddiqui et al., 2019). Interventions targeting older groups such as Youth Action Research Prevention (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) utilised a more formal structure, where participants were mentored to improve skills that may help them prepare for adulthood, such as employability, communication, and teamwork skills. Research suggests that regardless of the target age or stage, fun and enjoyment can impact future participation (Dishman et al., 2005; Gardner et al., 2017). Further, peer support and participating with friends were reported as the most common factors motivating young people to take part in youth social action (Pye & Michelmor, 2016). As such, providing inclusive, enjoyable, and youth social action experiences should be the focus of future interventions. Interventions with a theoretical foundation (Wilson et al., 2008; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Berg et al., 2009; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020) tended to report more comprehensive and consistent positive outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, leadership, socio-political awareness) compared to those without them (Jones,

2017; Block et al., 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2019). This was particularly true for those studies drawing on participatory action research. This suggests that having a clear theoretical basis may enhance the design, implementation, and effectiveness of youth social action initiatives. Several of the studies included were conducted more than a decade ago. While social and policy contexts have changed since these studies were conducted, older studies still offer valuable insights into intervention design and implementation. By capturing the evolution of social action approaches, these studies provide a historical perspective on how youth social action initiatives have developed over time. Over this period, initiatives have evolved to place greater emphasis on participatory and youth-led approaches, incorporate theoretical frameworks, and expand their focus from educational attainment to broader socio-political development and empowerment.

Schools continue to be a natural vehicle for youth social action. For example, the reformed national curriculum in England encourages schools to incorporate social action practices. Guidance co-developed with over 100 school and college leaders in England states that in order to embed social action within the education community, establishments must strive to (i) put social action at the heart of the school or college's strategy and values, (ii) inspire and empower young people to lead their own social action, (iii) recognise and reward social action, (iv) and build strong partnerships with local and national organisations (Ofsted, 2016). The findings from this review support the view that both primary and secondary schools are an ideal setting for intervention delivery, with all programmes (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007; Berg et al., 2009; Suleiman et al., 2006; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020), except for 'Art & Action' (Block et al., 2005), being delivered within a school setting. However, only one of the studies included, Social Action Youth (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007), was delivered during class time with most studies being offered as extra-curricular opportunities rather than being 'interwoven' within the curriculum as policy advises (Ofsted, 2016). Despite the focus being on young people engaging with the wider community through youth social action, many programmes continue to operate solely within the school or education locality (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Siddiqui et al., 2019; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). While interventions such as Children's University (Siddiqui et al., 2019) and Youth Action Research Prevention (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) also utilised community spaces, through excursions and community days, the feasibility of connecting young people with their communities in a meaningful way continues to challenge practitioners as evidenced by the lack of community studies (Ockenden & Stuart, 2014; Noble-Carr et al., 2014). Further, the beneficial impacts of social action on wider communities remains largely unknown due to the studies included within this review and the wider evidence base (Alma Economics, 2021) focusing on the benefits directly related to the young person. Successfully engaging the local community is at the heart of the youth social action concept, and as such, further exploration and deeper comprehension of the most effective means of achieving this in practice is required. While this review focused on peer-reviewed studies, it is acknowledged that many youth social action initiatives occur in informal, community-led contexts that are not captured within academic literature. Greater integration with community-based research approaches, such as participatory research or practice-based case studies, could provide richer insights into the lived experiences of young people engaged in social action. Future research should seek to bridge this gap by incorporating community-based evidence and participatory research methods to better understand the broader landscape of youth social action.

The reporting of study design indicated a lack of robust experimental trials, with only one study (Siddiqui et al., 2019) utilising a 'gold-standard' randomised control trial design (Hariton & Locascio, 2018). Several studies included within this review used qualitative techniques to evaluate aspects of the programmes (i.e., interviews/focus groups) and this

presented an opportunity for children to share their perspectives and become empowered to use their youth voice. While the methodological quality of qualitative techniques could not always be determined due to a lack of detail regarding sampling, selection, topic guides, and analysis (Smith et al., 2014; Smith, 2018), the opportunity for young people to lead aspects of evaluations was a key strength of the studies included. Specifically, the interventions included promoted opportunities for reflection through qualitative means (Jones, 2017; Wilson et al., 2008; Block et al., 2005; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007) and empowered young people to use their youth voice during focus groups and interviews (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Several studies utilised a mixed methods approach, and the Children's University (Siddiqui et al., 2019) provided a rigorous evaluation of improvements to academic attainment by utilising gold-standard practices for evaluation. Youth Empowerment Strategies (Wilson et al., 2008) embraced the photovoice technique as a youth mobilisation tool for promoting community change (Wang, 2006; Liebenberg, 2018), in which young people were empowered to not only lead aspects of the intervention but the evaluation of the project.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this narrative review include the identification of 8 individual youth social action interventions that were performed with young people aged 8–16 years and the provision of evaluative information. The General Framework of Narrative Reviews (Ferrari, 2015) was used to guide the process in a transparent manner to prevent the misinterpretation of findings in both research and practice. The review explicitly focuses on 'youth social action' interventions, which are underrepresented within the peer-reviewed literature. Finally, the topic of the review is of current interest and receiving investment in both the UK and internationally.

Within this review, only English-language papers were considered. This limitation limited the representativeness to interventions from the US, UK, Australia, and Canada. To be included in the review, articles had to be published in a peer-reviewed journal. Therefore, interventions developed by practitioners and/or third sector organisations may not have been represented in this review. In addition, only projects self-defining as 'social action' initiatives were included, which may have also limited the searching scope. Due to the inclusion criteria on age range for this review (8–16 years), the scope of this review was limited to youth and key interventions, with young adults aged between 16 and 24 years potentially not represented. Finally, a narrative review methodology is not as rigorous as a gold-standard systematic review. However, due to the time constraints within the research project, conducting a systematic review was not feasible. A further limitation of this review is the lack of consistent reporting of participant demographics (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity) in the studies included. This prevented an analysis of how lived experiences and social positionalities might influence intervention outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This narrative review identified 8 different youth social action interventions that were utilised with young people aged 8–16 years. The review provides information that can help researchers, practitioners, and young people to understand the progress of the youth social action movement and the projects currently available that have the greatest impact on participants and the wider community. Our findings highlight that the methodological detail and reporting of process evaluation aspects within the youth social action literature requires improvement. Furthermore, while many studies focus on the outcomes specific to youth participants, further empirical research is needed to consider the wider impacts on the community and society. Finally, while it is positive that evaluation practices are

being considered within the youth social action literature, long-term evaluation techniques should also be embraced to understand in greater depth the long-term impacts of youth social action projects.

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