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RETHINK IRELAND Our Social Innovation Fund

Closing the Gap: Evaluating Out-of-School Education to Address Educational Disadvantage

Evaluation of the Equity in Education Fund (2022-2025)

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Executive summary

This evaluation examines the barriers to educational progression faced by vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, with a focus on the impact of four projects, funded by the Equity in Education Fund. By drawing on the perspectives of learners, educators, programme facilitators, families, and other stakeholders, the study provides evidence on how targeted interventions can advance educational equity.

The evaluation pursues two core objectives: a) identifying effective supports and pathways that help marginalised groups such as Traveller, Roma, migrant and refugee communities, people in direct provision, and those in rural disadvantage; and b) building a robust evidence base to inform future work in education practice, funding, and policy, in line with national education, health, and youth strategies. Key areas of analysis include barriers to access, the effectiveness of supports, educational outcomes, and impacts on learner well-being. At the organisational level, the study assesses intervention effectiveness, contribution to systemic change, and alignment with government policy objectives. The findings of this evaluation study aim to inform best practices, strengthen advocacy, and support long-term policy reform to promote equity in education.

Out of the four awardee projects, two are smaller-scale projects with fewer students and limited geographic reach (Inclusive Education and The Donegal Travellers Education Project), while the other two are larger-scale initiatives involving more students and broader county representation (Teen Turn+ and The Big Idea). For the smaller projects, a qualitative case study design was employed to capture detailed, contextual insights that reflect the unique experiences of the participants. For the larger projects, a mixed-methods approach was used, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to offer a comprehensive understanding of educational outcomes. The fieldwork for this evaluation was structured into two distinct phases. Phase 1 focused primarily on qualitative elements for three of the four projects, utilising in-depth interviews with participants, families, and education providers and facilitators. Phase 2 incorporated quantitative data collection through online surveys while also integrating qualitative elements for the fourth project.

Key findings at a glance

Donegal Travellers Education Project: This project supports Traveller and Roma students in Donegal by providing targeted educational support, intercultural training, and leadership programmes to increase Leaving Certificate completion and enhance engagement with schools.

- Participants, parents and educators reported that engagement with the programme built trust-based, culturally safe relationships that supported retention and progression among Traveller young people.
- The project played an important advocacy and mediation role between families and schools, helping to address incidents of discrimination and strengthen communication.
- The relationship-centred approach fostered confidence, identity, and belonging, with parents reporting stronger ability to support their children's education.
- Stakeholders from both the formal school system and the programme reported that partnerships were created with schools and further and higher education institutions, leading to improved intercultural awareness and inclusive school environments.
- At the same time, participants and staff highlighted ongoing structural barriers,

including experiences of discrimination and limited school resources, which they felt continued to constrain opportunities long-term.

Inclusive Education Project: The project tackles educational underachievement among Travellers and Roma in Offaly by combining mentorship, after-school programmes, and skills training with holistic support for life skills, mental health, and community engagement.

- Stakeholders perceived the personalised, holistic support of the programme (mentoring, family engagement, afterschool activities) as supporting their attendance, confidence, and educational progression.
- The programme's approach embedded Traveller-led cultural awareness, which was consistently highlighted by participants, parents and staff as fostering a stronger sense of belonging and pride in their identity.
- Parents and educators observed that the programme acted as a bridge between schools and families, enhancing communication, advocacy, and mutual understanding.
- Sustaining the engagement of new students is a gradual process that depends on building trust and consistent relationships over time. Early, culturally-responsive supports and continuity of staff are key to maintaining participation and preventing disengagement.
- Stakeholders also identified the need for stable, long-term funding and staffing to maintain these gains and extend the programme's reach.

The Big Idea: The project targets early school leavers and young people at risk of disengagement by re-engaging them with education through creative learning, leadership, and teamwork development.

- Learners described the programme as a creative, learner-led alternative to traditional classroom learning that renewed their motivation and sense of purpose.
- Students reported strengthened creativity, teamwork, digital literacy, and communication skills, as well as increased confidence in their own abilities.
- Facilitators also experienced professional growth, noting improvements in their confidence and skills in delivering collaborative, project-based learning.
- Staff identified areas for further development, including the need for clearer structure for facilitators, more flexible scheduling, and additional training to manage sensitive discussions and emotional safety.
- Persistent barriers such as transport difficulties, attendance challenges, and wellbeing needs were highlighted as obstacles to sustained participation.

Teen Turn PLUS: Supports young women from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds in exploring STEM careers, combining experiential learning with long-term mentorship to encourage higher education progression, especially in male-dominated areas.

- Participants reported increased confidence, belonging, and a stronger science identity, along with stronger motivation to pursue further study and career opportunities.
- Parents and mentors highlighted the value of wraparound supports such as free transport, meals, and materials, which reduced barriers to participation.
- The programme's integrated approach of mentorship, industry partnerships, and hands-on learning was consistently described as a key factor enabling progression into STEM pathways for girls.
- Participants valued the programme as a space to build peer networks and a sense of sisterhood, sustaining participation and engagement over time.
- Families and mentors also noted shifts in parental attitudes and aspirations for girls, reflecting broader cultural change around women in STEM.
- Participants and stakeholders expressed a desire for broader outreach and greater visibility, ensuring that opportunities reach more schools and communities in the future.

Cross-Project Findings and Recommendations

Across the four projects, the evaluation found clear and consistently reported evidence that holistic, community-based, and relationship-centred approaches can help address educational disadvantage. Each project demonstrated robust qualitative evidence of improvements in learner confidence, engagement, and progression, while also strengthening family-school partnerships and community trust.

Beyond individual project outcomes, several cross-cutting insights emerged. The evaluation highlights that trust-based, relationship-centred practice, anchored in cultural responsiveness and representation, is a consistent driver of engagement. Providing transport, food, and mentoring were essential enablers to participation, while partnerships with schools and community organisations fostered meaningful shifts in institutional culture and practice. Across projects, participants described gains in confidence, belonging, and wellbeing, all of which underpin educational progression. However, common challenges remain, including rural isolation, limited digital access, and the need for longer-term, stable funding to sustain and scale impact.

1. Recommendations for awardees:

- Continue strengthening holistic supports (e.g., transport, meals, wrap-around care).
- Expand school and community networks and deepen family involvement.
- Develop clearer systems for documenting and communicating outcomes to sustain learning and secure future funding.

2. Recommendations for Rethink Ireland and other funders:

- Recognise and invest in alternative and out-of-school education pathways as essential to equity.
- Simplify and standardise reporting structures to reduce administrative burden.
- Promote peer learning and collaboration among grantees through communities of practice.
- Build sustainability supports, including capacity-building for evaluation, fundraising, and dissemination.

3. Recommendations for government and policy makers:

- Ensure continuity of mentoring and relational supports to deliver on commitments in the Education Act (1998) and National Access Plan (2022-2028).
- Embed culturally responsive and community-based approaches as core educational practice, not as short-term pilots.
- Strengthen investment in girls' STEM engagement and out-of-school learning within DEIS, Traveller & Roma Education, and STEM Education Implementation Plan frameworks.
- Support learner well-being and attendance through wrap-around measures aligned with the Well-being Framework (2025).

Together, these findings highlight that addressing educational disadvantage requires sustained collaboration across community, funding, and policy levels, in order to link local innovation to systemic reform.

Introduction

About Rethink Ireland

Rethink Ireland is a national organisation that supports outstanding social innovation initiatives by offering financial grants and business development assistance to its awardees. Its mission is to create a more inclusive and improved Ireland through the power of social innovation. The organisation partners with companies, foundations, trusts, and individuals who are dedicated to addressing urgent challenges in Ireland, particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, social enterprise, equality, and the green transition.

Awardees benefit from funding, tailored support, and access to valuable networks, helping them grow and expand their innovative solutions across the country. The funds raised by Rethink Ireland are matched by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht via the Dormant Accounts Fund. More recently, additional funding has been provided by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, as well as the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Introduction to the Equity in Education Fund

The Equity in Education Fund, a three-year (2022-2025) €1,125,000 initiative, was created by Rethink Ireland in partnership with a private donor and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. Its goal is to mitigate educational disadvantage through supporting innovative, non-profit organisations that work with communities across Ireland. The Fund aims to achieve this goal in several ways:

- By supporting greater access to education at second level for young people experiencing marginalisation
- By supporting engagement in formal and non-formal education for young people facing intersecting disadvantages
- By supporting development of 21st century skills (digital literacy, leadership and critical thinking skills) among young people.

The Fund awarded four organisations ('awardees') delivering projects designed to enhance educational engagement and improve both formal and non-formal educational outcomes for young people from Traveller, Roma and migrant backgrounds, as well as those experiencing rural disadvantage.

This evaluation will examine the objectives, processes and outcomes of the Equity in Education Fund, assessing its impact on some of the most vulnerable populations in Ireland. The overall aim of the evaluation is to understand 'what works' in supporting progression in education for the target groups, i.e., Roma, Traveller and migrant groups including people living in direct provision, and rural learners. In doing so, the evaluation develops an evidence base that will inform further work in education practice and policy.

Introduction to the Awardees

The Equity in Education Fund currently supports four projects that align with its mission. These awardees, selected for their impact potential and alignment with the Fund's goals, have each received a financial grant alongside non-financial supports such as mentorship and capacity-building

programmes. The four projects are:

1. Donegal Travellers Education Project

Target Group: Youth from the Travellers and Roma community in Donegal (estimated to be 650).

The Donegal Travellers Education Project is a specific initiative of the wider Donegal Travellers Project organisation, which is referred to in this report as DTP. This project aims to tackle the severe educational disadvantages faced by the Traveller and Roma communities in Donegal, where educational attainment levels are critically low. By employing an education team, promoting intercultural training, and delivering youth leadership programmes, this initiative seeks to encourage more young people to complete their Leaving Certificate and improve relationships between the Traveller and Roma communities and education providers.

2. Inclusive Education Project – Ballycommon Telework and Training Centre

Target Group: Youth from the Travellers and Roma community in Offaly (there are 300 identified Traveller families in the county).

Focusing on personalised support, this project addresses the social determinants of educational underachievement among young Travellers and Roma in Offaly. Through mentorship, after-school programmes, and 21st-century skills training, it aims to guide participants through formal education, offering a holistic approach that includes life skills, mental health support, and community engagement.

3. Teen-Turn PLUS

Target Group: Girls from rural, migrant, and underserved communities (including those in Direct Provision and refugee or emergency accommodation).

Teen-Turn PLUS empowers young women from marginalised and rural areas, guiding them towards careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Through hands-on learning experiences and long-term mentorship, this project not only fosters STEM interest but also promotes progression to third-level education, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields.

4. The Big Idea – Youthreach Programme

Target Group: Disadvantaged early school leavers, including those from rural, Traveller, Roma, and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

The Big Idea uses creative education to re-engage early school leavers, supporting them to develop critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork skills. Working with Youthreach Kilkenny, the programme focuses on student-driven projects addressing social issues such as equality and mental health, building confidence and educational engagement in these vulnerable groups.
Although each awardee is focused on different demographics and educational challenges, all share a common goal: breaking down barriers to educational access and success for some of the most marginalised young people in Ireland.

Context of the evaluation

The current policy landscape

Educational disadvantage refers to the reduced capacity of individuals or groups to benefit fully from the education system due to social, economic, or cultural factors and barriers (Jeffers & Lillis, 2021). It encompasses barriers such as poverty, limited access to resources, lower parental educational attainment, and systemic inequalities that affect educational participation, engagement, and outcomes (Smyth & McCoy, 2009). These disadvantages often result in lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and restricted opportunities for progression to

further or higher education, ultimately contributing to the reproduction of social inequality across generations (Carroll, 2022). At the heart of tackling educational inequality lies the need to create learning environments that empower all students. The Addressing Educational Disadvantage report by the Educational Research Centre (Watson, Kenny, & McGinnity, 2017) provides a comprehensive review and evidence of international strategies that have been proven effective in addressing these disparities, emphasising that strategies yield results when applied through an inclusive and culturally sensitive and respectful lens. Among the most impactful are parental involvement and raising teachers' expectations, both of which have been shown to significantly improve student outcomes, particularly for those coming from underrepresented communities. These strategies emphasise the importance of building trust, fostering high aspirations, and creating a supportive learning environment that values every learner's potential.

The DEIS Plan (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) remains the cornerstone of Ireland's approach to addressing educational disadvantage, providing targeted supports to schools serving disadvantaged communities. It emphasises literacy and numeracy, attendance, retention, and parental involvement, while recognising the role of Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) in bridging families and schools. Furthermore, the OECD (2024) Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland highlights that effective responses to disadvantage require more than resourcing alone, as it stresses the importance of capacity-building amongst teachers, school leaders, and schools themselves, supported by system-level policies to enable resources to be used effectively. Specifically for the Traveller and Roma communities, the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Department of Education, 2024) represents a formal government commitment to improving access, participation, retention, and progression for Traveller and Roma students. It centres on culturally responsive practice, community-based planning, and partnership with families and communities. This is complemented by the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, which recognises education as a key driver of equality, while also addressing accommodation, health, and cultural rights, and it reinforces the need for state agencies to work in partnership with Traveller and Roma communities. Moreover, the National Access Plan 2022–2028 (Higher Education Authority & Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022) provides the framework for widening participation in higher education, with specific targets for groups underrepresented in higher education, including Travellers, students with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged communities.

The Wellbeing Policy and Framework for Practice 2018–2023 (Department of Education and Skills, 2018) positions wellbeing as a core dimension of education, recognising that barriers such as poverty and inequality are closely linked to attendance, engagement, and learning. It commits schools to whole-school approaches that promote wellbeing. This commitment aligns with findings from the Well-being Framework 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025), which identifies cohorts such as younger people in the workforce, households with lower incomes, and single-parent households as experiencing greater inequalities across multiple wellbeing indicators, including mental and physical health and social connections. Moreover, dimensions like "Connections, Community and Participation" and "Subjective Wellbeing" show that fostering supportive environments is vital to improving life satisfaction. These policies reinforce the importance of schools creating inclusive, supportive environments that address social and economic barriers to promote holistic wellbeing and educational engagement. Furthermore, the STEM Education Implementation Plan 2022–2026 (Department of Education, 2022) outlines actions to foster STEM learning from early childhood through to senior cycle, with a strong focus on tackling gender imbalances and encouraging underrepresented groups, particularly girls, to pursue STEM pathways. Finally, the Review of Out-of-School Education Provision (Department of Education, 2022) recognises the role of

alternative and out-of-school settings in providing flexible, holistic responses for young people at risk of early school leaving.

It is worth noting that these policies represent pathways to deliver on Ireland's existing legal mandates, including the Education Act (1998), the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), the Equal Status Acts (2000–2018), and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992. The Education Act (1998) establishes the State's duty to provide for the education of every child, with equity as a guiding principle. The Education (Welfare) Act (2000) places a statutory obligation on the State to ensure school attendance and to prevent early school leaving, underpinning initiatives such as the School Completion Programme and informing new attendance measures introduced in 2025. The Equal Status Acts (2000–2018) prohibit discrimination in access to education, including on grounds of Traveller identity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. Finally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child commits Ireland to guaranteeing every child's right to education and to active participation in decisions that affect their lives.

The case of Irish Travellers

Irish Travellers remain one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Ireland. According to the 2022 Census, only 1% of Travellers progress to third-level education, and over two-thirds leave school before completing the Leaving Certificate (Brennan et al., 2024). Reports from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and organisations such as Pavee Point highlight systemic failures in addressing Traveller needs, from inadequate accommodation to underrepresentation in policy-making (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2024; Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2021). Furthermore, when Travellers are actively involved in educational initiatives, outcomes improve, meaning that interventions and policies become more representative, inclusive, and effective, fostering trust and cultural understanding. Despite this, such participatory approaches remain rare. Recently the Department of Education and Youth has developed a new Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030, which is part of a wider National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy. Partnership and meaningful participation of Traveller and Roma children are the core of this strategy. Strengthening communication and collaboration between the education system and these communities is essential for increasing engagement, attendance, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Dirrane and Dempsey (2025) explored the impact of Traveller-focused initiatives in the UK, showing that trusted relationships and flexible, culturally sensitive education models significantly improve engagement and outcomes. Future policy must prioritise intersectional data, community-based planning, and targeted investment in early years and post-primary transitions.

Girls in STEM

Across the world, women and girls continue to be underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields (Avraamidou, 2022; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2024). This underrepresentation is not due to a lack of interest or ability but is strongly influenced by gendered expectations, stereotypes, and unequal opportunities (Stoet & Geary, 2018). In Ireland, research shows that as early as nine years old, girls' performance in mathematics is underestimated by teachers and parents, reinforcing beliefs that boys are naturally more capable in STEM (McCoy, Byrne, & O'Connor, 2020). Studies highlight the critical importance of adolescence as a key period for fostering girls' sustained engagement and confidence in STEM subjects (Makarova, Aeschlimann, & Herzog, 2019). Flexible, hands-on, and community-based approaches — such as mentorship by female role models, real-world projects, and access to industry experiences — have been shown to effectively support girls' science identity and increase participation. Addressing these barriers early and providing empowering, inclusive learning environments are essential to improve long-term academic and professional outcomes for girls in STEM.

Alternative Education Approaches

Although a number of initiatives towards a more equitable education system have been introduced, educational inequality in Ireland perseveres. With a few exceptions (e.g., Youthreach) alternative education as a way of addressing educational disadvantage is not sufficiently investigated in the Irish education system. There is a range of alternative settings currently supported by the Department of Education and Youth, Tusla, the regional ETBs and a range of public and private bodies (Department of Education, 2022). The Review of Out-of-School Education Provision (Department of Education, 2022) highlights that informal education settings have been operating within the State since the establishment of Youth Encounter Project schools in the 1970s. These alternative forms of education provide a more holistic approach to teaching and learning and, as such, they can have a positive impact on learners' engagement, learning and future employability. Educational programmes, such as those funded by the Equity in Education Fund, provide an opportunity for exploring the specific educational needs and provisions needed to address educational inequality. In the same vein, this evaluation will provide systematic empirical evidence on the affordances of alternative education as a vehicle for accommodating diverse educational needs for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

About the Evaluators

This evaluation was conducted by a research team from the School of Education, University College Dublin: Dr Angeliki Lima, Dr Gabriela Martinez Sainz, Dr Olga Ioannidou, and Dr Seaneen Sloan. Collectively, the team has extensive expertise in educational disadvantage, inclusion, and children's rights, with experience in both qualitative and quantitative research across Ireland, the UK, and internationally.

Methodology

A. Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide comprehensive insights into the barriers to educational progression faced by vulnerable groups and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. By assessing the impact of the interventions funded by the Equity in Education Fund, the evaluation demonstrates how educational equity can be achieved through targeted support and interventions. This study will present empirical findings from the perspectives of the awardees, the educators and programme facilitators, family members and parents, and other stakeholders to inform policy discussions and promote broader societal change.

This evaluation focuses on two **overarching objectives**:

1. To understand and assess 'what works' in supporting vulnerable learner groups such as Traveller, Roma, migrant/refugee communities, people living in direct provision, and those experiencing rural disadvantage. The evaluation aims to identify effective educational pathways and supports that can help address educational disparities.

2. To establish an evidence base for effective educational interventions that will guide future funding initiatives and policy recommendations. The findings will align with strategic objectives from government departments such as the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the Department of Health, and the Department of Education and Youth.

The assessment framework used in this evaluation study was based on four dimensions as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessment Framework

Category	For learners / beneficiaries	For awardee organisations
1. Effective Pathways and Supports	Identify impactful pathways and support services needed to assist learners with the greatest barriers to education, contributing to best practices.	Develop an evidence base to help awardees advocate for systemic changes and shape their future work.
2. Identifying Barriers	Examine systemic and societal obstacles faced by marginalised participants in accessing and engaging with educational opportunities.	Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in reducing educational disadvantage and overcoming barriers to learning.

3. Impact on Learners	Assess qualitative effects on learner well-being, confidence, motivation, and future aspirations.	Provide a description of "what works" for learners that engaged in the programmes.
	Track outcomes such as increased access, progression rates, retention, and completion rates for learners.	Identify how awardees' outcomes align to government policies, and how such outcomes can support broader policy objectives for educational equity.
4. Recommendations	Provide actionable suggestions to improve learning experiences, reduce barriers, and increase engagement.	Recommend improvements in programme design, delivery, monitoring, and scaling for long-term impact.

B. Design of Evaluation

i) Methodological Approach and Rationale

Out of the four awardee projects, two are smaller-scale projects with fewer students and limited geographic reach (Inclusive Education and The Donegal Travellers Education Project), while the other two are larger-scale initiatives involving more students and broader county representation (Teen Turn+ and The Big Idea). For the smaller projects, a qualitative case study design was employed to capture detailed, contextual insights that reflect the unique experiences of the participants. This approach was best suited for their more focused and localised nature. For the larger projects, a mixed-methods approach was decided, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to offer a comprehensive understanding of educational outcomes.

By applying qualitative case studies to smaller projects and mixed methods to larger ones, the evaluation provides a holistic view of the educational interventions. This helps us combine empirical evidence with contextual analysis, offering valuable insights to inform future programme design and policy recommendations.

ii) Data Collection Planning

The fieldwork for this evaluation was structured into two distinct phases to comprehensively capture both qualitative and quantitative data across the various projects. **Phase 1** focused primarily on qualitative elements for three of the four projects, utilising in-depth interviews with participants, families, and education providers and facilitators. **Phase 2**, on the other hand, incorporated quantitative data collection through online surveys while also integrating qualitative elements for the fourth project.

The table below provides a comprehensive overview of the expected outcomes and impacts associated with each project, along with the specific research instruments and methods that were employed to capture these insights. For each initiative, we outline the anticipated educational benefits, such as increased student engagement, and enhanced collaboration among stakeholder and improved retention rates. Additionally, the table specifies which phase of the evaluation (Phase 1 or Phase 2) was used for data collection and analysis. The following sections will discuss each of these elements in detail.

Table 2: Summary of Evaluation

Expected Outcomes and Impact	Data collection and analysis
1. The Donegal Travellers Education Project (Letterkenny, Donegal)	
Higher retention in school and Leaving Certificate completion for Traveller and Roma young people. Increased involvement of Traveller and Roma children and young people in decision-making about their education. Improved relationships between the Traveller and Roma communities and education providers in Donegal. Increased intercultural awareness in schools and education providers, fostering a Traveller-friendly culture. Strengthened confidence, identity, pride, and well-being among Traveller and Roma young people.	Qualitative data collected through interviews with young Travellers. Qualitative data collected through interviews with members of the Traveller community and education providers, focused on their perceptions of the change in relations over the course of the intervention period. Qualitative data collected through interviews with parents, guardians, and family members to capture their experiences of the programme and their engagement in the educational process.
2. Inclusive Education Project (Tullamore, Offaly)	
Improved literacy skills among project participants. Increased engagement from new students. Increased intercultural awareness among students and teachers. Improved parental understanding of the benefits of education and project supports. Improved sense of belonging, self-belief, and confidence among students. Increased student confidence, engagement, and group dynamics in education.	Qualitative data collected through interviews with young Travellers. Qualitative data collected through interviews with parents and local school staff, focused on their engagement and perceptions of the change in relations over the course of the intervention period.
3. The Big Idea - Youthreach (Tullamore, Offaly - various locations)	
Improved creative thinking, teamwork, communication, and presentation skills. Increased student motivation supported by mentor feedback. Improved 21st-century skills among students (digital literacy, leadership, critical thinking). Improved confidence and skills among Youthreach teachers in delivering 21st-century skills.	Quantitative data in the form of a single online survey administered to capture measures of confidence and engagement, along with feedback from participants regarding their skill improvements, among students involved in the intervention. Qualitative data collected in a single Youthreach Centre with facilitators and participants

4. Teen-Turn PLUS (various locations)	
Improved school engagement among girls from marginalised groups. Increased completion of senior cycle and progression to third-level STEM education. Increased science capital among participating girls. Strengthened teamwork skills and peer support networks. Increased intercultural awareness among students and teachers. Encouraged third-level progression through portfolio and skills development. Improved sense of belonging in STEM, self-belief, confidence, and well-being.	A single online survey to gather insights on school engagement, confidence, programme experiences, and the hopes and aspirations of girls participating in the intervention. Qualitative data collected from interviews with participants, parents, mentors, volunteers and staff.

iii) Fieldwork Phases

Planning phase (October 2023 - January 2024)

The planning phase was critical for laying the groundwork for the entire evaluation process. During this phase, we held several key meetings with a broad range of stakeholders, including project leaders, community representatives, educators, and other relevant parties. These discussions were essential for:

- **Defining Evaluation Criteria**

We worked closely with stakeholders to clearly outline the criteria that would guide the evaluation. This involved identifying the key outcomes and success indicators for each project, ensuring alignment with both the projects' goals and the broader objectives of the evaluation.

- **Understanding Specific Goals and Target Groups**

As each project operates within unique contexts, targeting distinct groups, these meetings allowed us to deepen our understanding of each project's specific objectives, challenges, and the needs of their target populations, which was critical for tailoring the evaluation approach to reflect these nuances.

- **Theory of Change Development**

During this phase, the awardees developed and shared a theory of change for each project. This framework served as the foundation for our evaluation partnership, articulating the key inputs, activities, outputs, and expected outcomes for each initiative. By familiarising with the theory of change, we were able to map out how each project aims to achieve its desired impact, providing a guiding structure for the evaluation process. The theory of change also helped in identifying potential contextual factors and mechanisms that could affect the success of each intervention, which would later inform data collection and analysis.

- **Stakeholder Engagement**

Engaging stakeholders early in the planning phase ensured that their perspectives and priorities were integrated into the evaluation design. This process helped build trust and created a sense of shared ownership over the evaluation process. Furthermore, involving community representatives and project leaders in the planning phase allowed us to ensure that the evaluation would be culturally sensitive and contextually relevant.

Site visits (February 2024- June 2024)

While the initial Zoom meetings were crucial for gathering preliminary insights and understanding the unique contexts and challenges faced by each awardee group, we determined that in-person site visits were necessary to deepen our engagement and gain a more comprehensive perspective. These site visits allowed us to observe the projects firsthand, interact with participants, and gather rich contextual data. The locations visited included:

- *Letterkenny, Co. Donegal* (The Donegal Travellers Education Project): Met with various stakeholders and community members, including educators and participants' parents, to discuss their views on the programme's role within the community. Visited schools and explored other significant areas, gathering insights on the educational landscape and identifying key resources and support systems available to students.
- *Tullamore, Co. Offaly* (Inclusive Education Project): Engaged with stakeholders, including project leaders and parents of students, to gain a comprehensive view of the project's implementation and impact. Conducted informal discussions to better understand the experiences and perspectives of the families involved.
- *Galway, Co. Galway* (Teen Turn Programme): Observed a typical Saturday workshop at the *University of Galway*, allowing us to witness the programme in action. Interacted directly with facilitators, facilitating feedback on the programme's structure and content.
- For the Big Idea project, the site visit could not be conducted as the original location was no longer available due to staff changes. A connection with the new location was established during the subsequent data collection phase, and so we combined the initial site visit and data collection visits into a single step.

These in-person visits constitute a step of major significance in the fieldwork process, as were particularly crucial in establishing rapport and building trust with participants and local stakeholders. Trust is a foundational element for long-term evaluation success, as it fosters open communication, encourages honest feedback, and creates a collaborative environment. The relationships built during these site visits not only enhanced the quality of the data collected but also deepened local engagement and trust, which was essential for the evaluation.

Ethics approval (January 2024 - May 2024)

Ensuring that the evaluation of educational initiatives targeting disadvantaged groups adheres to ethical standards has been a critical aspect of the project planning and execution. The table below provides an overview of the steps taken to secure ethics approval, reflecting our commitment to upholding ethical standards and safeguarding the rights and well-being of all participants involved in the evaluation. This step was an essential part of our evaluation study given that the target groups engaged in the programmes belong to vulnerable populations.

For each programme, a detailed ethics application was submitted to the University College Dublin (UCD) Human Research Ethics Committee. This process involved several key components. First, we developed comprehensive data collection plans that outlined the specific methods to be used, the recruitment process, and how data would be collected, stored and analysed.

Each ethics application was developed collaboratively with the awardees, who acted as gatekeepers, as well as facilitators of the data collection process. Their input was crucial in determining how, what, and when we would have access to participants, ensuring that the ethical considerations aligned with the realities of working with vulnerable populations.

Once submitted, the applications were reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee and, following some amendments and requests for additional information, full approval was granted for all four applications by May 2024. Following this, data

collection was able to proceed.

Addressing potential ethical dilemmas

Given the sensitive nature of the target groups, such as young people from Traveller, Roma, and migrant backgrounds, it was crucial to address potential ethical dilemmas. Below, we outline some of the key ethical challenges we encountered and the steps we took to resolve them in line with best practices, demonstrating our deep commitment to ethical standards.

Informed Consent and Providing Information: One of the key dilemmas involved obtaining informed consent from participant groups, particularly young people and their parents, many of whom come from Traveller, Roma, and migrant backgrounds. These groups often face challenges in understanding complex information about research.

To ensure that informed consent was obtained in an ethically sound manner, we employed culturally sensitive and age-appropriate procedures. Information sheets were distributed via educators to both participants and their parents before data collection. This advance sharing allowed for sufficient time to raise questions or concerns. After obtaining parental consent, we engaged participants in a dialogue to explain the research's goals, the interview process, and their role in it. This approach ensured participants understood the nature of the research and were comfortable asking questions, thus fostering a participatory and informed consent process.

Managing Power Imbalances: Another ethical dilemma was the potential for power imbalances between researchers and participants, particularly as many participants come from vulnerable populations.

To mitigate power imbalances, we prioritised building on the transparent dialogue established during the consent process. Our team reflected on our positionality throughout the research process, emphasising the voluntary nature of participation. We made it clear that participants had the right to withdraw at any time, without any repercussions. During interviews, we practised active listening, which ensured that participants' concerns were heard, understood, and addressed empathetically. This approach empowered participants to feel in control of their participation and allowed us to foster an environment of respect and autonomy.

Mitigating Distress and Handling Sensitive Information: Interviews with young participants, particularly on topics related to educational disadvantage, carried the risk of emotional or psychological distress. To address this, we implemented a Distress Protocol based on Whitney and Evered's (2022) work. Participants were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time and were reassured that there were no right or wrong answers. Our research team members were trained to recognise signs of distress and, if necessary, stop the recording and offer participants the option to pause or end the interview. Following the interview, participants were provided with contact details of our team, but also a key individual in the organisation who would act as a safe point of contact, and the opportunity for follow-up support if needed. Additionally, we explained to participants the limits of confidentiality, particularly in cases where disclosures might indicate harm or risk to a minor, in which case we would notify a trusted adult.

Balancing Educator Autonomy and Research Participation: Finally, we considered the ethical challenge of balancing the autonomy of educators involved in the programmes with their willingness to participate in the research. This was particularly important given their dual role as educators and participants in our study. We engaged the educators in a detailed discussion about their participation, ensuring they were fully informed about the research's implications, including limits on confidentiality. While the educators had successfully been awarded Rethink Ireland funding and were open to the evaluation, we emphasised that their autonomy would be respected throughout the research process. Clear communication and the right to withdraw at any time were underscored to ensure they felt no undue pressure to participate.

Recruitment and Sampling (May 2024 - June 2024)

The size and composition of the sample were determined through close collaboration and consultation with the awardees. Together, we worked to identify key stakeholders and participants who could provide valuable insights into both the experiences of individuals involved in the programmes and the overall impact of these initiatives.

Several factors were taken into account during the discussions, such as the diversity of perspectives, the representativeness of the sample, and the practicalities of conducting interviews with a range of different stakeholders. Through these consultations, we established a sample size that strikes a balance between achieving a comprehensive understanding of the programmes' outcomes and respecting the logistical constraints of the research project.

Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited with the assistance and collaboration of the programme coordinators and contact persons, who played an essential role as gatekeepers. These coordinators helped facilitate access to participants and ensured that a diverse representation of perspectives and experiences was included in the sample. For participants under 18 years of age, parental consent was obtained before any communication or interview. After identifying suitable participants, they were provided with detailed information about the study, including its purpose, the interview procedures, and any potential risks or benefits. The consent process ensured that participants were well-informed and comfortable with the research. Once consent was secured, interviews were scheduled at a time that accommodated participants' availability. A UCD researcher travelled to different locations to meet with participants and conduct the interviews.

Summary of Recruitment Steps:

1. **Collaboration with Programme Coordinators:** Programme coordinators were instrumental in identifying potential participants and facilitating the recruitment process.
2. **Parental Consent:** For minors (<18 years), parental consent was sought before initiating any contact or interviews.
3. **Participant Briefing:** All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, interview process, and possible risks and benefits.
4. **Interview Scheduling:** Based on participants' availability, interview dates were set, while Zoom interviews were held when it was the participants' preference or due to their availability.

Table 3: Sample size and composition for each programme

The Donegal Travellers Education Project	
Stakeholder	**no.**
Learner	4
Parent	4
Educational Support Worker	3
School Liaison Officer	1
Assistant Manager/ Primary Health Care Coordinator	1
Total	13

Inclusive Education	
Stakeholder	**no.**
Learner	3
Member of the Irish Travellers Community	1
Educational Support Worker	1
Staff Health Managed in OTM	1
OTM Manager	1
Parents	3
Teacher from local school	1
School Liaison Officer	1
OTM and Ballycommon Manager	1
School Principal	1
OTM representative and educational support worker	1
Total (Interview participants)	15

Big Idea	
Stakeholder	**no.**
Facilitator	2
Learner	5
Total (Interview participants)	7
Total (Survey participants)	10

Teen Turn	
Stakeholder	**no.**
Learner	12
Parents	6
Volunteers/Mentors	3
Staff	2
Total (Interview participants)	23
Total (Survey participants)	27

Data Collection

Phase 1: May 2024 – July 2024

In this phase, we focused on gathering qualitative data from the Inclusive Education, Teen Turn, and The Big Idea projects. This included conducting in-depth interviews with participants, educators, and key stakeholders such as parents and community representatives. One of our researchers conducted several in-person visits for interviews, while Zoom was used for those unable to attend in person. By the end of this phase, the qualitative data collection for all three projects was nearly complete. However, one interview from the Inclusive Education project and five from Teen Turn were postponed until September 2024 due to participant availability and school closures over the summer months.

Phase 2: October 2024 – February 2025

This phase involved administering two surveys and completing the qualitative element for the Donegal Travellers Education Project. A researcher conducted a three-day fieldwork trip to Letterkenny in October to complete interviews with participants, parents, and other stakeholders. We coordinated with key educators to ensure this was done on schedule. Additionally, the survey for Teen Turn+ was approved, and we worked with the team to plan its administration. For The Big Idea survey for the educators, we applied for ethical approval on August 26, 2024, following a change in plans and we received final approval by mid-October 2024.

Analysis

Cross-project thematic analysis

To understand the impact and effectiveness of the four programmes, we conducted a cross-project thematic analysis. This approach allowed us to systematically explore key patterns and insights across diverse contexts, while also recognising the unique characteristics of each programme and participant group. Drawing on the qualitative and quantitative data collected over the course of the evaluation, we identified four overarching themes that capture the core areas of experience, challenge, and change. Each theme is further broken down into sub-themes or focus areas to provide a nuanced understanding of participant motivations, programme dynamics, and the outcomes as reported by different stakeholders.

Theme 1: Effective pathways & supports

Sub theme: Participation in the programme (what worked)
This theme covers the key factors behind each programme and aims to capture a full picture of what motivates participants to engage, what supports this engagement, and what makes long-term participation possible.

Sub-theme: Enablers to access/engage with formal education
This theme focuses on how the programmes respond to the identified barriers. It highlights two main areas:

- Family support/parental engagement
- Other supports (examples: mentors, schools, logistics)

Theme 2: Barriers to access/engage with formal education

This theme looks at the needs or gaps the programmes aim to address. It helps answer the question of why these programmes are necessary, why here and why now. It also encompasses the broader educational context and the challenges faced by both participants and education providers.

Theme 3: Impact/indicators of change

This theme explores what key stakeholders identify as outcomes of their involvement in the programmes. It includes two main areas:

- Individual (learners): The ways in which the programme influenced learners' emotional, social and academic outcomes. For instance, what is the perceived impact of the programme on the learner's participation in formal education, their well-being, confidence?
- Community/Schools: The way in which the programme promoted parent empowerment. Has there been an increased awareness or visibility of the learner population reported or observed? Has there been a change in attitudes or practices at school level?

Theme 4: Recommendations

This final theme of our analysis highlights key reflections and insights gathered from participants and stakeholders. It focuses on constructive feedback, emerging challenges and suggestions that can inform the programme's ongoing development and support long-term engagement.

The table below presents an overview of these four themes along with their sub-themes or focus areas. This framework guided our analysis and structured the way we interpreted and synthesised the data.

Table 4: Overview of Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Sub-themes / Focus Areasv
1. Effective pathways & supports	**1a. Participation in the Programme (What Works)**	What motivates participants to engage, what supports this engagement, and what makes long-term participation possible.	▪ Motivations for joining ▪ Factors that support ongoing engagement ▪ What keeps participants involved over time
	1b. Enablers to Access / Engage with Formal Education	How programmes work to address the identified barriers.	▪ Family support / parental engagement ▪ Other supports (mentors, logistics, school support, peer support)
2. Identifying barriers		The needs or gaps the programmes aim to address, and the background and the context in which participants and providers are working. Aims to answer why this programme, why here, why now.	▪ Systemic/structural barriers ▪ Cultural or emotional barriers ▪ Challenges faced by schools and providers
3. Impact/indicators of change		What participants, families, and schools report as outcomes of their involvement and changes they see in themselves as a result of this programme. Two levels: individual and community-school level.	▪ Individual: wellbeing, confidence, skills development ▪ Community/School: parent empowerment, schools changed attitudes or practices
4. Recommendations		Areas that can improve, as well as challenges, gaps, or future needs that need to be addressed.	▪ Challenges experienced ▪ Suggestions for improvement or long-term sustainability

Core Findings

Building on the thematic framework and cross-programme comparisons presented above, this section outlines the core findings of the evaluation. Each theme is discussed drawing on participants', facilitators' and other stakeholders' perspectives to illustrate how the programmes were experienced, the impacts achieved, and the challenges encountered.

By presenting direct insights and stories alongside analysis, this section aims to provide a rich, grounded understanding of what worked well, what barriers persist, and what changes stakeholders observed as a result of their involvement. The findings highlight both the shared strengths across programmes and the unique elements shaped by each specific context.

The Donegal Travellers Education Project

1. Participation in the Programme – What Works

Interviews with participants in the programme and their parents identified key features of the programme that worked well to **motivate learners to be involved and sustain their engagement.** Particularly important for their sustained participation in the project and engagement were the relationships the support workers have developed with them and the community, the trust they have earned, and the culturally safe environment that the programme offers:

> *[My child] is doing his Leaving Cert, and he needed some support. [...], through the education project, got support for his English and Maths. [...] And it's like a sense of belonging, do you know what I mean? Being with your own. (Parent 1)*

Educators in the programme described positive feedback from the different activities they plan to motivate participants. From support with exams and homework to trips and extracurricular activities, the broad range of activities were important for motivation. Participants and their parents discussed the importance of the support and the opportunities given through the project, but educators emphasised the importance of conducting them in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way. The motivators identified were also supported by the educators involved, who provided more details into the feedback from learners and their overall engagement.

> *They offered me more help and grinds with any subject I was really struggling with. So they were doing everything they can to help me get through school and understand everything. (Participant 1)*

> *My son actually got a great experience — he got to go to Italy, and he got to go to Paris — two big countries. And my daughter got to go away as well, to Paris. So she did — all through, like, wouldn't happen without them, you know. [...] They've had amazing experiences, and they've been down the country too. (Parent 2)*

The **supportive and engaging approach of the programme** delivery was evident not only in the activities they planned for the children, but in the way the programme worked to engage parents as well and make the information and enrolment process as accessible as possible. The support provided by the programmes to the parents continues as children progress into school and responds directly to their emerging needs, from access to information about school admissions and processes, to supports in school, to application for grants:

> *They'll call out to the home, knock on the door, and, you know, give me some leaflets, kind of letting you know that it's going to be starting, if you want to sign up your children or whatever. [...] they keep you well informed and keep you up to date with what's happening. (Parent 2)*

> *And I was quite concerned because it's my first time going through the secondary school thing. And I was worried, I was concerned. [...] I was even worried about the financial part of it. When the time came, they [Educator 1 and Educator 2] said, "We'll support you. Do this and do this." And then he got accepted for the SUSI grant. And they said, "Bring the letter," because I couldn't understand it. And I was afraid to even ask, but in two seconds, [Educator 1] texted back. (Parent, 1)*

The experiences of the participants confirmed the supportive nature of the programme and show the impact this had in their academic performance and educational engagement. The supports provided by the programme and the educators accompanied many of the participants through their education trajectory, from Primary School to Higher Education:

> *Well, to be honest, I wasn't really that social in school. So every Wednesday, they'd hold, like a low group project, and that's where I*

made some friends and all. And I was able to meet new people there. And anytime I was like struggling in school, they were there to help me. (Participant 1)

[The programme] gets me out of noise, keeps me out of trouble, gives me a better education for school. [...] They did a lot for me. If I didn't have them, I'd probably still be in trouble. They took me out, doing stuff with me, just gave me a reason to stop being bad. [...] [Educator 1] and the other people in the project, they always help us. They always tell us to come out, and they always look after us. (Participant 3)

One of the key elements that works for the programme is the strong relationships the educators build with the participants, their families and the community. The educators have gained the trust of participants and their parents, through purposeful engagement, constantly checking in with the young people and their families, meeting regularly with them and being accessible. The strong relationships they build with the families and the holistic support educators provide are the main reasons why the programme is then recommended to other members of the community.

Good engagement to me means a lot of work we would do in the background — neighbourhood work. [...] I mean, it is just — I suppose sometimes when you are reporting, you are not mentioning the time spent building relationships. Sometimes it is very hard to report on that — the building of relationships. [...]— the support that is there is crucial for tackling educational disadvantage. (Educator 1)

The relationships the project forged also include other key stakeholders, for example School Principals, Teachers and Home-School Liaison Officers. Educators in the programme support parents in multiple ways so they can support their children's learning and engagement in school better. They do so, by providing key information on the education system, detailing the supports available to them or, in many cases, acting as mediators with the schools.

The Education Project being here has given Traveler parents power to support their children in school [against discriminatory treatment], and also, like, to support your Travelers in schooling. It's done so much. [...] Because when you go up to the school, you're not just sitting with the principal. You are sitting with the principal, the teachers, the chaplain — a whole team. And you're probably sitting there yourself. And they're a team, and you're sitting individually. But now, you know, you've got [Educator 1] and [Educator 2]. You know you've got a team. (Parent 1)

The strong relationships were identified as crucial for young people participating in the programme. For participants the educators are not only supportive mentors but in many cases role models and examples of what they can achieve if they continue to be engaged in education.

***Interviewer:** In your community, are there any people that you look up to?*
***Participant:** [Educator 1] first, yeah, anybody really in the Donegal Traveller Project You know, they've all had their life figured out, and they've gone through the education. They've stuck at it. So I want to do the same. (Participant 1)*

2. Barriers to Access and Engagement with Formal Education

Participants in the programme identified barriers that shape their experiences in education. These barriers, also discussed by the parents and the educators of the programme, were often linked to systemic excursion and discrimination faced by the Irish Travellers Community in Co. Donegal. Intergenerational experiences of exclusion and discrimination that led to educational disengagement and mistrust in schools were often passed from generation to generation. These experiences not only affect young people's engagement in education but also their identity, with many of them not wanting to identify as Travellers any more due to the discrimination their or their parents have experienced.

You could be working with parents whose experience in school was absolutely atrocious

[...]So, it's about understanding the full picture of parents' experiences in education—the intergenerational discrimination they have experienced—and supporting them on a journey with their sons, daughters, children, young people. (Educator 2)

I went to the schools, the school now that my two daughters have attended. It was a very, very hard decision, [...] And I was very nervous about them attending school. I was. Because even though they might not recognise you, once they know your surname [they recognise you as] a Traveller [and then] they put them in the back corner. (Parent 1)

But now, as an adult, looking back, we were never allowed to sit beside nobody else. We were at that same table next to the teacher, and when my dad went to school, it was always the Travellers had to sit down at the back of the class in an old box or do something like this. (Parent 2)

Common exclusionary practices that the young people participating in the programme and their parents have identified include reduced timetables, non-academic tasks given in schools such as picking up rubbish or harsher disciplinary measures than their peers. As explained by one of the educators of the programme, many of these practices are the result of unconscious bias and institutionalised racism in schools that hold lower expectations for them.

He says, picking up the rubbish. Now, this is something that used to happen when my daddy went to school. [...] with the help of the Traveller Project, I got in contact with them, and I was like, this can't be happening. Like, this is not normal. He needs to be learning. He already is behind on so much, and his speech and language problem is so bad. He needs support. Like, he doesn't need to be out picking up rubbish. And so I told them about it, and they were really not happy about it, because it should have been stopped a long time ago. They got in contact with the school and all, and thank God, it came to a stop right away. (Parent 2)

The exclusionary and discriminatory practices represent a significant challenge for educational engagement of the young Travellers. These practices, clearly identified by them as unfair, marginalise them and diminishes their interest in school as the participants of the project expressed:

I found it hard with the teachers and stuff. [...] They were not treating me the same as everyone else, things like that, and it was just annoying me. (Participant 1)

Yeah, and school — like, it was hard for me, because I felt pressured, you know?[...] And that just made me not want to be there, because it was happening on a regular, daily basis — every time I was in. (Participant 2)

The educators of the programme are very aware of these challenges, so they explicitly tackle discriminatory and exclusionary practices in schools when talking with young people. As one of them explained, to feel represented and included can have a long-lasting impact on their educational journeys:

So if young people can see, 'Oh, that is my culture represented in the curriculum,' then they will feel more included. And then the chances are, by feeling more included, they will stay in school, go on to third level, go on to further education — you know, different pathways in life. So I think [good representation] is absolutely essential. (Educator 1)

Other barriers identified that impact educational engagement were more practical, including lack of transport and limited options for children and young people in the area. Further education and ETB courses are far away from Donegal and services like Foróige often do not run due to a lack of interest; many of the options educators in the programme try to find that respond to the interest of the young people are not within an accessible distance or

cannot be performed remotely. A key challenge is the rural context and the geographical spread of Donegal, which impacts on the distances between towns that educators have to travel in order to do their neighbourhood work:

> *I suppose I have a sizable area. It is just like — I could be in Inishowen, chatting with a family, and then I could be in Bundoran, which is like an hour and a half away. And I live outside Letterkenny, which is another hour and a half away. In one day, you could see two or three families if you are doing neighbourhood work. How to manage that? (Educator 3)*

Other practical challenges the Donegal Travellers Project (DTP) faces to implement several of their initiatives, particularly teachers training and awareness sessions, is the lack of time schools and teachers can dedicate to the intercultural initiatives. The educators continue to work with the students in the schools and afterschool programme but acknowledge that more work is needed to increase the reach of their intercultural training in schools.

3. Enablers to Access and Engagement

Interviews with different stakeholders showed how the programme worked in an efficient way to address these barriers through **relationship building, advocacy, and institutional partnerships** with schools to better support educational engagement and progression for the young Travellers. For example, collaboration with schools and, in with the School Liaison Officers in particular, was key to establish the ways in which the programme and schools can work together and often included awareness training and workshops.

> *And [Educator 1] has — and [Educator 2] and DTP — have played a huge part in helping me integrate, communicate, and link in with parents from the Roma and Traveller community. (Home-School Community Liaison Officer, 1)*

The programme helped schools to connect with the families, and the impact of the partnership with schools is evident in attendance rates among young people, but also in the engagement from parents. Increase in their participation in parent-teacher meetings or use of the app for official communications, are examples of family engagement which the school staff attributed to the support from the programme. One Home School Community Liaison officer shared the impact of her collaboration with the project, and how it has led to home visits to organising events in the school to welcome Traveller and Roma families.

The partnership between the programme and the school made events such as intercultural celebrations to be organised and well-received in the community. Particularly important was the organisation of Traveller Pride Week within the school for example, which had not been done previously and included talks, presentations and display of posters and materials. Such events have had a very positive impact with young people as they were able to recognise their culture across the school and displayed pride about their identities.

Institutional partnerships also extend to Further and Higher Education providers, for example, the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) Sligo. The programme takes young people on visits to show them different possibilities and educational pathways, which motivates them to continue in school.

> *But also, it has an impact on the parents because some parents did not know where ATU was or what it was. So again, they are going home and saying to their mommies and daddies, "We did science today. I was in the college. We did engineering, and I want to be an engineer. I want to be a teacher." And the feedback from that, again, was young people saying, "I want to be a teacher. I want to be..."*

— which is absolutely brilliant to see. (Educator 1)

Parents reported that the programme has helped them become advocates for their children and their education rights. Most of them indicated they wanted their children to have better experiences in school but also to progress further in their educational trajectories. They explained that thanks to the support from the educators of the programme, they were in a better position to actively help their children.

It has given me the courage if I see that something's wrong within my children's education. Like, previously, I'd be like, that's not right. [But now] I can challenge them. No knowledge of that [before, but] those days are over. (Parent 1)

Parent: *Kids love school now. I dropped out halfway through my Junior Cert, which I do not want for my kids.[...] It is great. The kids love it. [...] I hope all the kids graduate and go on to college.*
Interviewer: *Three of them are already in college?*
Parent: *Yes, and the others are still in secondary school. But I would like them all to go to college. (Parent 3)*

4. Impact – Indicators of Change

To present the level of achievement for each outcome of the programme, we are using a concentric circle model. The concentric circle model is structured with the innermost circle representing the most immediate and readily achievable goals, while the outermost circle represents the long-term, aspirational outcomes. Each circle builds upon the achievements of the inner circles, creating a pathway towards long term and sustainable change. We use different colours to indicate the intended outcomes of the project and the level of achievement observed through this evaluation. Dark green represents outcomes that were fully achieved, while lighter green highlights outcomes for which there is strong evidence but where more time is required. Orange is used for long-term outcomes that build on the earlier ones. While the majority of outcomes were achieved, it is important to emphasise that maintaining and deepening these gains requires ongoing effort and sustained investment. For example, the partial achievement of higher retention in school and Leaving Certificate completion reflects the time required to build trust, reduce barriers, and sustain support over the full course of a student's educational journey. This is not a matter of quantity but of meaningful and long-term impact: these findings highlight the potential of community-based, culturally sensitive models.

The reported impact in this section is compiled through the feedback and experiences of participants in the programme but also the feedback and observations from parents and school staff. The interviews with different stakeholders provided evidence on the impact the programme has had in children and young people's educational engagement based on their intended outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the core, intermediate and long-term intended outcomes of the project.

Figure 1: Intended outcomes and measured impact for The Donegal Travellers Education Project

From the feedback and experiences collected, it was possible to identify other indicators of change. Interviews with the participants demonstrated increased levels of confidence, a greater sense of empowerment and agency as well as a greater commitment to their educational trajectories.

> *I got kicked out of that school [...] my mom, she actually, she still tried. She got [Educator 1] and [Educator 2] in for meetings, and there were other people there as well — other youth workers, the board of management, the principal, all my teachers. And I had to sign-up a contract and stuff [but I went back]. And that is when I realised, I have to cop on and smarten up in school. [Now] I have done the LCA [Leaving Certificate Applied] and I have done good, you know.[...] I am even thinking about joining ATU after. Because, see, with LCA, you need an access course to move on into college [...] If I had not had all the support, like, I probably would have dropped out of school after third year, as soon as I turned 16. (Participant 2)*

Interviews with parents addressed the impact the programme also had in relation to their children's pride and identity, and their overall wellbeing. For example, one of the parents observed a clear shift in their daughter as a result of her involvement in the DTP and how her pride over her identity has consolidated because of it.

> *Them being Irish Travellers, it's made them proud of who they are, and they don't feel like they have to hide it to be able to be accepted. [...] But the more then she had gotten older and more into these groups and homework clubs, she felt more proud of herself. Now she's in secondary school, and she'd done a big [project], she wrote out a big story about Travellers, and she read it out to the school. So she did — [thanks] only for the Traveller project, she would have never done something like that. I'm very proud of her, and she's proud of herself. (Parent 2)*

Parents could observe their children's pride in their traditions, in their culture and how inspired they felt in the activities and events implemented by the DTP. Educators also confirmed that young participants involved in the different aspects of the programme felt empowered rather than marginalised, proud of who they are and not inferior to anyone else. Progress for parents was also evident in their children's academic performance.

> *And I saw how much progress she had with her spelling, her reading, her confidence — even her confidence to stand up in a class and read out. So I thought to myself, right, I will send [my other daughter] too. It's brilliant, [...] they put in the work, and the effort is there [...] that kind of encouragement they give them, you know, the praise that they give them to the weans. If you're a parent, if you keep encouraging them, that's going to blossom. (Parent 1)*

Other clear indicators of change and the impact of the project that were collected from the interviews include academic progression but also school enrolment. Educators from the DTP have played a crucial role in securing places in schools for Traveller children in the community. The involvement of the DTP was crucial to progress relevant applications and administrative processes. The efforts of the DTP educators were recognised not only by the schools and parents, but clearly by the participants themselves.

> *If you ever needed help with anything, I would always just call [Educator 1] or [Educator 2]. Because I know that if they were not able to help me, they would find someone who could help me. (Participant 2)*

5. Reflections and Insights

Participants in the programme, their parents and educators themselves identified relevant gaps that need to be addressed and recommendations on how to address them moving forward. The recommendations included the expansion of the services provided (e.g. add an extra day to the after-school programme) or continue with their current offering (e.g. intercultural training for teachers). A recommendation that stands out, is to consider how the DTP could work with Initial Teacher Education programmes to make sure that future teachers have intercultural competencies to work with Traveller children and young people.

Inclusive Education

1. Participation in the Programme – What Works

Participants described what motivated them to engage and what sustained their involvement in the programme over time but also their educational engagement. Key features of the programme included holistic support and care, personalised support and Traveller-led, cultural awareness embedded in all the aspects and activities of the programme.

As one of the educational support workers explained, the afterschool programme not only helps children and young people to do their homework but ensures they have all the resources needed to engage in school. They provide transport to the homework hub, healthy snacks and any extra support that might be needed before they are dropped home. The holistic support was considered a clear strength by schools, and how not only the educational but social aspects of care are considered when identifying individual needs of the participants to understand their unique circumstances (e.g., upcoming exams or assessments) and how they could be supported better.

> *It is not just about them coming to do homework, but it is about making sure that they have everything that they need [...]. When they come to the hub, you know, it is like there could be barriers in place for them. (Educational Support Worker)*

> *There is a plan, and it is organised so well that it just runs so smoothly. Even with the girls, with their attendance and their engagement levels and everything... [...] And we change [the routine the girls have] to support the girls in that sense. So if the girls have CBAs coming up, well, then we pause the literacy support, and we help them with their CBAs. (Local Teacher)*

The **personalised and tailored support** was particularly praised by the parents in the interviews, who recognised the impact of the support on their children but also for them. Tailoring the programme led to personalised and responsive support for them, which was evident in different forms, from how accessible they were to both participants and their parents to their capacity to support children and prepare them for exams in specific subjects in which parents cannot help:

> *Even if my daughter needs them, or if my daughter needs to talk to someone and she's not in school [...] she can just give them a call and they'll come and speak to her. This is how important they are. The reason I find them very important is because I can see changes, I can see absolute changes. (Parent 2)*

> *Being honest, they make things simple. Like, [my daughter] got a folder now—they just finished their exams. The ladies had little*

labels on it, little cards—flashcards—and everything for them. I was going through them with Alicia, and it was just more simple. It was just easier the way they laid out everything for it to sync with the test. [...]. Because I can read and write everything now, but Irish—I always had a problem with it. But I know that she has the support from the hub with the Irish—that they can give her that support that I cannot. (Parent 3).

A key element for the success of the programme is the **strong relationships** the educators build with the participants, their families and the community. The educators have gained the trust of participants and their parents, first by acknowledging the negative experiences parents and members in the Traveller community might have had in the past with the education system, including teachers and schools and then by showing genuine care and demonstrating strong and sustained support. Those working in the programme are aware that the trust and respect from parents and the community has to be built and gained over time and based on positive experiences:

And then having a better connection with the parents, [...]. So open communication with the parents is so important. [...] everything should fit together, and everybody should work together... (Educational support worker)

But what you get from the Inclusive Education Project is that you have the support that is needed, but in a safe place where you can actually access support. People sit you down and explain things to you until you understand what you are asking. To me, it is a benefit for anyone who takes part in this programme. (Parent 1).

Interviews with multiple stakeholders confirmed how the programme works to embed a **Traveller-led cultural awareness** into all the activities and supports they offer. The success in their efforts, according to the interview with the Offaly Travellers Movement (OTM) Manager, is the result of consistent and sustained work with and for the Traveller community, their children and families. As a result, the programme is widely recommended, with referrals from participants and their families who gladly share their testimonials:

I honestly find them brilliant. It's not only in the Hazelnut [Hub]—when you need them, they're there. Whatever you need for school or anything like that, they're there. [...] So she's understanding more—a few things that don't get told to her in school are told to her here, like how education is really important, and how education is really important for a Traveller. (Parent 2)

And with Travellers, it is word of mouth. So someone goes back and says, "I had a great time in there today. I learned so much. They helped me so much. I had great fun in there today." Then, like my brothers, they are like, "What is that about? I want to join that as well." (Parent 1)

The Traveller-led ethos of the programme not only acted as a buffer from schools but also helped the participants and their families to feel valued and respected rather than discriminated against because of their cultural identity. Since there are Travellers working in the programme and assisting in many different components, they were able to bring their expertise and insights, they could provide a unique and understanding approach that resonates significantly with the young participants and positively impacts their sense of belonging.

Mainstream school sometimes does not cater for Travellers, is not as accessible to Travellers. So something like this gives that extra support, gives that sense of belonging, gives that safe space for Travellers to continue on in education. [...] So we have Traveller peer workers working in the project, so they understand what the education system is like for Travellers. So we have that support in place. (Staff member)

I mean, it is like when you have Travellers helping Travellers or assisting Travellers.

They understand them, so they kind of know where they are coming from and what they need. And then it just makes it easier for the students to take part in it because they feel like they belong, and they do not have to fit into a different group of people... (Educational Support Worker)

These people are so positive. It's the kindness alone—the kindness alone is amazing. [...] They see Traveller children as people. They see Traveller children—that they deserve to learn, they deserve their education, and they deserve to go out and live their own lives—like the way I see them. They see—which never happened with me, I'll be honest, it never did—but they see that they are humans. (Parent 2)

They know your—they know your background, they know you are from the Traveller community. And they do not discriminate against you for that—they do not do anything like that. They would put that into consideration—what your problem is. Everyone's situation is different. Everyone has a different problem, but they will always help you, support you, make you feel comfortable... (Parent 3)

An important element of the programme was the continuity they provided to the participants and their families. Even though the programme is inclusive and does not restrict access to anyone interested, young participants that started from Year 1 for example seemed to be benefiting more from the supports and structures provided. School Principals who have worked with the programme also identified the consistency and continuity as key strengths and unique features that worked really well for Inclusive Education.

2. Barriers to Access and Engagement with Formal Education

Interviews with the participants served to identify some of the barriers to access and engagement with education. These barriers were strongly connected to personal experiences of exclusion and discrimination in the Irish Education System. Many of these experiences were similar across generations, which highlight a historical and intergenerational system that hinders engagement and fosters mistrust in schools and education.

It was grand [to grow up as a Traveller]. But there are some, like, ignorant people [...] It is just some people who would be, mean and stuff. (Participant 2)

It was all right [to grow up as a Traveller], but, like, I would have had some problems in it. Like, say—being blamed for stuff I did not do, like real discrimination with teachers. [...] No, not really hard, but through school, It is kind of like, some people do not like you because you are a traveller and stuff like that. (Participant 3)

I go out and I actually call to the houses of these people and talk to them on a one-to-one basis, [...]and maybe keeping some of these children in education to try, I suppose, break the cycle, really. Because there is a cyclical nature where, you know, the grandparents left school early, their parents have left school, and it's nearly an expectation that the same will happen with this generation. S. (Home School Community Liaison Officer)

Exclusionary practices that participants and their families had faced seemed to be rooted in the misconception that Travellers are inevitably disengaged from education. These practices included but were not limited to teachers not paying attention to Traveller children in the classroom or schools placing Traveller children in reduced timetables. The consequence is a two-tier education system, one for non-Traveller children with more supports and opportunities and a very different one for Traveller children:

I remember talking to a teacher and he said to me—he said, "You wouldn't put as much effort

into teaching a Traveller child as you would a settled next to them." And I said, "Why?" He said, "What's the point? They're going to leave school early anyway." So that's their mindset—right? [...] [...] I believe in some of the schools—the level of teaching is different—levels for Travellers and non-Travellers. (Parent 1)

And I left school. So I left school in fifth year. I was just sick of it at that point. [...] if I could go into classes late, I would not get in trouble but they would hand out all the workbooks and that, they would be handing out sheets, but they would never give me one. I would just sit at the back of the class and do nothing. So, like, not the best experience. (Participant 3)

While interviews confirmed how many Travellers leave education because of the discrimination they face, they also revealed how empowering education can be for them. Considering the low literacy and numeracy levels of the Traveller community and how often these are a fundamental reason for not engaging with schools or their children's education, parents involved in the programme recognised the transformative power of education. As one parent explained, once a Traveller is educated, they have the words, the knowledge, and the confidence to speak up and challenge some of the discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

As I said to you earlier on—is that reading—reading and writing for me—was like learning a whole new language. [...] You understand those words—and you can match them. So you—that's empowerment. (Parent 1)

The discrimination the Traveller community faces is not only within schools and the Education System, but outside of it and these negative experiences impact their engagement while reinforcing their negative views about education. As one member of the staff explained, due to employment exclusionary practices, many Travellers are not being offered jobs, so they do not see the point or value of education since they continue to be discriminated against.

We have stats there that the employment rate for Travellers is very low. A lot of employers will not employ Travellers. So there is discrimination from a young age set in. They do not see any value in it, and then parents do not see any value. So it is about changing the minds of parents, but also changing the minds of young people—get through college, get through school, get into college, and get a job. (Staff)

And, you know, there is this idea that there is no point in getting an education because you will not get a job. And we have even had that with some of our participants saying, "Well, nobody will take us on. Nobody will employ us." And, you know, we have pointed out to them the different people who are working in different places, you know—like here around town—people from the Traveller community who are employed. You know that you can get employed. (Education Support Worker)

Beyond the systemic barriers participants would face, there were also practical challenges that would negatively impact their educational engagement. From financial costs to attend school trips or buy the books and resources participants would need in schools to lack of access to Wi-Fi connection or electricity at home, or places to study, these barriers, although persistent, were navigated differently depending on the schools and the level of education. While more supports are available in primary schools, particularly those with designated DEIS status, secondary schools presented a significant challenge because the limited resources and supports in place:

It is a different environment at second level [than primary school]. And they're just, there's no one to help [the children], but again, more importantly, there's no one to help the family. (Home School Community Liaison Officer)

3. Enablers to Access and Engagement

Key enablers for access to and engagement with formal education identified in the inclusive Education initiatives include: identification of role models, collaboration with schools, strong family engagement and advocacy partnerships. The different stakeholders interviewed, including participants in the programme explained how these different enablers worked. For example, the importance of role models for the girls was discussed several times, because it inspires and motivates them but also role models with 'good jobs' show them that it is possible to overcome the different barriers.

> *And a lot of the rhetoric is, You can't do this. You can't do that. You can't. And they're told it from every angle. Next thing, they see somebody who has done it, you know, it's great for them. And I think that's really important. It's probably the most powerful thing. (Home School Community Liaison Officer)*

While role models provide very clear images to the girls of what they can aspire to if they continue their educational trajectories, developing **strategic collaborations with schools** is fundamental for the programme to achieve its goals. These collaborations can have different focuses from mental and physical health to socio-emotional learning or academic support, and would also respond to the specific needs of the participants, but through them it is possible to build a strong relationship with the schools and work together to benefit the young Travellers.

> *They made contact with us and their interest in supporting students from a Traveller background in the school, particularly at the junior level, focusing on that transition piece from primary to secondary school. [...] the piece the Hazel Hub does. It provides a really vital jigsaw piece in that school community that you need—that has to be there. (School Principal)*

The strategic collaborations in schools can lead to practical changes in schools that benefit the attendance and engagement of young Travellers. For example, in response to the significant problem of reduced timetables, one school working closely with Inclusive Education managed to develop a different and more inclusive approach that focuses on strengthening supports rather than reducing their time at school. Family engagement with the programme and with education is fundamental for the work of Inclusive Education to keep children engaged in education. Changing attitudes around the importance of education, recognising their own experiences in schools and expectations for their children are some of the areas they discussed:

> *And I think there is a big piece of that—it is working with the parents. Working with the children is one thing, keeping them in school. But the other big part of it, I would see, is engaging with parents and trying to change their attitude around the importance of education, and you know that there are employment opportunities out there. [...]. (Staff)*

Advocacy and navigation support for families and participants to address the inequality in a way that is culturally sensitive. The aim is to tackle the challenges without asking the young Travellers or their families to compromise on their cultural identity or to disregard their negative experiences in education. Through engagement with more services for example and helping them navigate systems beyond education, Inclusive Education is aiming to break the cycle of educational disengagement and build long-lasting positive attitudinal and cultural changes.

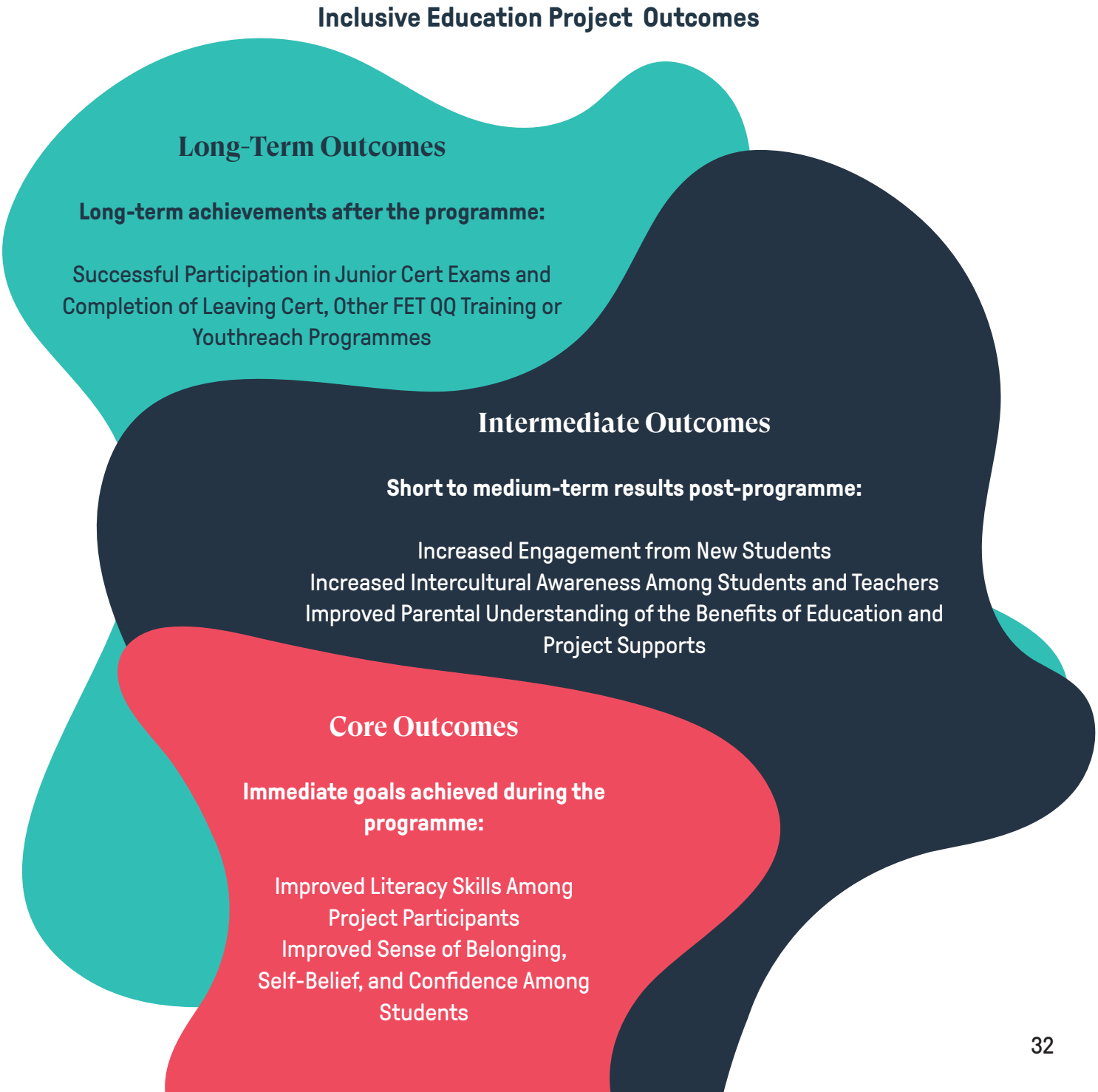
> *But I know I have the support from the hub to get [child] down there, getting studying. The staff will help lay out with the study—what he needs to do, what he does not need to do. If I ever have a problem—say next year, [sitting the Leaving Cert] if there are problem with any of the teachers, anybody, I know I have the hub there to help me, to come in with me, support*

me, support [him]. Where I probably would not know what to say to the principal, what to say to the teacher, but I know the girls would be there for that. So I did not have that when I was younger, anyway. (Parent 3)

4. Impact – Indicators of Change

Again, to present the level of achievement for each outcome of the programme, we are using a concentric circles model (Figure 2). The innermost circle represents the most immediate and readily achievable goals, while the outermost circle represents the long-term, aspirational outcomes. Each circle builds upon the achievements of the inner circles, creating a pathway towards long-term and sustainable change. Dark green represents outcomes that were fully achieved, while lighter green highlights outcomes for which there is strong evidence but where more time is required. Orange is used for long-term outcomes that build on the earlier ones.

Figure 2: Intended outcomes and measured impact for Inclusive Education Project



From the feedback and experiences collected, it was possible to identify other indicators of change. Interviews with the participants demonstrated positive impact on their sense of identity and belonging, increased levels of confidence, a greater sense of empowerment and agency as well as an overall improved wellbeing. Indicators of the impact of the programme in their sense of identity and belonging were evident in the interviews, since the programme is designed with cultural awareness at the core, their identity as Travellers is celebrated and the work is designed to ensure they have equal and inclusive access to opportunities without having to lose their identity as Travellers.

> *if the children can only say that they feel like they fit in and they are accepted, yes, that will change how parents think [...] Inclusive means that you are giving a sense of belonging to absolutely everybody. (Staff)*

> *My daughter is a very shy girl, very laid back, and I find the hub gave her that little bit more confidence, which she needed. And it kind of makes her more proud to be a Traveller in school. [...] And it literally—it gave her that confidence. It gave her that boost that she needed. (Parent 3)*

The programme not only supported the personal development of participants but also increased their engagement in school. The work they do in the hub as well as the role models they can see in schools that work with the programme have a compounded effect, giving them representation that makes them feel more confident and proud but also included in the learning environment. This has led to a decrease in anxiety and problems in and with schools.

> *Just my mindset on school [changed]. I used to hate going to school. And then I came here, and it kind of helped. I just did not like [school]. And then there were, like, some racist teachers and all this. But when I came here, they helped me. And they went into school and talked to the school and everything. (Participant 2)*

The increase in confidence, self-esteem and pride among participants was evident for different stakeholders, and the positive results have led to attitudinal changes in their families. These changes are evident as well in the attendance levels, engagement and participation from the families in the schools that collaborated with the programme.

> *My daughter is more positive now than she would have been two years ago—even about school and even about herself. Even about herself. [...] When I say changes—even in my daughter's learning—it's getting better. [...] I see her smiling—coming out of school. That is a big, big difference. But that's because of this [programme] with all of the support they're getting. And they're making them believe in themselves (Parent 2)*

> *[...] now, she speaks for herself. So instead of going by what somebody else said, or just saying, "I do not know," she now opens her own mind and speaks for herself. So yes, I find her confidence has grown a lot. And I think today, you need confidence. They need that little bit of confidence—that little push. (Parent 3)*

> *So I would say, at the moment, we are really happy with the buy-in that we get from the Traveller families in our school. We are really happy with the girls' attendance. We are really happy with their participation and engagement in our school. We are really happy, most importantly, I would say, with their involvement in extracurricular activities, because they see themselves as members of our school community. And I am really happy with the parental involvement as well. And all of that is down to the project. (School Principal)*

Other clear indicators of success in the programme are the cases in which young Travellers, after receiving support from the hub, had significant academic achievements. From improving grades to completing their exams, getting over 400 points in the Leaving Certificate, and getting accepted into college, different stakeholders were able to share

success stories of young Travellers involved in the programme. Other examples that indicate impact of the programme in academic progression include participation in Further and Higher Education.

> *We had a girl who came in during her final year, very low self-confidence, needed grinds. She stuck with us for a whole year, and she is after getting over 400 points in her Leaving Cert, and she has gone on now to do science and biology. She got accepted. [...] Yeah, she is our first now to get into college. She is doing Science and Biology, it is brilliant. It is really good for us. (Educational Support Staff)*

> *Now, her grades—she did a lot better this year and last year than first year, and you can see that in the grades. Even the teachers were talking about her and saying she is brilliant. (Parent 3)*

5. Reflections and Insights

Participants in the programme, their parents and educators themselves identified relevant gaps that need to be addressed and recommendations on how to address them moving forward. The recommendations included a stronger focus on gendered supports for young Travellers, particularly for Traveller girls, greater support for the Leaving Certificate Applied programmes that are often cut from schools due to costs or locations and an expansion of opportunities for apprenticeships and employment. Earlier interventions were identified as key as well as an increase in the resources and staff available in schools (e.g., education officers) to increase the uptake and engagement from schools.

The Big idea

1. Participation in the Programme – What Works

Participants described what motivated them to engage and what sustained their involvement over time. Key features of the programme supported ongoing participation, such as the dynamic design, real-world relevance and focus on creative methods.

Motivators for Participation

A strong motivator for both facilitators and participants was the programme's dynamic and inclusive design. The structure encouraged active engagement rather than passive learning, creating an environment where participants felt more involved. As a facilitator and a participant shared, the process being enjoyable and rewarding was key to sustainable engagement:

> *If I had time every day to do every class like this, I would. I do my best to have a start, a middle, and an end for my classes when I am in the classroom, but I just—I like the layout, and they like the layout, like, "Okay, what do we do next?" This movement for them—because, you know, we have a lot of learners with ADHD and stuff like that—and for them not to be just sitting there and chalk and talk, it is great. (Facilitator 1)*

> *It is a great experience. There is a lot of fun involved, and there is no downside to it. So I do not see why people should not do it. Very connecting, and it is a building support—whether it is a sport event or whatever it is, a training programme. (Participant 2)*

Real World Relevance

Another important factor in sustaining engagement was the real-world relevance of the programme projects. By allowing participants to choose topics that mattered to them, the programme fostered **ownership and emotional investment**. This approach encouraged participants to reflect on personal and societal issues, making learning more meaningful.

> *And because we had such a diverse group, we have Irish and we have learners with refugee background, amongst others from time to time, because it is continuous intake, but they were adamant they wanted to do something around mental health. So I did not think, we did not think, as a team, (the other facilitator) and I, it was right to kind of steer them in a different direction, because we felt maybe they would not put 100% into it. So, you know, it is just kind of for us standing back a little bit and giving them the reins. You know, that was a little bit difficult at times, but definitely worth it, you know. [...] They might come here, and some of them are so sad. And I never would have known this. They would have never even spoke about this. (Facilitator 1)*

> *But then the class felt very fixated on doing mental health, since it was something that also everyone suffers with. So that is kind of what we did there. And then what we did was we all went into a classroom, and we all thought of why we decided this was the best one. And it was like—for a foreign person, or an additional nationality coming into a country, having to live in, like, hotels and that—and basically, we realised that mental health was definitely the topic. So then we started focusing on mental health. (Participant 2)*

Creativity & Community

Finally, the programme's emphasis on creativity and community played a vital role in encouraging participation. Participants were given the space to express themselves creatively, which fostered a sense of joy, teamwork, and shared accomplishment.

> *And then, you know, some got involved kind of capturing it, making videos and putting music to it. And, you know, yeah, that that's nearly when **their creativity started coming out**. [...] It is unbelievable, the way they come out. And just for communication, for group dynamics, to help their, you know, just get that creative thinking flowing—it is brilliant. And it is difficult to do that in a classroom setting. [...] **For me, because we like to have a little bit of fun doing it, the games were key for our learners**. [...] They really—and then I think to start off with the fun is major for them, and then the serious comes. It is mixing it up. [...] But obviously, there is thinking behind how you do it. Like, you are not going to say, "Let us sit down, and we are going to have a serious conversation about mental health." That does not work. Everyone would just sit there and say nothing. (Facilitator 1)*

Participants emphasised how activities like teamwork challenges and creative tasks helped them develop important skills while building strong connections:

> *I think both [creativity and communication] played a big, big factor in doing the Big Idea. I think communication and teamwork were the two ones that everybody gained or benefited from—like, to be honest. [...] Because now, you know—we might not be masters now at communication or teamwork—but we have a nice little jump-start on it, you know what I mean? And we know how a team aspect works now—because all of us might, you know—might not have worked in a team aspect before or anything, or been able to properly communicate. But we have a nice little rough idea now. Individually, like, each and every one of us has our own little idea—you know what I mean. (Participant 1)*

> ***Your creativity matters. And any idea you have is not a good or bad idea—like, an idea***

***is an idea, no matter how good or bad**. [...] Creativity. Skills—no one knows how creative they are until, like, it comes to a situation where it all depends on creativity, you know? Like, there's so much creativity that people sustain. It's good to let it flow—get all that creativity out of it. [...] We're all creative in our own ways. Like, there's not one person that's not creative. (Participant 5)*

2. Barriers to Access and Engagement with Formal Education

All participants in this evaluation were early school leavers attending a course in a Youthreach Centre, and many shared that their negative experiences with the formal education system played a significant role in their disengagement and eventual departure from school. Feelings of isolation, lack of support and mental health challenges were among the most common barriers described. For some, language barriers and social isolation in school environments left them feeling disconnected and unsupported:

No, I do not like school. I did not have any friends there—nothing—because I did not have English. And then—so, if you do not chat with people, you never learn anything—like English or something. You have to chat with people to, like, keep remembering the words. So, there—nothing. I did not talk to anyone like this because, like, I cannot—I cannot understand anyone there. (Participant 3)

Well, it was just difficult for me. Like, it just—there was a lot of things going on. Yeah, like, mentally—like, mental health. Like, it was just a lot of things going on. I just—could just—missed a lot of days. I just missed days. And after, I ended up just dropping out from fifth year. After, I joined this course. (Participant 4)

Fifth year was like 17, and I dropped out due to, like, bullying and just I did not fit in with the right crowd in school. So I dropped out, took it, like, a year to myself, then I found this place, and I was like, "[name of course] sounds cool." It is another skill. Because I am a musician. I play guitar. So I was like, I can take more skills. (Participant 5)

I have always—never really—I never enjoyed the idea of school or anything, sitting down at a desk, you know what I mean? Writing everything. I always had to go about and do something—like, just use my hands. I had to use my hands, always. [...] Yeah, I suppose—there were some practical subjects, but still, they were kind of mixed with theory as well. So I only really ever ended up enjoying school for, like, the social environment—going in and seeing your friends. But when it came to sitting down, doing the work—my brain just was not with me. I do not know what it was—what it is—but my brain just does not allow me. I cannot focus, so that kind of caused a few problems—ish. (Participant 1)

3. Enablers to Access and Engagement

Participants identified several key factors that enabled their access to and sustained engagement with the programme. They highlighted the importance of peer collaboration and learning, the hands-on, project-based approach, and the continuous support from facilitators. Together, these elements helped overcome the negative experiences many had with formal education, fostering a sense of belonging, confidence, and motivation.

Peer Collaboration and learning

Many participants and the two facilitators emphasised that **working collaboratively with peers** was a significant enabler. The group environment created a sense of community and inclusion, where everyone's voice and ideas mattered. This collective approach not only strengthened participants' social connections but also helped them build confidence and communication skills:

> *And even if it is something very small, that every learner would have some little bit of an input. [...] But then they came back to us—they really wanted to work on mental health. That is something—and they used that word—"passionate about." That is why I think it works. It has to be learner-led. It has to be. Improved communication skills and builds up resilience. Learners will start to use their mindset to tackle anything that life could throw at them in the future. That is the hope, you know what I mean—that is the hope, that they will go on. You know, "This is how to tackle this in a different way that we may not have had before." (Facilitator 1)*

> *The Big Idea, really, is it is just a communal thing, an operation, if you will. Like, everybody is included. Not one person is left out. Everybody's voice and thoughts matter. [...] There's no talking over voices—it's very rude. So we don't do that, you get me? We're all very respectful when it comes to someone else's voice being heard. Hmm, so that's how we kind of manage it. [...] (Participant 5)*

Project based elements

Participants found the project-based approach particularly motivating and engaging. Unlike traditional classroom work, this approach allowed them to explore ideas freely and apply them creatively, helping to develop problem-solving skills and critical thinking.

> *I think if schools had more of a—like, let's do The Big Idea—have more, like, you can come up with your own ideas and apply them whichever way you want to. In school, it is already like that—they have a boundary towards, if you are trying to apply your ideas or certain things, it has to be within the level of the school and the level of the classroom, within the level of your classmates. You do not want to exceed expectations or go below them when you are in the classroom to make everyone else feel bad. So they kind of have a limited base. But with The Big Idea, you can go out and explore, get more ideas within the classroom. So I think you should have more options for students to get more knowledge within the classroom, instead of just working on workbooks and handing them off as sheets.(Participant 2)*

Support from facilitators

The role of facilitators was repeatedly highlighted as essential in creating a safe, encouraging, and nurturing environment. Their support helped participants feel valued and understood, allowing them to engage more openly and build trust.

> *And it was totally because it was draining being there, because they had such different views, yeah. Do you know? And then now I know you're going to say to me, well, then how was it an enjoyable experience, but it was in its own way, because we learned more about the learners as well. [...] I got much more knowledge on my learners and how they feel—actually feel. (Facilitator 2)*

> *[Facilitator] always looks out for us, and she always makes sure we are okay. She has our best interests at heart. She makes sure we have what we need. She never leaves us with nothing. And that had a big impact on me. I think it is because I never really felt that before. So it kind of softened me a little bit. I was like, "Wow, there actually are people who have my best interests at heart." Because before, I never really had that. But I suppose some people could argue it was my own fault, because, obviously, my teachers never had*

my best interests at heart—because I was just in class causing trouble. I did not care about school, so it was just one of those things. (Participant 1)

Yeah, they helped me a lot. They taught me how to speak—everything. I think, anyhow, they will be there for me. (Participant 3)

I learned—I learned, like, more activities, learning and all that stuff. And the teachers here are so nice too—(names)—they are actually so nice. And through it all, it is like a second family to me. Like, you know, just, like, nice—nice stuff. (Participant 4)

Like, even the tutors—they're just family to me. Like, I don't know where I'd be without them. If I was still in school when I could have been here, I would be in a different place now, like, mentally. Like, it was so bad in school, but here... It's just better—positive vibes. If someone's down, we'll get them back up. (Participant 5)

The Big Idea - questionnaire

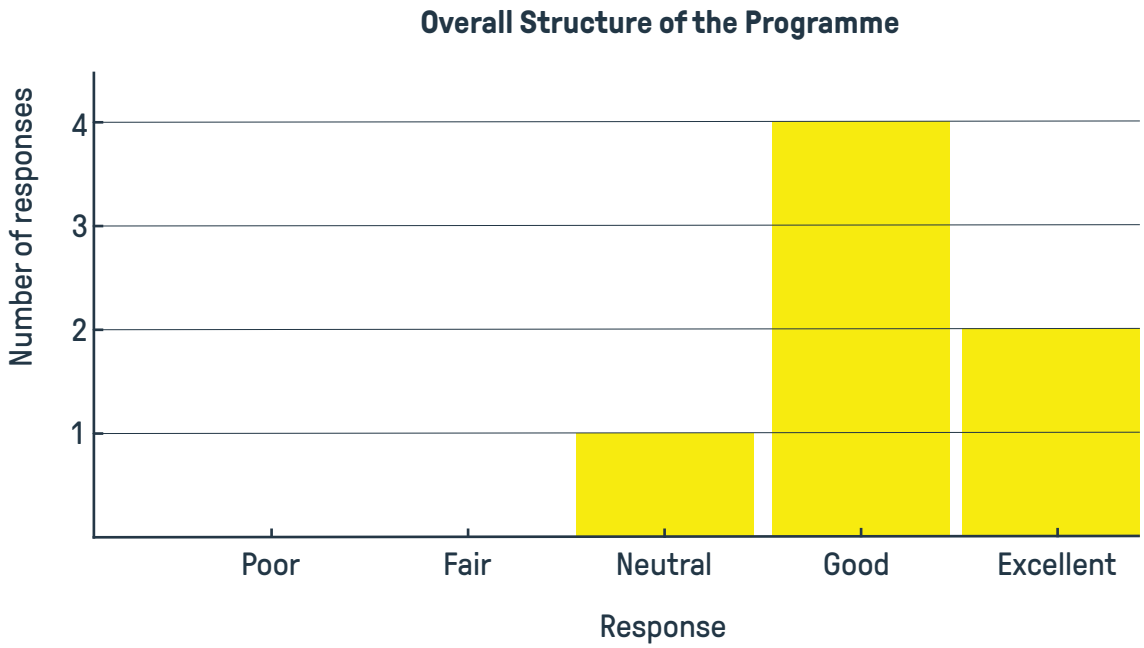
In January 2025, an online questionnaire was distributed to 36 educators from Youthreach centres and secondary schools who were currently participating or had previously participated in The Big Idea programme. Responses were received from 10 educators — 3 from Youthreach and 7 from transition year classes in secondary schools — representing an estimated response rate of approximately 28%. Nine respondents identified as female, one as male, and one did not state their gender. The respondents' years of experience as educators ranged from 6 to 25 years, with an average of 14 years.

Within transition year groups, respondents reported that between 5 to 60 young people participated in each session (average 40) with 1 to 3 mentors/facilitators per session. With Youthreach groups, respondents reported 14 to 50 young people and 2 to 3 mentors/facilitators per session. At the time of completing the questionnaire, only two respondents had completed the full programme. Four had completed 5-6 sessions, and a further two had completed 3-4 sessions; these respondents elaborated that they were working through the remaining sessions.

Educator engagement with the programme

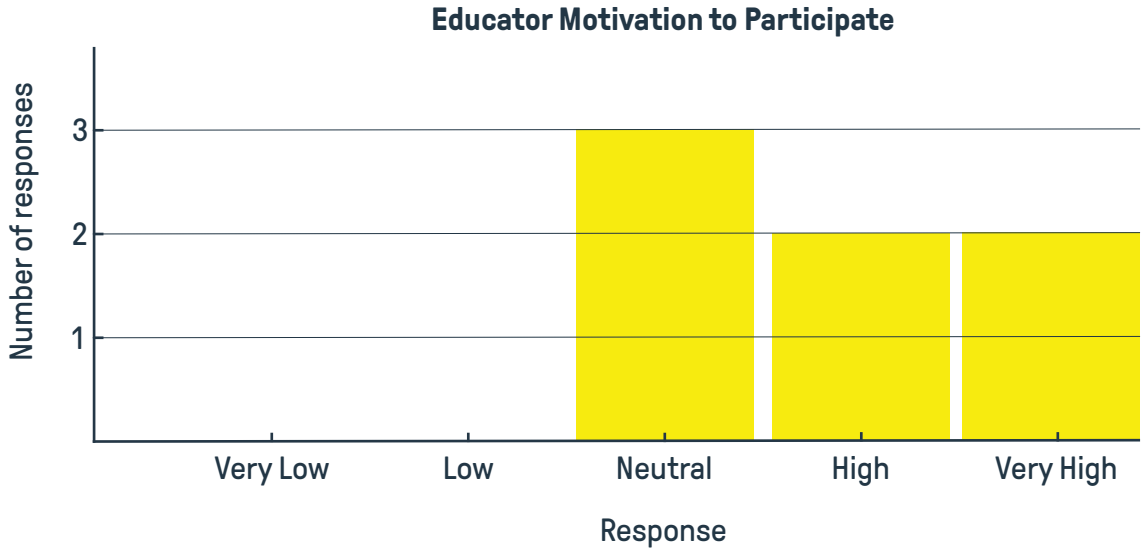
Respondents were asked to rate the overall structure of the programme (Figure 3). Four of the seven respondents to this question rated the overall structure as 'Good', and a further two rated it as 'Excellent'. One respondent was 'Neutral', and none responded 'Poor' or 'Fair'.

Figure 3: Educator rating of overall programme structure



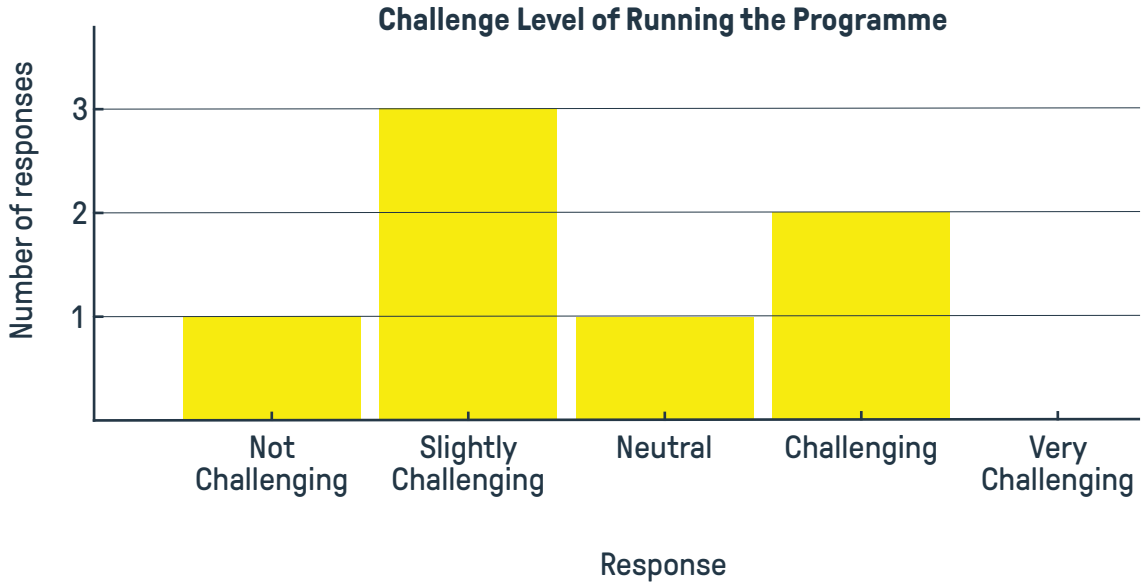
Respondents were asked to rate their motivation to participate in the programme (Figure 4). Three were 'Neutral', while two responded 'High', and a further two selected 'Very High'. None responded 'Very Low' or 'Low'.

Figure 4: Educator motivation to participate



Respondents were asked to rate challenge level of running the programme (Figure 5). One responded 'Not Challenging' and three responded 'Slightly Challenging'. One participant was 'Neutral', while two felt that running the programme was 'Challenging'.

Figure 5: Challenge level of running the programme

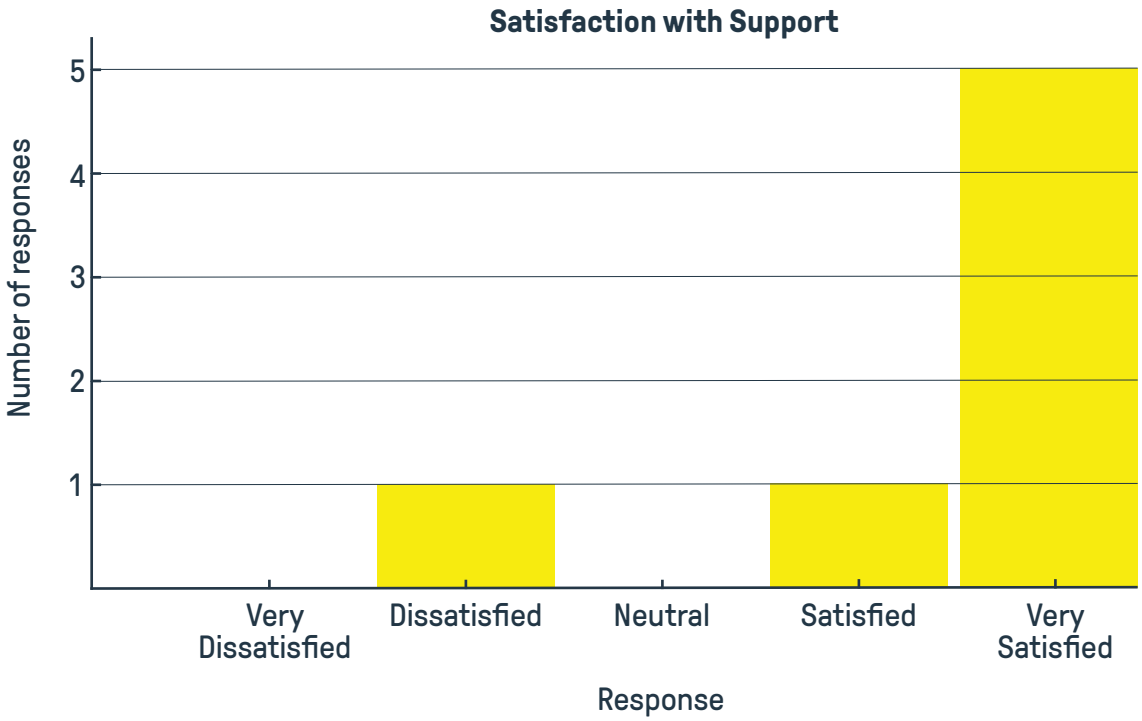


Training, support and resources

Seven respondents answered a question about receiving training or workshops from The Big Idea before running the programme. Of these, three respondents had participated in training or workshops, and four had not. Of those who answered 'Yes', two said that they found the

training/workshops to be 'Effective', and one felt 'Neutral'. Respondents rated their satisfaction with support from The Big Idea team (Figure 6). The majority of respondents (n=5) were 'Very Satisfied', and a further one 'Satisfied', while one respondent was 'Dissatisfied'.

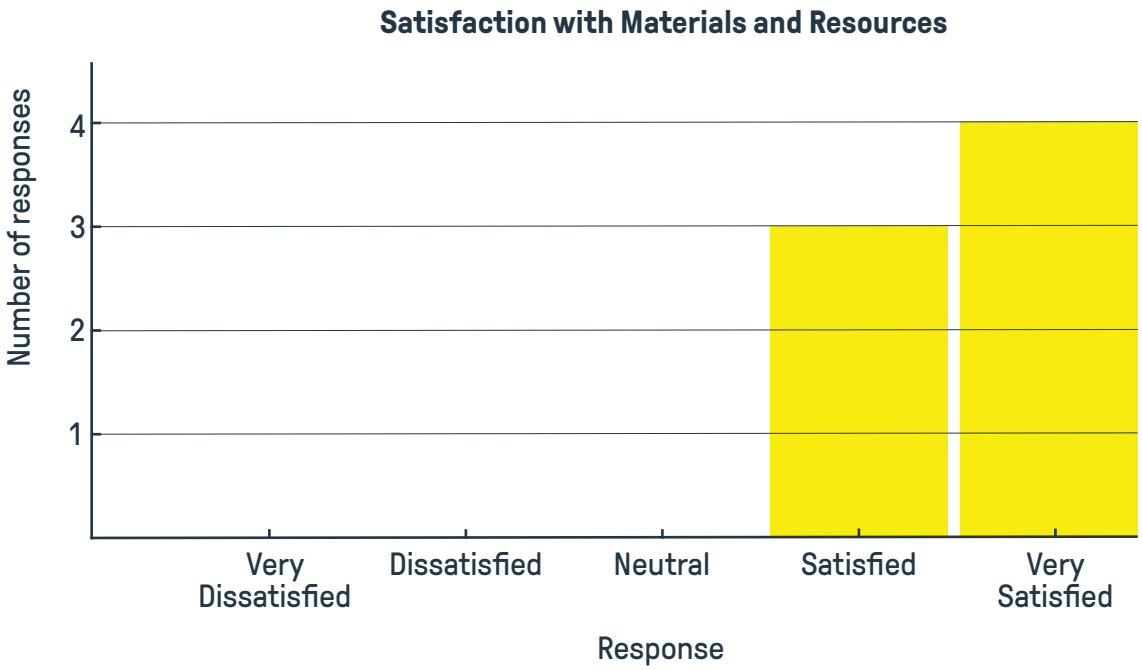
Figure 6: Satisfaction with support from the Big Idea before the programme



Respondents were asked to rate communication from The Big Idea team (Figure 7). All respondents rated communication as either 'Excellent' (n=5) or 'Good' (n=2). Similarly, when respondents were asked to rate satisfaction with materials and resources (Figure 8), all were either 'Satisfied' (n=3) or, 'Very Satisfied' (n=4).

Figure 7: Satisfaction with communication from The Big Idea team

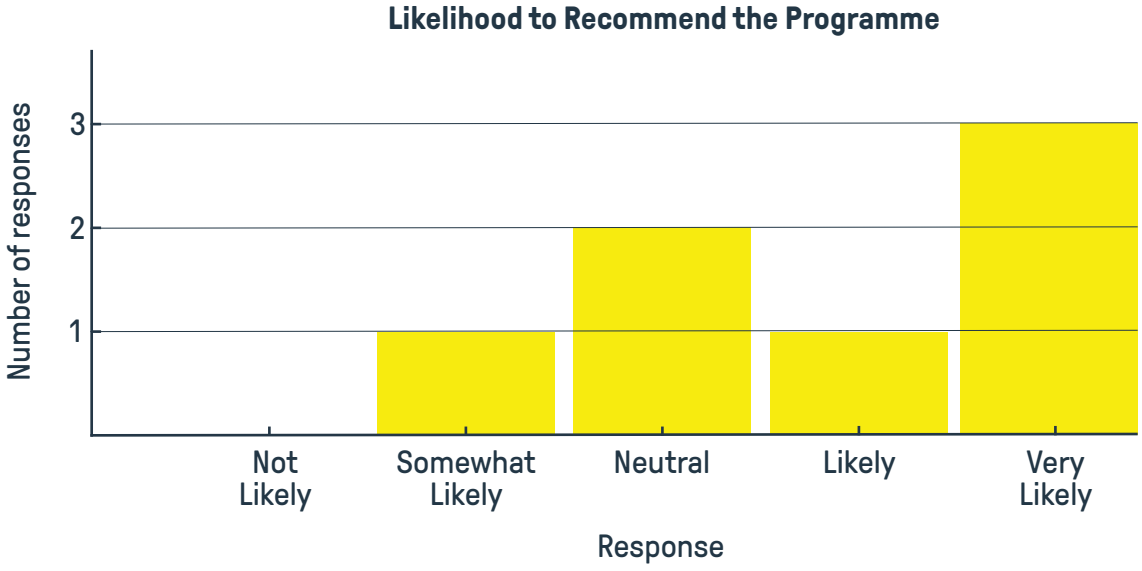
Figure 8: Satisfaction with materials and resources



Respondents praised the high quality of materials and resources provided, including project kits and reflective copybooks. Respondents commented, "the resource box that we receive is really excellent and makes the running of the programme so much easier" and "everything we needed was supplied". The initial excitement from students receiving dedicated materials such as copybooks, t-shirts and equipment was seen as a strong motivator. Other suggestions for improvement from questionnaire respondents included additional resources, such as documentaries and case studies related to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and more examples of how to integrate hands-on tools like LEGO into lessons.

Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of recommending the programme to other educators (Figure 9). There were a range of responses, with two respondents opting for 'Neutral', but others 'Very Likely' (n=3), 'Likely' (n=1), and 'Somewhat Likely' (n=2).

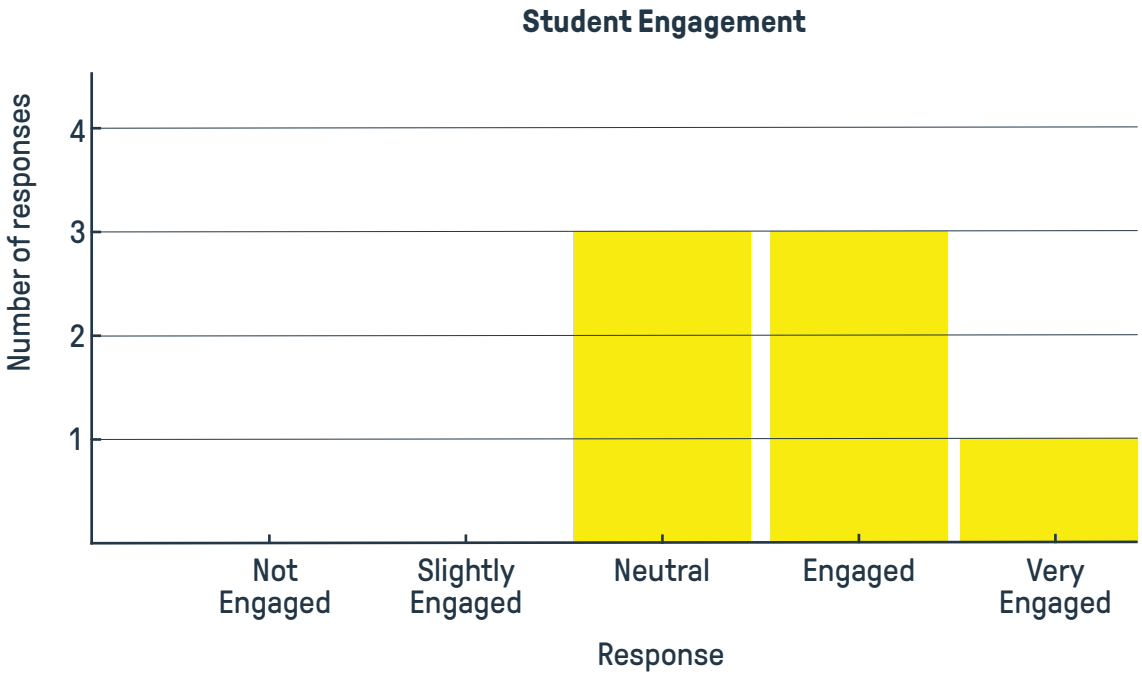
Figure 9. Likelihood to recommend the programme



Student engagement with the programme

Respondents were asked to rate student engagement with the programme (Figure 10). Three respondents felt 'Neutral', and the remainder felt that students were either 'Engaged' (n=3) or 'Very Engaged' (n=1).

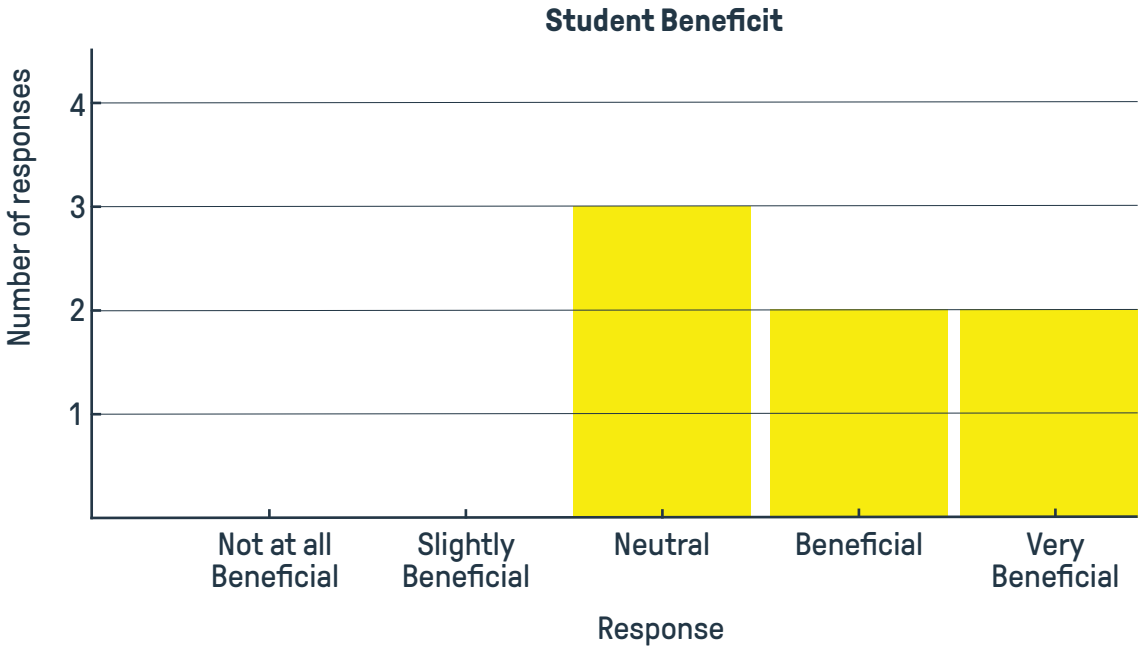
Figure 10: Educator rating of student engagement with the programme



Perceived impact of the programme on students

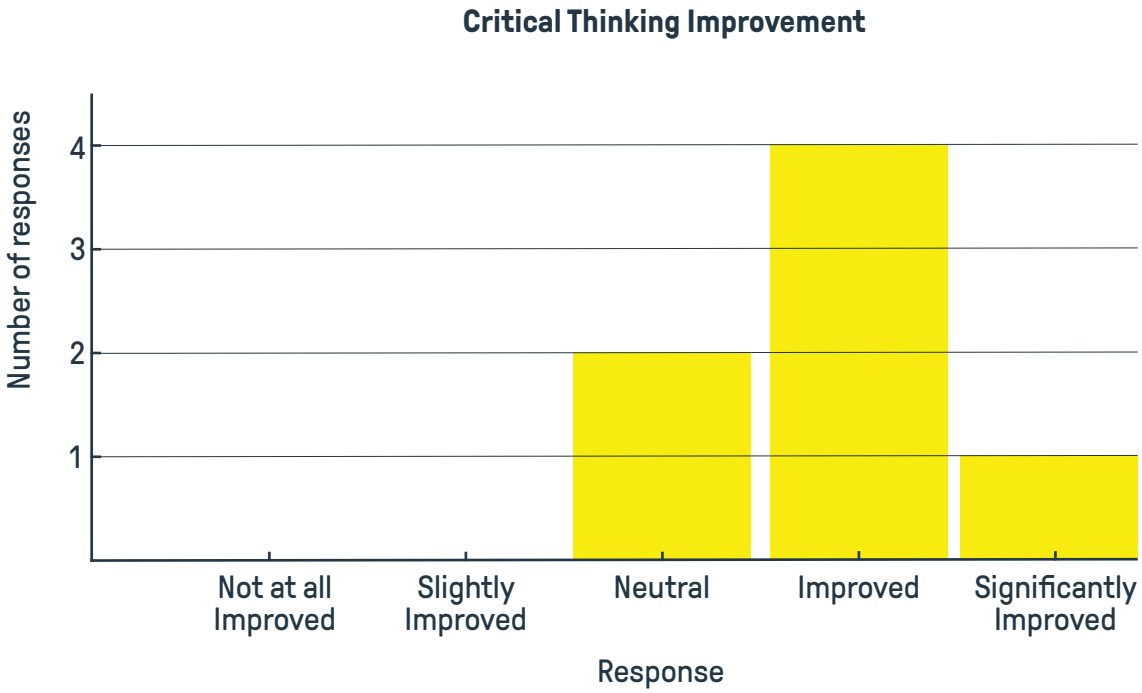
Respondents were asked to rate how beneficial they found the programme was for students (Figure 11). Three respondents felt 'Neutral', and the remainder felt that the programme was 'Beneficial' (n=2) or 'Very Beneficial' (n=2) for students.

Figure 11: Educator rating of how beneficial the programme is for students



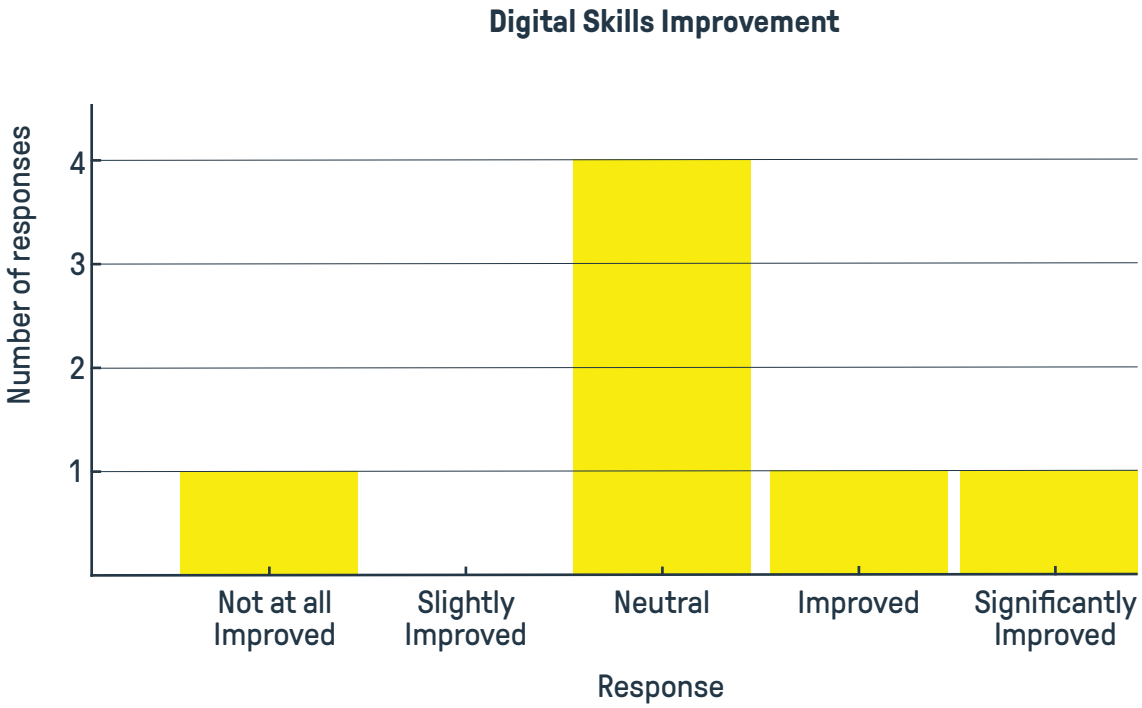
Respondents were then asked to rate the extent to which the programme improved students' competencies in specific areas. In relation to improving critical thinking skills (Figure 12), the majority of respondents felt these skills had improved 'Somewhat' (n=4) or 'Significantly' (n=2), with two 'Neutral' respondents.

Figure 12: Educator rating of students' critical thinking improvement



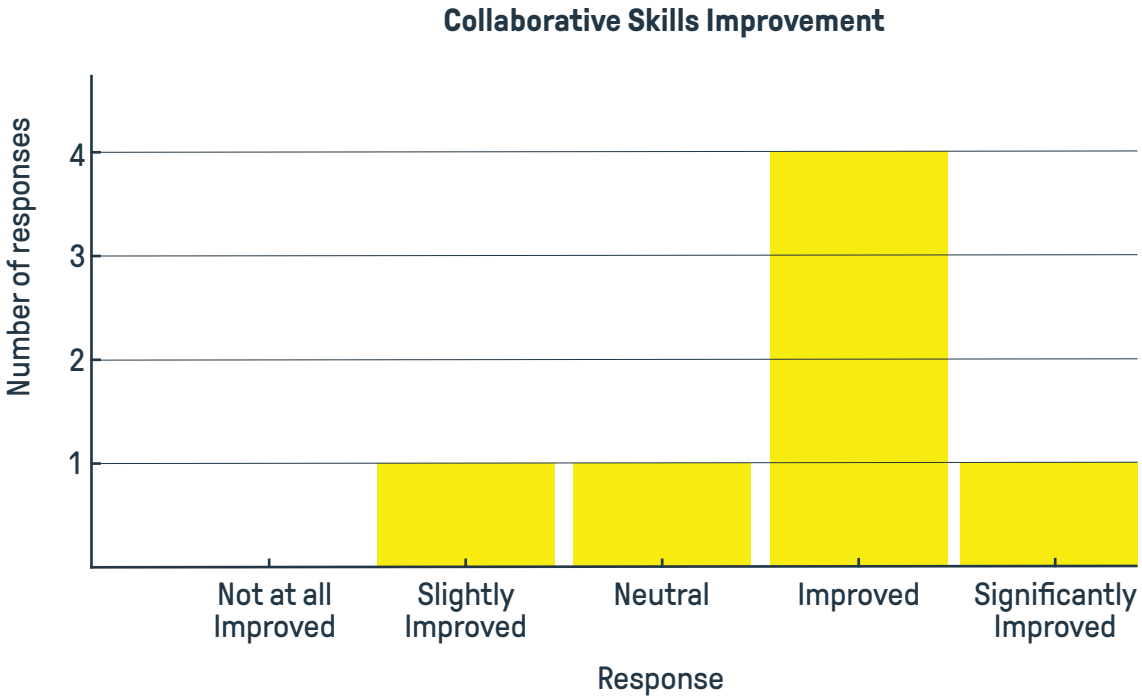
In relation to digital skills (Figure 13), one respondent felt students' skills had 'Not at all improved' and a further four respondents were 'Neutral', while some respondents felt these skills had improved 'Somewhat' (n=1) or 'Significantly' (n=1).

Figure 13: Educator rating of students' digital skills improvement



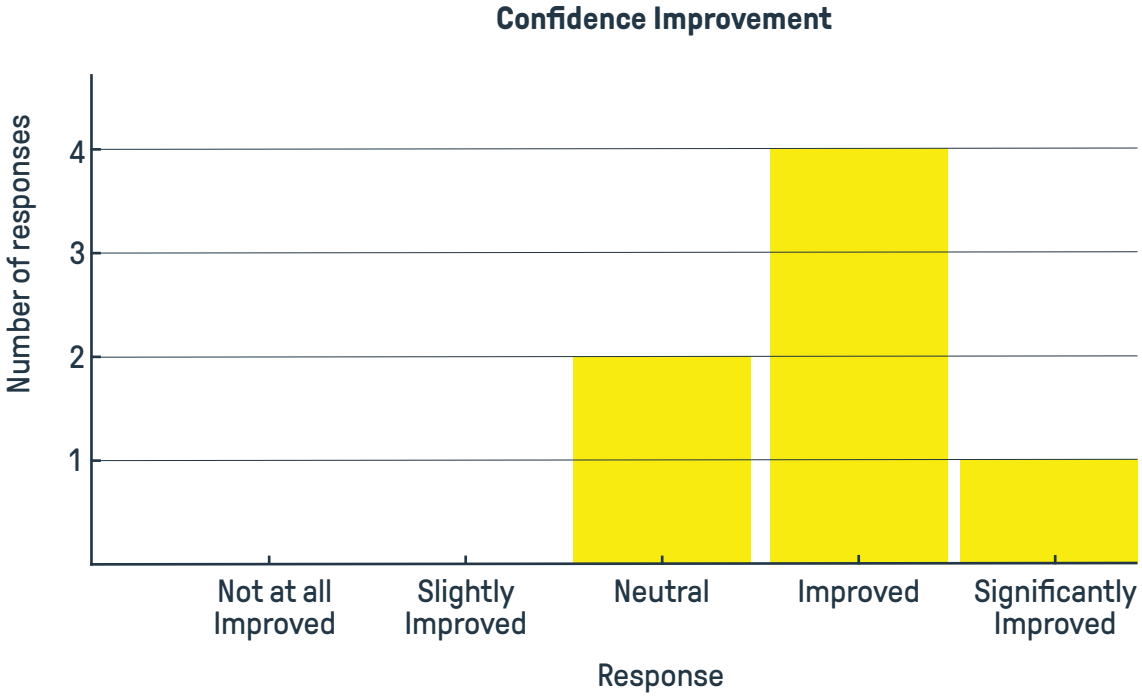
In relation to collaborative skills (Figure 14), most respondents felt these skills had 'Somewhat Improved' (n=4), and a further one felt these skills were 'Significantly Improved'. One respondent felt 'Neutral', and one felt these skills only 'Slightly Improved'

Figure 14: Educator rating of students' collaborative skills improvement



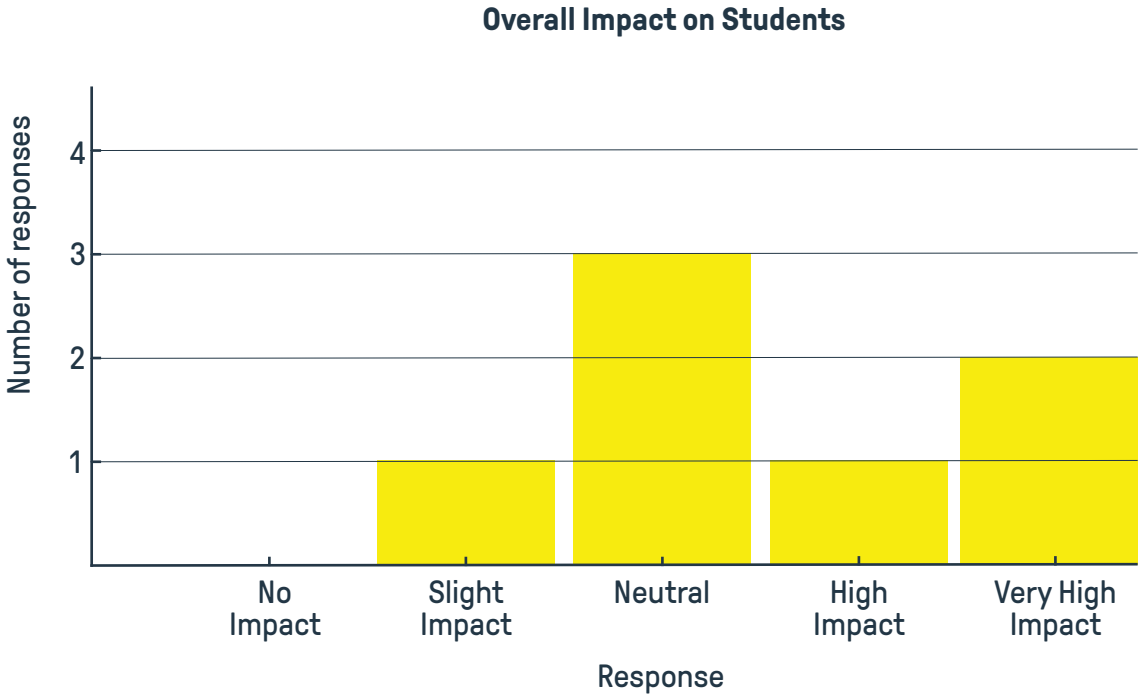
Finally, in relation to confidence (Figure 15), four educators felt these skills had 'Somewhat Improved' amongst their students, and a further one respondent felt they 'Significantly Improved'. Two respondents felt 'Neutral'.

Figure 15: Educator rating of students' confidence improvement



There was some variation in relation to educator perceptions of the overall impact of the programme on students (Figure 16). While some respondents felt the programme had a 'Very High Impact' (n=2) or a 'High Impact' (n=1), three respondents were 'Neutral', and one felt the programme had only a 'Slight Impact'.

Figure 16: Educator rating of programme's overall impact on students



Challenges and suggestions for improvement

Within the open-ended sections of the questionnaire, respondents elaborated on challenges they faced in implementing the programme. Time constraints were commonly cited. Many struggled to fit the programme into timetables that were already full with work experience, trips, and other activities, especially in TY. Motivating students, particularly in Youthreach, was also reported as a difficulty. One respondent commented that the students' stage of development meant that it may have been harder for them to engage in the empathy-focused topics. Other challenges cited included inconsistent student attendance, literacy barriers, and difficulties adapting group work for students with social anxiety or behavioural challenges. The group work was also cited as challenging when friendship groups wanted to work together instead of on their individual favourite challenge, leading to mixed motivation. There were also comments about the need to be able to tailor the programme to all ability levels, which at times required a slower pace with time to present explanations suited to a range of literacy levels.

Several educators suggested structural changes that could mitigate these challenges. This included starting the programme earlier in the academic year and extending it into a full-year format. The importance of having time formally allocated on timetables was highlighted. Other suggestions included providing resources that allow for individual rather than group submissions which would support students with irregular attendance.

4. Impact – Indicators of Change

Building on these findings, the intended outcomes of The Big Idea programme and the level of achievement observed through this evaluation are presented through a concentric circles model (Figure 17). The innermost circle represents the immediate goals achieved during the programme, with the outer circles reflecting intermediate and long-term outcomes.

The long-term outcome of improved confidence and skills among Youthreach teachers in delivering 21st-century skills is based on feedback indicating that additional training and support will be needed to sustain and embed this change. For outcomes such as the development of 21st-century skills among learners and increased student motivation, there is strong evidence of achievement, but further refinement of programme delivery and additional time are required for these outcomes to be fully consolidated.

Figure 17: Intended outcomes and measured impact for The Big Idea Project

Participants and facilitators described a range of positive changes as a result of taking part in the programme. These included increased confidence and wellbeing, stronger teamwork and peer collaboration skills, greater openness to different perspectives, and enhanced creative thinking and problem-solving abilities. Together, these outcomes highlight the programme's role in supporting participants' personal growth, social development, and future aspirations.

Increased confidence, wellbeing

One of the most striking impacts described was an overall increase in participants' confidence and sense of wellbeing. Many participants who had initially been shy or withdrawn described finding their voice and feeling more comfortable engaging with others.

> *But we, the main thing we had was kind of group discussion. But what we allowed the students, learners to do was just—we let it flow, I suppose, through the medium of maybe playing the games, mixing up the groups, so that it would not be all the friend groups together [...] And it was just kind of, I suppose, watching them come out of their shell, particularly like, you know, the less vocal guys. [...] And then vice versa—the ones that were quieter, they became more confident in maybe sharing a story or whatever. (Facilitator 1)*

> *Just let your mind work, and you will do everything, you know? Just think a lot—like, think a little bit of what you want to do, and you will do it. There is nothing hard in this life—well, you can make something hard. You can make it easy. If you want to say, "Oh, this is hard, I cannot do it"—no, you can. There is nothing you cannot do. Everything you can do. (Participant 3)*

> *I used to, like, be shy talking to people. I used to not—like, I could not, like, talk to people. I would be, like—if people were there I did not know, or, like, if it was one person, I could not go up to them and talk. I would just be shy—like, scared. And after, when I came here, I just, like, started going with the people, talking to them. [...] But now, when I came here, I have more friends, and I talk to more people. (Participant 4)*

> *I learned that, like—my voice is as important as anyone else's. We're all important. You know, in school, I never got that. I never, never got a chance to speak up about, like, what's on my mind, or just in general. So The Big Idea really was, okay, it's your turn. We're gonna listen to you as you speak. I never got that in school. (Participant 5)*

Teamwork and peer-collaboration

Participants reported that learning to work effectively with others was a transformative part of the programme. Many came to value collaboration and experienced a shift from individual to group-based creativity and problem-solving.

> *And I think that was a lesson in itself—learning to participate, [...] putting in our bit, contributing. And I think that was the most important part—just knowing how to participate. (Participant 1)*

> *Well, I definitely see that I am talking to my classmates more. I think my thoughts became a lot more fluent—like, I could think of other people's perspectives more, as well. See ideas from other people's perspectives more—less sort of just my own. Because if I thought an idea was not going to work out, I would not say it to someone—I would let them explain the idea first before doing that. Before, I do not think I would have done that—I would have just gone, "No, that's not going to work." I would call bluff straight away. But now I like to see other people's ideas through as well, because you do not know—their idea process or thought process might be different than mine. So understanding other people's thought processes—that is something I learned. (Participant 2)*

Shift in attitudes, openness to different opinions

The programme also led to a notable shift in attitudes, with participants becoming more open to different perspectives and more empathetic toward others. Importantly, this group chose to explore mental health as their project topic — a sensitive and complex theme that naturally invited heated discussions, differing points of view, and moments of vulnerability. Engaging with this topic challenged participants to reflect deeply, listen actively, and develop greater respect for each other's experiences and feelings.

Facilitators highlighted this shift:

> *But in a good way, towards the end, like the one that there was, I would say, a disagreement between how one felt and the other felt. But they were able to come after it to say, "Okay, listen, I do not agree with what you are saying, but I respect your decision." [...] And even though we may not agree with each other's opinions, we are going to work. Are you happy to do that? And they were. [...] Like nobody said anything initially, then the group came together. [...] But I suppose, particularly for the cultural difference—the vocal, maybe Irish guys started to listen to and go, "This actually—this is—you cannot do this in your culture. This is frowned upon," or whatever. So different things for different students, depending on where they are at, yeah. (Facilitator 1)*

Participants themselves described how these discussions and the focus on mental health encouraged them to open up, express vulnerability, and consider perspectives they might not have engaged with before:

> *But it kind of surprised me then, when we got kind of into it, and you realised how vulnerable other people were letting themselves be. So it kind of left you to be like, "Oh, I can actually be vulnerable around these people as well." You know—like, express your emotions and everything in the big group itself, rather than just the one or two. So everybody was kind of getting more comfortable with each other. Because before, not everybody talked—you know what I mean? [...] I would say—from personal experiences—personal experiences people were actually willing to share. They were showing their vulnerability by letting us into their personal lives and showing us that their life is not all as perfect as it seems—and vice versa. (Participant 1)*

> *To not rush into conversations with a heavy head—make sure you think before you talk. Because people's feelings can get hurt from words, and people are sensitive—compared to others. I was unaware of how sensitive other people can be before I started doing The Big Idea and seeing a sensitive topic happen—yeah—when we were talking about mental health. [...] (Participant 2)*

> *Like, when you see someone sad or whatever—yeah—like, listen to what they say. Do not, like, laugh at what they are saying. No, just listen—respect what they are saying. Try to talk to them. (Participant 3)*

Creative thinking and problem solving

The programme also fostered significant growth in creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Many participants described discovering new aspects of their creativity and learning how to work through challenges collaboratively. The shift from viewing creativity as an individual pursuit to embracing it as a shared, collective process was a powerful outcome for many.

> *I think my favourite was just being with the group. Because—I do not know—I said it before to one of the tutors. I was like—I always thought creativity was just, like, on your own. [...] Like, I thought it was only me that could be creative, you know? I did not think you could be creative in a group. I was always used to just being creative on my own. But then, when we were thrown into a group altogether, and we were told, "Oh, come up with this idea," I*

actually thought it was so much better being creative with a group—a big group of people coming together to create something rather than just me. Like, it was a change for me because usually I am always just working on my own. (Participant 1)

Another thing would be that I have learned—probably—to see the final product to the end. If you do not start on a project, you are never going to be happy with the progress you make at the very start, because you do not have a whole lot done. So I would say, if you are going to start something, make sure you finish it to the very end. And if you still do not like it at the end—at least you did everything you could to try and make it the best you could. That is the best—the best way to spend—the second one. [...] (Participant 2)

And basically, the big idea, really, is your idea. It's everyone's idea that you all put together. Then that's the big idea. Again, everyone's heads just collide together, and then that's the big idea. That's my, like, example of it, really, because, yeah, it's, it's still a new thing for us, but we grasped it pretty quickly, and we all got along with it very, very well. [...] I've unlocked a new creativeness when it came to The Big Idea. Like, I didn't know I could be that creative, and I didn't know that I was that creative. Who knows what I can—I could, like, portray that creativeness to music, like just pure, like, confidence and creative—just onto my music. The Big Idea definitely showed me—maybe opened my eyes a lot about myself and about others. And just, like, creativeness, you know? (Participant 5)

5. Reflections and Insights

Participants and facilitators identified several gaps, ongoing challenges, and areas for improvement to enhance the programme in future iterations. These insights highlight the importance of ensuring clarity, consistency, and more targeted support throughout the process. A key challenge repeatedly mentioned was poor attendance and continuous intake of new learners in the Youthreach programme, which resulted in constantly changing new dynamics. Suggestions included forming groups based on learners' interest and commitment to ensure more consistent participation and cohesion. Time constraints and scheduling conflicts also posed significant barriers, with some facilitators highlighting the difficulty of fitting the programme into busy timetables, especially when learners were already fatigued or preoccupied with other commitments such as exams. This led to recommendations for more flexible scheduling, additional dedicated time, and careful selection of the most suitable periods to run the programme.

Facilitators and participants emphasised the need for clearer guidance and more structured support materials throughout the process. Many felt uncertain about the overall journey and expressed a desire for clearer step-by-step explanations, visual examples (e.g., sample empathy maps), and a more detailed outline of what each stage should look like in practice. Suggestions included providing example projects for each topic, demonstration videos, and clearer communication around expectations and key milestones. Moreover, facilitators stressed the importance of clearer communication throughout the programme, including timely and transparent updates about events, expectations, and available resources. In addition, facilitators noted that some of the project themes could be sensitive and potentially trigger strong emotions or conflicting viewpoints among participants. They highlighted a need for additional preparation and training on managing conflict, facilitating difficult conversations, and supporting emotional safety within the group.

There was also a strong recommendation to strengthen the mentorship component. Facilitators suggested introducing opportunities for live, interactive sessions with mentors rather than relying only on written feedback. This more personal connection could help reinforce learners' confidence, increase motivation, and provide a tangible sense of progress and recognition.

Teen Turn PLUS

1. Participation in the Programme – What Works

Participants and stakeholders highlighted several factors that motivated girls to join Teen Turn and sustained their engagement. These included the presence of inspiring female role models and mentors, the opportunity to explore STEM interests in a supportive environment, strong parental encouragement, the removal of financial and logistical barriers, and the creation of a safe, non-judgmental learning space designed specifically for girls.

Motivators for Participation

A strong motivating factor for participants was the opportunity to learn from and connect with **female role models and mentors**. The mentors' encouragement and guidance helped create a sense of belonging and confidence among the girls, fostering a community where older participants supported and inspired the younger ones.

> *Because the girls definitely have found their tribe. They're really supportive of each other, and they mentor the younger ones. Oh, it's unbelievable. The older ones mentor the younger ones. [...] so it's great that they're passing on their expertise to the next group behind them, and they're encouraging them. (Mentor)*

> *So, I feel like if I had not done Teen Turn, I would be more inclined to give up. But with Teen Turn, I can see a lot of girls around me who have also experienced what I am experiencing — especially the older girls. They would have gone through what I am going through, and the mentors always motivate you to get back on, try again, or do something different, or change something. (Participant 4)*

> *Then I joined Teen Turn, and my whole view flipped. I even went to a women's engineering talk as part of Teen Turn. There was a woman there who started her own business in college, and she studied biomedical engineering. I was thinking, 'Wow, that could be me in a few years.' [...] you also get to work with female mentors, which is very comforting. After finishing Teen Turn, you can come back as an alumni, which is also an incredible opportunity to give back to younger girls. I hope Teen Turn continues to grow and reaches more schools and ages. (Participant 9)*

> *That's another great thing—lots of the people you meet are women in STEM. And it's like, 'Oh, well, this is what I want to do,' but I didn't realise there were as many women in this field. Even when I walked in on the first day of college and I see 90 lads and nine girls, I was like, 'This is fine,' but that's only because I'd seen that. It's not always going to be like that, obviously. The field of engineering I want to go into is quite male-dominated, but I know that there are women out there. I think that was a huge part—every aspect of STEM, you see someone you aspire to be. Even if they're someone who just decided to do this because they had free time, they make a huge difference to someone. (Participant 8)*

Interest in STEM subjects

For many girls, the chance to explore their interest in STEM subjects, combined with the opportunity to meet new friends who shared similar passions, was a powerful draw. Participants described Teen Turn as a space where they could learn, experiment, and grow in a fun and engaging way.

> *I never knew that I had an interest in STEM, but I have an interest in gaming. I'm on my phone or laptop a lot, so I thought this might be something new or something cool to try. (Participant 9)*

It is a really good place to find friends as well. So if you are looking for people who are more like you, I would definitely recommend it. (Participant 4)

Like, at the Saturday sessions, we meet girls from different counties, and they get us involved with each other. Yeah, we stick to our friends, but we also meet other girls who have similar interests, which is just — like, it is amazing. (Participant 7)

[...] they kind of put a fun aspect on things. Like, for the robotics, beforehand, it always looked kind of cool, but I thought, 'Sure, I will never be able to do that.' But there, they broke it down and let you try it. I think the way they taught it was kind of fun. (Participant 11)

Parental support

Parents played a crucial role in encouraging participation, supporting their daughters to take part in activities and step outside their comfort zones. Their trust in the programme and recognition of its impact on their children's confidence and interests were significant factors in sustaining engagement.

She came back just so enthusiastic, so enlivened by it all, so full of ideas. It is just — it is really such a nurturing space, such a wonderful space to be able to let you — and as a parent — to let your daughter off on a minibus at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning, and to know that she is going to be well looked after, and she is going to get opportunities that she would not have gotten. [...] I just soaked up the energy and the enthusiasm that she came back with from the courses. And you cannot ask for any more than that in any activity for your child to be involved in. (Parent 1)

I'm quite shy, and if it weren't for my mom, I wouldn't have known to push to get things done. I'd never have gone out and looked for internships or work experience on my own. But thanks to Teen Turn, I just got an email asking if I wanted to sign up for summer work experience. I was on the fence about it, but my mom said, 'Just do it.' (Participant 9)

Yeah, I thought it was excellent. I couldn't get over, first of all, the interest that it just sparked in my daughter, you know, whether it be science or engineering or the robotics or the computer side of it. So first of all, it was just the interest in the topic and the kind of commitment from the school as well to support it. I was always so impressed about how many trips were being planned, you know, and how much kind of discretionary time the teachers were putting into making sure that the trips happened, organising the buses, getting them there and back. (Parent 4)

Fully funded participation

Teen Turn's model of fully funded participation, including free transport, meals, and resources, was repeatedly highlighted as crucial for enabling access, particularly for girls from rural areas or lower-income families. This approach eliminated significant barriers and ensured inclusivity.

I also liked the fact that everything was paid for. It didn't cost me a load of money to send her. They got the bus to different places, they got food, and the companies all provided their time for free. Sometimes when kids do stuff out of school, it's very expensive. So, that's what I liked about it as well. She got this for free. [...] Yeah, because if I was to fund that, it would have been a lot of money, you know. (Parent 2)

Well, one of the things I love about Teen Turn, especially because I live in a rural area — and even transporting my own child to places is difficult — is that Teen Turn provides transport to the girls. Anywhere they are going, the girls do not have to pay for anything, so it is accessible. They pick them up at their school, or they drop them off as close to their house as a bus can go. And also, providing meals. So,

for certain groups — maybe if they are in direct provision — we have seen examples with girls in direct provision. They would not get home in time for their set meal time, and people will not feed them outside of set meal times. So for those girls to be able to come to us, we have to feed them. So we do that as well. Even when the girls are coming on our trips and everything else, we feed them as well. Because you just do not know what situation they are coming from, and if they can afford to come along and go on a day out and buy pizza. So making those things accessible, I think, is really, really important. And it is something I love that Teen Turn does. (Staff 1)

They've been really supportive. I also think they appreciate that there's no price tag attached. I don't have to ask them for money to do things. Like, I'm going to Dublin for this project, but there's no cost. I just have to show up. Honestly, I wouldn't have been able to do even a quarter of what I've done with Teen Turn if there was any price attached. It's been amazing. [...] But more than that, the opportunities, the confidence, and the understanding. The fact that Teen Turn takes care of everything—like bringing you to Dublin, booking your hotels for BT, making sure everything is safe—all you have to do is the work and create your projects. We don't even get that kind of support in school all the time. It's been amazing, and I've loved it a lot. I'm very passionate about it, so I start ranting whenever I have the chance. (Participant 2)

A safe, welcoming, and non-judgmental learning environment

Finally, participants and parents alike emphasised the importance of Teen Turn as a safe, all-girls space, which created an atmosphere free from external pressures and competition often found in co-educational, especially in male-dominated environments related to STEM. This supportive environment encouraged girls to fully engage, express themselves, and develop their skills and confidence.

And I suppose the reasoning behind it — you only have to look at the workforce and say, "Well, this is the gap we are trying to bridge." Look how few women there are working in the sector. Look how few there are studying it at third level at the moment. We have to do something to change that. So, in terms of the reasoning why we only have girls — that would be the foundational reason. (Staff 1)

So, I can see, once I started working with Teen Turn, I was like, yes, the girls need this. There are so few girls working in STEM subjects. They need this extra push. They need this extra encouragement. [...] I think there's a sense of collegiality that's there because it's all girls, and it's women helping women. And I think that's a really big part. It's not that we exclude boys. I feel it's just that we encourage girls more because they don't get that encouragement in other parts of their world. That's how I would see it anyway. (Staff 2)

Yeah, like my mother said, it is a sisterhood. And, like, obviously, if you lose, you are like, "Oh..." — you are upset if you do not win. But you are happy for your friends. You want to cheer them on. You are there together, you are there to support as well. [...] And when it is just women — like, if I was there with a couple of boys — it is different. Like, with the robotics, for example — that was a team effort, so we were all there to win together. But it is just not as — loud is one word I could use to compare it. Because, like, you know how boys get — like, "Oh yeah, let's do this!" I do not know — it is less quiet. With the girls, we are helping each other. (Participant 7)

I signed up for Teen Turn, and I was especially relieved when I found out it was just for girls. That was definitely a big help for me joining Teen Turn. [...] I know myself, I'm already shy around people in general, and I think it might just be my generation, but some people aren't very nice, especially girls doing something that typically isn't for girls. So I think being in an environment that encouraged only girls to

partake in a male-dominated field was really helpful for me. It made me feel more inclined to come out of my shell too because there were girls who were in the same position as me or who might have felt the same way. (Participant 9)

It was the first STEM space I've ever been in where I'm surrounded by girls. [...] It was the first time I'd ever been in a space, and I was, like, surrounded by people who were kind of, like, they were the exact same as me. They were girls going in. Even in engineering, now, I'm doing engineering for the Leaving Cert. I am the only girl in my class. It's definitely different. (Participant 10)

I'd say it helps girls more, like, because if you look at it, if I say, "Oh, yeah, engineer," you would say, "Oh yeah, it's a male engineer," but you would never think, like, that's the first thing that comes to your head instead of a female one. And like, the fact that there are so many girls who share the same idea and like the same thought about it, like they want to be something they've always dreamed about, and there's like, a whole program just there to help them be that, I would say it would be their dream come true. Because instead of other people shutting them down, there are loads of people helping them get to that goal. And like, it's one of the most important things there, because instead of me telling you, "You can do it," there are others telling you, "Yes, you can." Like, you just need to go down this route, to that route, and like when they bring in all the other people in that profession just to help us, it's like a great thing. (Participant 12)

2. Barriers to Access and Engagement with STEM in Formal Education

Participants highlighted several significant barriers that shaped their educational journeys and influenced their capacity to engage with STEM. These barriers included educational disengagement and socioeconomic disadvantage, persistent gender stereotyping and confidence gaps, limited subject availability and resources in schools, and rural-specific challenges. The sub-themes presented below provide a deeper understanding of these interconnected obstacles.

Educational disengagement and socioeconomic barriers

Girls from disadvantaged backgrounds often faced multiple obstacles that discouraged them from pursuing STEM. Some came from communities where education for girls was not prioritised, and financial barriers made participation in additional activities nearly impossible.

So, like, BT Young Scientist — if I was doing that on my own, it would cost a lot because I do not live in Dublin. I would have to find a hotel, and then I would have to pay to actually get into the competition. But Teen Turn covers that — it takes away that financial barrier. And it gives you an opportunity to, like, find yourself. (Participant 4)

My school doesn't have the budget for opportunities like this, and I definitely don't have the budget to pursue them on my own, so Teen Turn has been a game-changer for me. I've made some amazing friends and met incredible people. It's truly expanded my world. (Participant 2)

I suppose a lot of the girls that we do work with are from backgrounds where they may be deprived in some way, or they don't have the resources that they should have, there's a language barrier, or their parents are working full-time and long hours. So I think some of the challenges would be getting the time and the space to go to an activity or to do an activity. But I feel Teen Turn helps with that because they provide the travel and the food. I also think that sometimes it can be a hindrance that they don't have the technology at home to be able to tune in when we're online and things like that. (Staff 2)

Gender stereotyping and confidence

Data showed that the cultural and societal expectations around gender deeply influence how girls perceive their abilities, their place, and their potential in STEM. Many participants described feeling that STEM was "for boys" — an attitude reinforced by subtle messages from peers, teachers, and the wider community. Even when technical subjects were technically available, girls often felt discouraged from selecting them or were implicitly steered toward more traditionally "feminine" options, such as art, Home Economics, or childcare. These social pressures, combined with a lack of visible female role models, contributed to lower confidence, hesitancy to engage, and a sense of not belonging in STEM spaces.

> *But also the fact that they are not studying it at second level because: A) They go to an all-girls school where they cannot study it. B) Even if they are in a mixed school that does have the subject, sometimes they just feel that it is "a boys' subject." And everyone else thinks it is for boys, so they are not going to do it. So we are trying to break the norm that is associated with the subject. (Staff 1)*

> *But then, as I began working with Teen Turn, I realised that it really is a chronic case, if girls just don't get the resources to do this. They're not encouraged to do this, even in schools where it's boys and girls. It's the majority of boys who go toward the technical subjects. It's the boys who are in the engineering class because the girls don't get that opportunity to try it out from a young age. They automatically go into art or music or Home Economics, and they don't choose those subjects, and then they're kind of almost pushed out of it. They never get the opportunity to try them. (Staff 2)*

> *At school, we are also doing our robotics, like with the same kit, and we were recently at a competition. It was a bit different with all the guys there because we had to form teams with them, and some of them were kind of looking down on the girls, saying, like, "We do not need to form a team with them if we do not want to." [...] And with it all being all girls, it's less intimidating and, you know, and also, like, skills, like, normally, if someone gives you a screwdriver, you're just really, like, expected just to hold it and mind it for the person. But there, they're like, you know, you can do it. You can try, you know, build a robot yourself. (Participant 11)*

> *And especially being in an all-girls school, you know, when you are little, you always think, "Oh, those things are kind of for boys." But you realise that there are so many brilliant women in the industry who do all these things — but you never seem to hear as much about them as the men. (Participant 3)*

Barriers to STEM in Schools

Participants and stakeholders discussed a major barrier of limited access to STEM subjects in many all-girls schools, combined with a lack of exposure to STEM pathways more broadly. Participants described how restricted subject options and limited resources in their schools not only hindered their ability to pursue STEM interests but also shaped their sense of what was possible for their future. In many cases, subjects such as physics, engineering, and computer science were not offered at all, or if offered, lacked proper facilities, qualified teachers, or sufficient student interest to run. This structural constraint makes girls feel excluded from technical fields early on, reinforcing perceptions that these subjects were not meant for them and closing off opportunities before they could even be considered.

> *And then when I went into secondary school — which was an all-girls school — there were no technology subjects. We had really old computers that were barely used. [...] Yeah, it was an all-girls school. So, like, literally, when I went to choose my subjects, we had music, art, Home Ec, and business — that was it. And then you compare it to the all-boys school across the road — they had tech, graphics, engineering, woodwork, metalwork, you know,*

stuff that I would have found cool, but I did not get the opportunity to do. So, Teen Turn was where I got a lot of my technology experience. (Participant 1)

It wasn't an opportunity that was available in my school for anyone in their Junior Cert, but if it had been, I would have joined even in first or second year. The younger you're exposed to STEM, the more irreversible the changes are, especially if it's something like a hidden passion. I think it is for me. I'm really grateful for all the opportunities, including the work experience I'm doing. (Participant 9)

A lot of older schools like this one do have the bare minimum like physics, but because of our smaller size and the area being quite troubled, the school hasn't had the population or drive to offer many STEM-based subjects. It's gotten better over the past few years, but I've still had classmates leave by the age of 16. We didn't even have enough students to justify a physics class, so we can't even offer woodwork or engineering. It's just not an option. We don't have the facilities to teach those subjects either. [...] It's a nice enough school, but unfortunately, we have very little STEM access. Since it's an all-girls school that's older than the United States, it doesn't quite mix well with modern subjects. Our LCBP (Leaving Cert Vocational Programme) class focuses on childcare and hair care. That's the extent of the offerings. We don't have physics. [...] Unfortunately, in my school, we only have childcare and hairdressing as options. No woodwork, no engineering—nothing really technical. It's all a bit frustrating for me. (Participant 2)

A lot of the subjects don't include anything that we would do in Teen Turn as part of the curriculum. They're more about focused learning in the book, rather than the actual physical experience... our curriculum is very limited when it comes to technology and STEM in a lot of schools, especially in schools that are all-girls schools. (Staff 2)

Challenges in Rural Communities

Another barrier that emerged from the data is the fact that girls in rural areas faced further challenges related to technology access and isolation. Weak broadband and lack of local infrastructure often limited their ability to engage fully in online activities or attend sessions.

In Mayo, we always have an in-person option because those girls cannot get online at home. [...] We only got broadband like two years ago... before that, we had dial-up. If I was to take my broadband off my phone, I would only have one bar. I would be trying to wave it in the air to download a photograph or to open an email. (Staff 1)

Because of my school and location, and because this stuff is normally super expensive, and mine is not a prosperous area, I've never gotten to do things like this before, especially when I'm older. (Participant 2)

3. Enablers: Overcoming Barriers and Supporting Participation and Interest in STEM

A central focus of the Teen Turn programme is creating a supportive ecosystem that actively addresses barriers to STEM participation and sustains girls' long-term interest. Participants and stakeholders described how the combination of mentorship, real-world learning experiences, and ongoing opportunities through Teen Turn+ helped bridge gaps in confidence, resources, and exposure. These enablers not only provided practical skills and career insights but also nurtured a strong sense of belonging and self-belief, empowering girls to pursue pathways in STEM that might otherwise have felt out of reach.

Mentorship

A key enabler for girls' sustained participation in STEM was access to supportive mentors and

inspiring female role models. Participants described their mentors through the programme as patient, encouraging, and deeply invested in their learning and confidence. This mentorship helped them navigate challenges, gain career insights, and build a sense of belonging in the STEM community.

> *I would say, if I can, you know, be hands-off, if we're talking about their projects, and I'm suggesting changes, and they have a counter-argument on where they want the project to go, that's it. It's their project, and I won't see the project again until it's ready. They're completely self-motivated, and they'll ask when they need a rereading or an editing or whatever. But honestly, you're not really doing anything except being a soundboard. [...] I mean, it's unfathomable to have mentors, industry mentors, beaming in once a week, and other times if needs be. Or for them to get to go see industry live and kind of imagine themselves in these scenarios. It's unmatched, really. (Mentor)*

> *So there was a lot of that, and that's what I liked when it was in the group setting, because if someone didn't know how to do something, there was always someone in the room who did. And then obviously, all the mentors—there were mentors from companies and colleges, and they all had their area of expertise and were great at helping. (Participant 8)*

> *Even guest speakers, like the ones who help with coding or financial planning, are so nice. This summer, I did two calls with (company names) for coding with Java and Python, and they were amazing. The support and encouragement from them really help with motivation because they're taking time out of their working day to help us. The teachers also stay behind after school, even though they have tests and homework to correct, to make sure we can work on projects. That really boosts motivation.(Participant 9)*

> *For example, when my friend and I were doing (project name), they got us a mentor who was able to specifically teach us that. If someone wanted to work on their business plan, they could join the call with someone who knows how to do business plans. (Participant 1)*

Real-World Learning, Industry Exposure, and Portfolio Development

Another powerful enabler was the opportunity for hands-on, real-world learning through industry partnerships and practical projects. Participants highlighted how working on real challenges, learning about the world around them, engaging with companies, and developing projects for competitions, supported portfolio development and opened pathways into higher education and STEM careers. Exposure to different work environments and industry experts offered inspiration and clarity about future options.

> *We also learned a lot, and it definitely helped solidify a lot of information that I was learning in school. But it just didn't feel the same as school. [...] Doing something like Technovation in 12 weeks is a real challenge; you really have to fit a lot into a short amount of time. [...] it definitely did help. With other things as well, like I was working on stuff that I was also learning in school. Now that I've gotten into college, I realised just how much of it is projects, and I'm like, "That's something I've really gotten good at." (Participant 8)*

> *The teacher sent an email to all of us at the end of third year, telling us about STEM Inside, which is Teen Turn's summer program. [...] I thought, "I may as well join." And I absolutely loved it! We got to work with different companies every single week for eight weeks. I was there for seven of them because I went on holiday for one week, but it was probably the best summer I've had. [...] However, I think Teen Turn has given me more insight into the actual work that happens in companies. [...] It's different from the theoretical, academic side you often see in college. I wouldn't say I've completely changed my mind or come up with a whole new idea for what I want*

to do in life, but Teen Turn has given me a broader perspective, and I think that's just as important. (Participant 2)

I have also gotten a lot of work experience, like I have done work experience at (names of companies). And it is honestly just amazing. Like, if I look back at myself before I did Teen Turn, I cannot even recognise that person at all. It has helped with so much. (Participant 4)

A lot changed. Definitely, my viewpoint of the world has changed. Through doing my Project Squad and Technovation, I saw the problems highlighted by other people's projects. That was big for me. Before joining, I was very focused on my own little bubble, not paying attention to anything else. But now I've seen so much more. I realised how many problems there are in the world and how we're here, starting in Ireland, such a small country, and these problems are everywhere, not just in Ireland. It also broadened my career horizons. [...] So, that's definitely changed my outlook. I've also been looking into college courses like engineering, computer science, or even the new Immersive Engineering program at UL. (Participant 9)

Sustained Engagement and Long-Term Interest through Teen Turn+

Teen Turn+ provided participants with ongoing opportunities to continue their engagement with STEM beyond the initial programme, supporting not only long-term interest, but also personal growth. Follow-up activities such as advanced workshops, grinds, and specialised sessions helped keep their skills and motivation alive. Participants described how these ongoing supports helped nurture their interest in STEM.

I suppose one of the other things that was great — you started with last year — was the online tutorials or subjects and things like that that are available. So when (daughter's name) took up engineering last year, she started with it but discovered quite quickly it was not going to be much benefit to her because they were — it is kind of like online grinds — they were revising things she had not studied yet. But now in September, they are going to be hugely beneficial for her. And it is such a fantastic resource. It really is very supportive for students. (Parent 1)

Like I said, I was not able to do much technology stuff when I went into secondary school. So, they were able to teach me all sorts of new programming languages. I feel like I had a big head start in computer science because of Teen Turn. When we started with Python, I already knew how to do it from some of the summer sessions they ran. And I learned new programming languages because of them, which I would not have been able to learn by myself, so that has really helped me. (Participant 1)

So, I suppose it has really had a very positive influence on my attitude towards STEM because it has taught me that it is so much more than just working in a lab or making plans for building things. Not only are there so many different jobs, but it is a community too, and there are so many opportunities in the world. So, yeah, it has given me a really good attitude about things like that, to be honest. (Participant 3)

[...] overall, the programme is amazing. I'm so glad to be part of it. I'm thankful for the opportunities and just being able to do this. Even just making projects, even when you don't win anything, the experience of learning how to make a science project, especially when you're going into a STEM field, I think is amazing. So I'm eternally grateful for the opportunity. Especially because my school doesn't have those opportunities, chances are I would never have had those opportunities. So, to have them is amazing. (Participant 2)

4. Impact – Indicators of Change

Building on these findings, the intended outcomes of the Teen Turn PLUS programme and the level of achievement observed through this evaluation are presented through a concentric circles model (Figure 18). The innermost circle represents immediate goals achieved during the programme, and the outer circles reflecting intermediate and long-term achievements. In this case, all outcomes are shown in green, as there is strong evidence and a high level of achievement across the board. The long-term outcome of increased completion of the senior cycle and progression to third-level STEM education builds upon the earlier achievements. While longer-term impacts will require continued monitoring beyond the timeframe of this evaluation, the evidence collected suggests that a very strong foundation for the achievement of this is already in place. **To sustain and deepen this impact, continued investment in long-term mentorship, expanded outreach efforts, and inclusive, hands-on learning opportunities are essential to support girls' confidence, belonging, and progression in STEM.**

Figure 18: Intended outcomes and measured impact for Teen Turn PLUS

Participation in Teen Turn had a profound and multidimensional impact on the girls involved. Across interviews, participants and parents described how the programme shaped career aspirations, built confidence, fostered a stronger sense of belonging in STEM, and supported the development of both technical and transferable skills. These changes extended beyond academic or professional ambitions, influencing personal growth, identity, and future possibilities. As shown in the selected quotes below, these outcomes highlight the transformative potential of this targeted, supportive STEM initiative for girls.

Career awareness and aspirations

A striking impact of Teen Turn that the participants described was the way it broadened their horizons regarding future careers. Through the programme and the exposure to industry environments and mentorship it offered, many girls moved from having limited or uncertain ideas about their futures to developing clear, confident aspirations in STEM fields. Participants described discovering entirely new career paths, recognising their own interests and strengths, and building a sense of purpose regarding their future possibilities. For many, Teen Turn served a catalyst for considering STEM careers and a crucial support in shaping their emerging professional identities.

> *I feel like I have had a lot of experience with Teen Turn. Like, we go out to see a lot of companies. Even for our summer camps, which start in late June or early July, at the end of each month, we always go out to a company sponsoring it. And we have been to so many companies — data companies, production companies, cybersecurity companies. So, I feel a lot more sure about what I want to do in the future regarding STEM. [...] it has almost helped me find my purpose and what I want to do in the future. Because if I had never done Teen Turn, I would have never known that I liked things like coding, building, and design. Like I said, I did like science — but science could mean anything, really. So it has kind of helped me know who I am, career-wise. (Participant 4)*

So then it was only after COVID that we got to visit Thermo King in Galway, which is one of the ones that really stood out to me because that was the first time I really got exposed to all the types of engineering, and that was through Teen Turn. We visited them a few times, and I did the Teen Turn ship with them. Then summer 2023, I think, and that's when I actually considered mechanical engineering, which is kind of what I want to do now. And it was all that, that I probably would have never actually got to see if I'd never signed up for Teen Turn. And then there was also the Plus clubs, and we started robotics. And then I got really into robotics, and it kind of just went from there. So as time went on, I really steered more towards engineering, because of all the things it changed and exposed me to. (Participant 8)

I would say going to Teen Turn has changed my view on engineering. It's mostly because of the work experience I did. [...] I could see myself being a biomedical engineer because I like building things. I've always considered myself a "do-it-yourself" type of person, so I would say the work experience really changed my view on engineering. (Participant 12)

Definitely. I feel like if I had not had Teen Turn and I had just gone through school, I probably would have wanted to do something else. Like, I do not know what I was thinking before — I wanted to be a teacher before. But then when I got into Teen Turn and started doing more technology, I realised this is what I am good at. This is what I want to keep doing because I really enjoy it. (Participant 1)

You know, when you are little, and you think, "Oh, I want to be an astronaut," or "I want to be a doctor." And then the reality of the world hits you, and you realise, "Oh, I cannot do all that." But you get exposed to so many different people and so many people who do different things — like jobs you never knew existed. So I suppose it has given me so many ideas of maybe this is a field I want to go into. Even just exposure to working with different

fields of business, robotics, engineering, and technology — it really exposes you to the possibility that you could have a future in this. (Participant 3)

Yeah, yeah, definitely. It gives them a lot of confidence in themselves, that they have these abilities and they can do whatever they want. You know, even when (daughter's name) was looking at college and courses, she was saying, "Oh, you could do this, you could do that." And I'd say to her, "But what kind of job would you get out of that?" She could name places, "I could go here, I could go there," you know, the way there was nothing holding her back. And it was definitely because of all her experiences in that, being exposed to companies and kids from other countries. When they'd go to Technovation, they'd be looking at projects from America, and they could see that they could achieve anything they want and be anything they want to be. (Parent 2)

My confidence has definitely grown. I was quite uncertain about what I wanted to do, but over time, I've been able to narrow it down. I want to do something that pays well, in this economy, something that personally fulfils me, and something that makes a positive impact. (Participant 2)

Confidence

A core impact that emerged powerfully across all stakeholder interviews, participants, parents, mentors, volunteers, and staff alike, was the remarkable growth in participants' confidence. Parents, staff, and the girls themselves emphasised how Teen Turn helped them believe in their abilities, take risks, and step into new roles and talk about their achievements with pride. Many participants described coming out of their shells, becoming more comfortable speaking in public, and developing the courage to lead and take ownership of their projects. The programme created an environment where girls felt supported to try, fail, learn, and ultimately see themselves as capable of achieving anything they set their minds to.

But really, it's about the confidence boosting, the fact that they believe in themselves more, that they know they can do something, and they follow on with that. You know, you see them coming back over and over again, and they're building on the skills that they're learning as well. They don't just stop at one thing. They're really interested, they try something else out. So, I feel the confidence and that trust in their ability, that they can do what they want to, and they can do anything they want to achieve, is a huge part of it, and the confidence that it build (Staff 2)

And it has helped me come out of my shell. Like, I would have struggled speaking in front of people, but it really made me come out of my shell and speak publicly. I would not have done that if it was not for Teen Turn. So, it helped me in a lot of different aspects. [...] Like, if you were talking to me when I was back in second year or third year, I would struggle so much. I do not think I would have been able to do this. Like, I want to go for that. That is what I want to go for. I want to be there. I want to be a leader. I suppose I want to invent stuff. I want to — maybe I want to be the next Mark Zuckerberg, or — I want to be the next female Mark Zuckerberg, if you know what I mean. I want to be a revolutionary. I want to create inventions. I want to be out there. (Participant 7)

If I think about the skills I learned in Teen Turn, like working independently, in teams, leadership skills, or confidence, I'd say, when I look at myself two and a half years ago, I've definitely changed. I've gained more confidence, especially when working in a team. The program has helped me grow in those areas. [...] It helped me believe in myself more and realise that I can do it, no matter what. (Participant 12)

But through projects and through giving presentations as well, it has helped me build

my confidence and realise my potential. If that makes sense. [...] Like I said, I have also built my presentation skills and confidence skills a lot because, during Teen Turn, you do a lot of competitions where you have to present — sometimes in front of the entire group or to a judge. And those are really, really difficult. I would not have been able to do that in the past. (Participant 4)

Increased Interest and sense of belonging in STEM

Many participants and stakeholders described how the programme sparked, or reignited, their interest in STEM and nurtured a sense of belonging in these fields. Through the engagement with all aspects of the programme, perceptions of STEM were shifted from something distant to something accessible and exciting. Several girls highlighted the fact that through their participation they chose new subjects, pursued new fields, or considered careers in STEM. This change expanded beyond subject choices, shaping deeply how they see themselves and their futures, fostering a sense of belonging in STEM spaces.

But because of the year she spent with Teen Turn in transition year, it totally opened up a whole new range of subjects for her. She took on engineering in fifth year, having not done it for Junior Cycle, and it is one of her best subjects. If she had not done Girls in STEM, we would not even have considered it. And it was such a leap. (Parent 1)

Yes, I would say so. With all the robots, I used to look at them and think, "I could never do that. That is for real engineers." But then when we actually got the kits, I realised, "This is doable. Everyone can do this." And also, when he showed us around the robots at ATU, those were really cool. The robotic arms and everything. It would be amazing to work with those. So I kind of looked at that and thought, "Wow, that would be a cool job." (Participant 11)

And then I suppose, if I'm looking at it before even working with Teen Turn, the biggest achievement that I would see, and I've seen it with numerous girls in my school, is girls that started doing the Teen Turn program, having not done any technology subjects whatsoever for Junior Cert. And then they went into Leaving Cert and picked up engineering, especially for girls, because they had done Teen Turn. So they changed the whole journey of their educational path, because they had been given access to technology and had enjoyed the building process, and then went on to do engineering. (Staff 2)

So, I never thought about being interested in computer engineering, game design, or anything like that. My brother, when he was younger, wanted to be an animator or a game influencer. And I was like, "Oh no, I cannot be that because that is what my brother wanted to be." And now this is what I might end up being. So, yeah, it has completely turned around. (Participant 7)

Another thing I learned was that I could actually see myself working in this industry in the future. I've never been this motivated for something in school before, but for Teen Turn, I was passionate, and I saw how much work I would have to put in to succeed. (Participant 9)

Development of practical and transferable skills

Participants widely described how Teen Turn helped them build a broad set of practical and transferable skills essential for both academic and future professional success. Through team-based projects, hands-on challenges, and mentorship, they developed critical abilities such as effective communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, organisation, and openness to new perspectives. Many highlighted how these experiences pushed them beyond their comfort zones, taught them to manage disagreements and conflict, and encouraged them to express their ideas confidently. The programme not only equipped them with technical skills but also

fostered resilience and adaptability — qualities they recognised as vital for navigating college, the workplace, and life beyond school.

> *But we learned how to just get stuck in. Just really be like, "Okay, we can't panic. What do we do?" and get stuck in and working with each other. And really, I think communication was a really big thing, and just really clear communication, especially like you could be doing a project with girls that you might not really know very well, and it's all about just like, yeah, getting stuck in. [...] Even in the workplace, you need those kinds of skills to be able to approach problems — even problem-solving skills. I definitely learned that in Teen Turn — there are a lot of steps to making those projects. And organisation skills as well. (Participant 4)*

> *But now, I'd say teamwork is a skill that I really need to develop. After going through these two programs, I've done more team-based work. I'd also say communication because I now talk more to people. I'm much more open to everyone, and it's easier for me to get my views across, rather than before when I used to hold things in. [...] Another skill would be that I'm much more open-minded now. Before, I was more restricted to one way of thinking. Now, I'm much more open to other views on a topic, and I've learned about many topics and perspectives that I didn't know about before. (Participant 12)*

> *Definitely, I also learned how to work in a team. It was very challenging because everyone has different opinions, and I had to learn to respect and work around that. In school, I don't think they do enough group work that's serious enough for people to actually want to try. But in Teen Turn, because they're all girls my age, with the same passion and the same goal, and also the motivation of the prize that's up for grabs, we try a lot harder. You really see the effort that's put in, and you also learn how to work with others. (Participant 9)*

> *For teamwork — during Technovation, the teacher was our mentor, but she was also a mentor for everyone else. So they did not tell you what to do; they helped you figure it out yourself. I had a partner in Technovation, so we had to share out the work. That meant we needed planning skills and teamwork. For leadership — before, I probably would have just sat there in silence in a new group, thinking, "Who is going to talk?" But now I am probably more likely to be the person who says, "Okay, what are we doing now? Let's do this. Let's do that. What are your names?" That kind of thing. Yeah, before, I probably would have just stayed quiet, and obviously, that would get you nowhere. (Participant 11)*

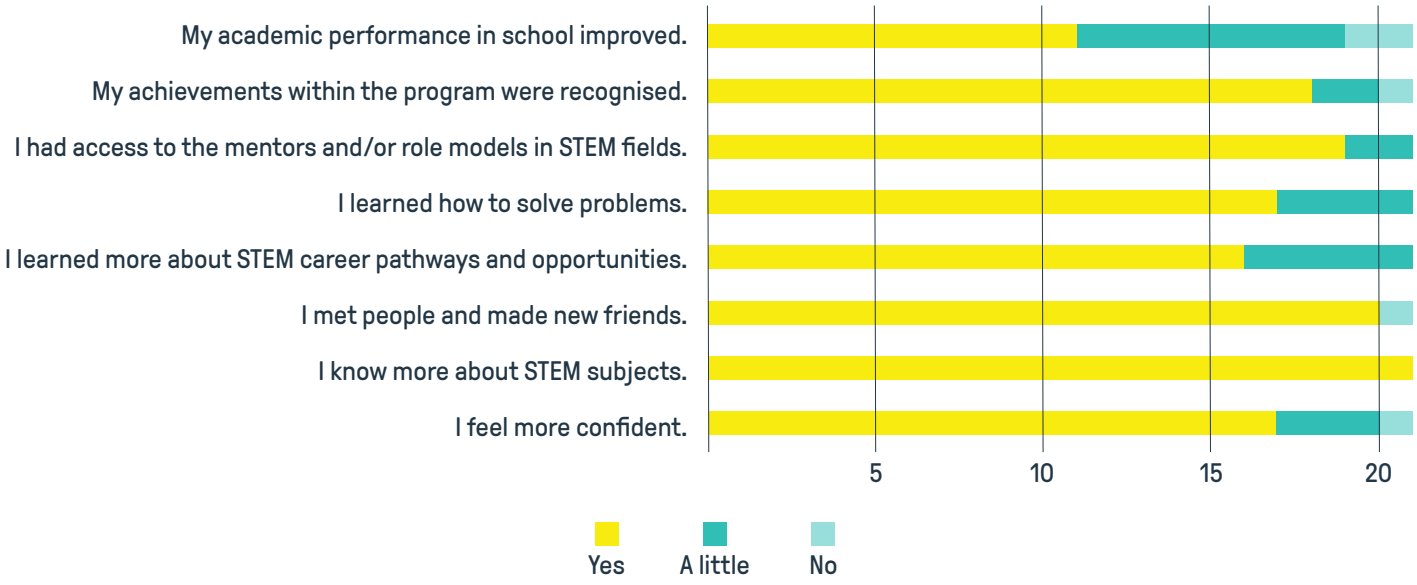
> *With COVID, a lot of my generation didn't have much experience with teamwork in school. So just the idea of having a project, working together, and having at least a good presentation by the end of the week was very useful. I think that's a skill that will be helpful going forward into the workforce and college. [...] The project also helped me develop skills I hadn't used before, like academic research. I never made sure my sources were credible before, but with this project, I learned how to do that. [...] I also learned how to approach mentors and ask for help, which boosted my confidence. (Participant 2)*

In addition to the rich qualitative insights shared above, quantitative data collected through participant surveys further illustrate the impact of Teen Turn on girls' confidence, skill development, and interest in STEM. Between November 2024 and March 2025, an online questionnaire was completed by 27 participants involved in the Teen Turn PLUS project. The age range of participants in the Teen Turn Plus project spanned from 12 to 20 years, with the majority clustered between 14 and 16 years old. There was a strong representation of mid-secondary school students, particularly those aged 14 to 16, who together accounted for over three-quarters of the sample (76.93%). The presence of younger teens and a small number of older participants suggests the programme's reach

across a broad age spectrum. The respondents represented a mix of school types: 14 (53.85%) were from girls-only schools, while 12 (46.15%) were from co-educational settings. The following figures provide a visual representation of these outcomes, offering a complementary perspective that underscores the programme's influence.

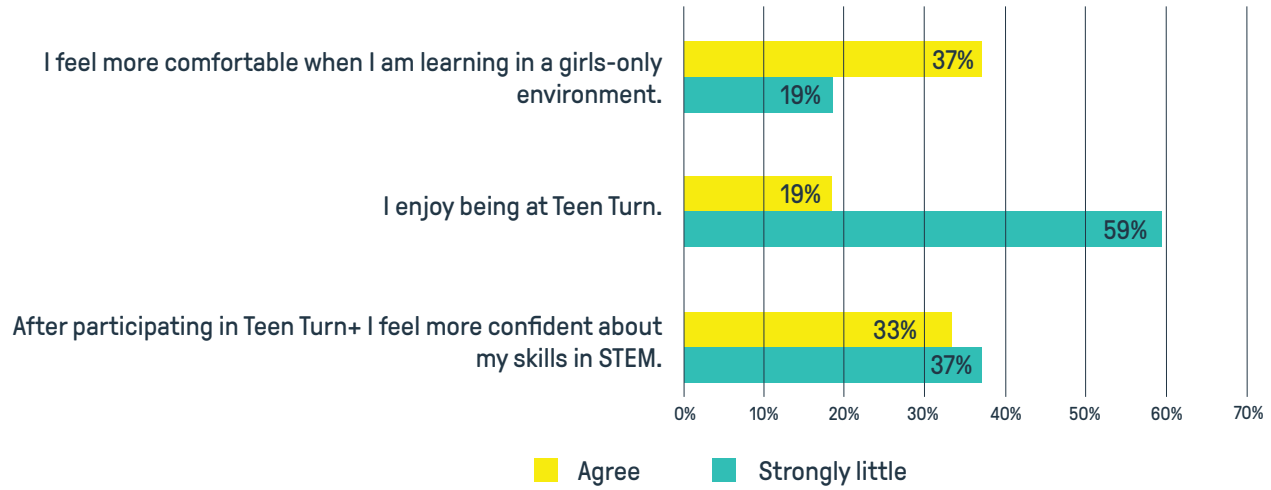
Figure 19 highlights that all (n=27) survey respondents reported an increased understanding of STEM subjects following their participation in the programme. Beyond academic knowledge, the social dimension of Teen Turn was also significant: participants noted that they met new people and formed friendships, reinforcing the importance of a supportive and collaborative environment in fostering engagement and learning.

Figure 19: Girls perceived impact of the project on their learning and skills



In addition to gaining knowledge, participants reported feeling more comfortable learning in an all-girls environment and expressed strong enjoyment of the programme overall (Figure 20). Many highlighted how this supportive, girl-centred space helped them feel more at ease when exploring new skills in STEM, boosting their confidence and willingness to participate. These survey results align closely with qualitative findings, where girls described Teen Turn as a safe and encouraging space that allowed them to connect with peers and try new things without fear of judgment.

Figure 20: Girls' enjoyment and confidence in STEM



A significant proportion of respondents (45%) indicated that they see their future career in STEM (Figure 21). This suggests that participation in Teen Turn not only nurtures interest but also motivates many girls to envision themselves in STEM-related careers. This quantitative finding resonates with the interview data, where participants described how their experiences with Teen Turn helped them identify career options and build the confidence needed to pursue them.

Figure 21: Interest in Pursuing a STEM Career

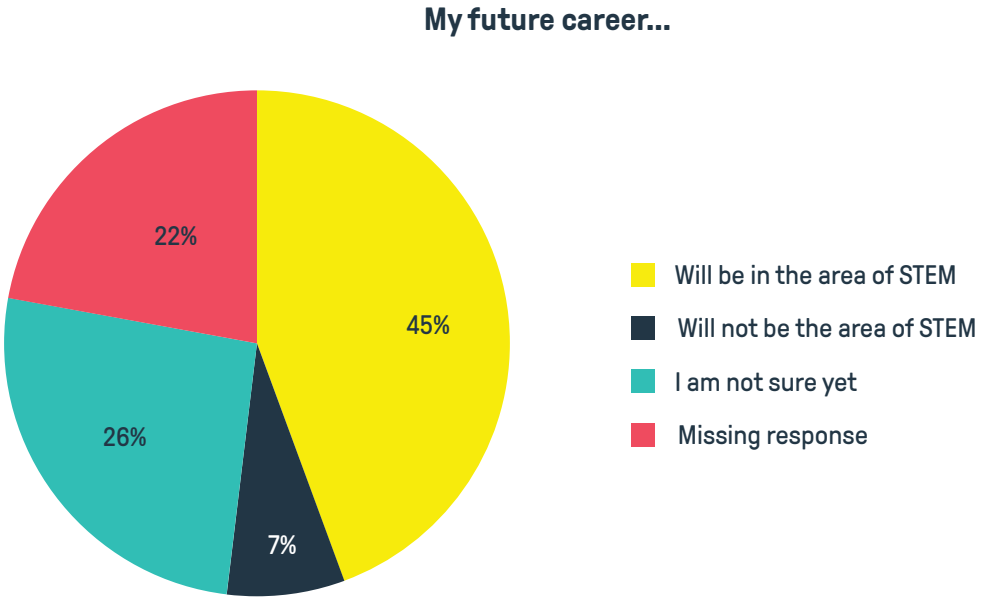
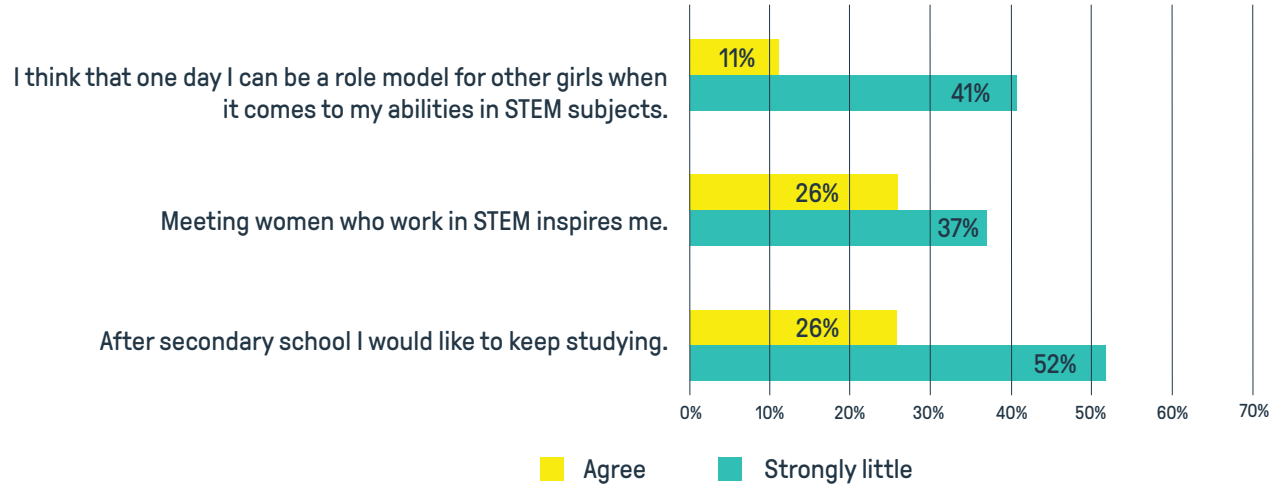


Figure 22 highlights the strong sense of inspiration and forward-looking ambition among participants. Many girls reported that meeting women working in STEM motivated them and helped them believe they could one day become role models for others. Additionally, a high number expressed a desire to continue studying after secondary school. Together with the qualitative findings, these findings reflect how Teen Turn not only supports immediate learning but also fosters long-term aspirations and empowers participants to envision themselves in STEM.

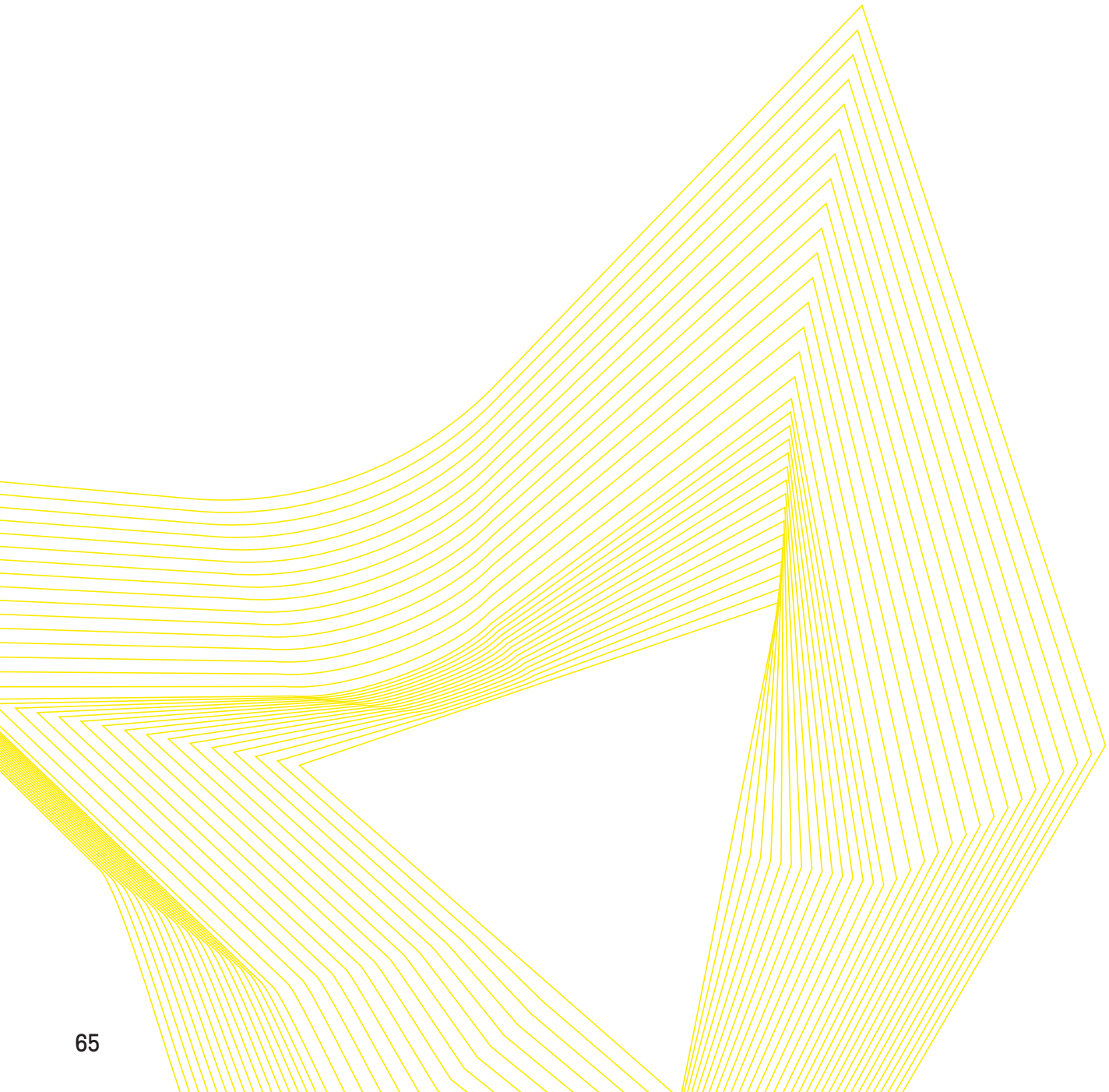
Figure 22: Inspiration, Future Study Plans, and Role Modelling



5. Reflections and Insights

Participants, parents, and other stakeholders shared valuable insights and recommendations to further strengthen the programme and expand its impact. The most prominent theme was the strong desire for the programme to reach more girls, especially by actively involving students from a wider range of schools and communities across Ireland. Participants suggested more outreach to schools, including in-person visits, talks, and workshops to introduce Teen Turn and inspire wider participation. Some respondents recommended increasing visibility and awareness through stronger promotion and advertising, to ensure that more young women are informed about the opportunities available through Teen Turn. Additionally, participants expressed interest in including a broader range of STEM and STEAM careers, such as design and creative industries, to showcase diverse career paths.

> *I just feel it is important that people know about Girls in STEM, and that it is shared throughout the world – that girls know about it and that girls just get involved. (Participant 7)*



Summary & Recommendations

Summary of findings: The Donegal Travellers Education Project

The Donegal Travellers Education Project has had a profound and multifaceted impact on Traveller children, young people, and their families. Through culturally safe, trust-based relationships and holistic support, the programme successfully engaged participants, strengthened educational retention, and fostered a deep sense of belonging and pride in Traveller identity. The educators' consistent presence, advocacy, and practical assistance, from academic help and extracurricular activities to navigating grants and school systems, enabled young people to remain in education, develop confidence, and aspire to further and higher education pathways. Parents reported feeling empowered to support their children's education and observed significant positive changes in their children's confidence, identity, and academic engagement. Moreover, strong partnerships with schools and higher education institutions enhanced intercultural awareness and created more inclusive school environments. Finally, despite ongoing structural barriers such as discrimination, practical access challenges, and limited school resources, the programme stands out as a model of effective, community-centred educational support, demonstrating the transformative power of culturally responsive and relational approaches.

Evaluation notes on achieving and sustaining impact

As highlighted earlier, Irish Travellers remain one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Ireland, with only 1% progressing to third-level education and significant early school leaving rates (Brennan et al., 2024). Evidence has consistently shown that meaningful involvement of Travellers in educational initiatives leads to more representative, inclusive, and effective outcomes, fostering trust and cultural understanding. In this context, the Donegal Travellers Education Project demonstrates an example of a culturally responsive, relationship-centred and community-based approach in addressing these inequalities.

Moving forward, all outcomes — even those marked as fully achieved — require continuous reinforcement to ensure that progress is consolidated and expanded. This aligns with the principles of the new Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Department of Education, 2024), which underscores partnership, participation, and culturally responsive practices as key drivers of change.

Summary of findings: Inclusive Education

Through the qualitative data analysis it is evident that the Inclusive Education Project has made a significant impact on children and young people from the Traveller community, by employing a model based on individual needs and fostering a strong sense of belonging and self-belief. Through personalised, holistic supports — including tailored academic assistance, one-to-one mentoring,

culturally sensitive afterschool activities, and substantial family engagement — the programme successfully supported educational participation and progression. A key strength of the project lies in its adaptability and responsiveness as key elements, as educators and support workers adjusted activities and interventions based on each participant's unique context, creating an environment where children felt seen, understood, and empowered. The integration of Traveller-led cultural awareness further ensured that students could be proud of their identity and access educational opportunities, enhancing their confidence and pride. Parents and educators especially highlighted the project's role in breaking down barriers to education, through operating as a bridge to improve communication with schools and providing critical advocacy and navigation support. Schools observed improved attendance, stronger engagement, and greater involvement in extracurricular activities. Systemic challenges such as discrimination, and practical barriers (e.g., financial costs and lack of resources) persist, however, the Inclusive Education Project demonstrates how much a culturally informed, and relationship-centred approach is needed and how it can create meaningful and lasting change in educational trajectories.

Evaluation notes on achieving and sustaining impact

As highlighted in national and international research, effective engagement and improved educational outcomes for Traveller children and young people depend on culturally responsive, trust-based, and community-based approaches (Dirrane & Dempsey, 2025; Brennan et al., 2024). The Inclusive Education Project is an example of this approach, by embedding Traveller-led cultural awareness, holistic supports, and strong school-community partnerships at its core. Sustaining and deepening this impact requires continued investment, and expanded pathways into further education and employment, as emphasised in the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Department of Education, 2024). The partial achievement of the intermediate goals highlights the need for sustained trust-building and earlier interventions to address intergenerational barriers and foster long-term participation. These findings confirm that the priority is not merely increasing numbers but ensuring deep and culturally sensitive engagement to foster long term sustainable impact.

Summary of findings: The Big Idea

The Big Idea programme stood out for its creative, learner-led approach, and offered participants an alternative to traditional classroom learning. Findings show that there was significant encouragement to explore real-world topics, which helped participants develop new skills, build confidence, and discover their own agency as thinkers and creators. Against a background where alternative education approaches remain underexplored in Ireland, The Big Idea is an example of a creative, learner-driven, and project-based programme in re-engaging young people who have experienced educational disadvantage. As highlighted in recent reviews (DE, 2022), alternative and informal education settings offer holistic, flexible pathways that can better accommodate diverse needs and support meaningful learning experiences. In the analysis of the participant and facilitator feedback, it is evident that while The Big Idea has achieved strong outcomes in fostering engagement, creativity, and essential skills, several areas for improvement remain critical to sustaining and expanding its impact. Key recommendations highlight the importance of greater clarity and structure throughout the programme journey, including more step-by-step guidance for facilitators. The need for flexible scheduling and more consistent group structures was emphasised to address challenges posed by fluctuating attendance and continuous intake in Youthreach

contexts. Strengthening mentorship through more live, interactive support was also identified as vital for deepening motivation for sustained participation. Finally, the sensitive nature of some project themes points to the need for additional facilitator training in managing emotional safety and navigating conflict. Together, these insights underline the importance of ongoing adaptation and resourcing to ensure that alternative educational models like The Big Idea can fully realise their potential for inclusive and transformative learning.

Evaluation notes on achieving and sustaining impact

While The Big Idea programme successfully achieved or made strong progress toward all intended outcomes, sustaining and deepening this impact requires ongoing adaptation and support. The findings highlight the importance of flexibility, strong facilitator training, and sufficient time allocation to ensure that all learners, especially those with complex needs, can fully engage and benefit.

Summary of findings: Teen Turn PLUS

The Teen Turn PLUS programme has evidently demonstrated a profound impact on the lives of participating girls, stretching far beyond STEM engagement activities. Its core elements of strong mentorship, hands-on experiences, exposure to STEM related activities and competitions, building bridges with industry, targeted support, fully funded participation, and provision of a safe learning environment, effectively worked to sustain participation and have a positive impact. Barriers related to gender stereotypes, confidence gaps and limited school opportunities were successfully addressed through the programme's model. Participants described profound shifts in their mindsets and approaches around STEM and career aspirations, with many actively pursuing STEM pathways they had not previously considered. Furthermore, the safe, all-girls environment fostered a sense of belonging, empowerment and sisterhood. Participants and all other stakeholders reported an evident change in confidence, soft and transferable skills development, and creativity. Parents and staff, including volunteers and mentors highlighted how the Teen Turn PLUS model, including free access, transport, meals and materials, removed critical socioeconomic and logistical barriers, making STEM learning truly accessible. Moreover, Teen Turn PLUS provided sustained engagement through follow up workshops, support, industry exposure and work experience, supporting and nurturing immediate learning but also long-term educational and career trajectories.

Evaluation notes on achieving and sustaining impact

Participants, parents, and stakeholders shared insightful recommendations to further strengthen Teen Turn PLUS and expand its transformative reach. The most prominent suggestion was to actively extend the programme to reach more girls, particularly by engaging a wider range of schools and communities across Ireland. This includes increased outreach through in-person visits, workshops, and talks to raise awareness and inspire broader participation. Stakeholders also called for enhanced visibility and promotion to ensure that more young women are aware of these opportunities. Additionally, participants suggested diversifying the focus to include a wider array of STEM and STEAM pathways, such as design and creative industries, to reflect the breadth of possible future careers.

These recommendations strongly align with existing literature on gender and STEM. International evidence shows that women and girls continue to be significantly underrepresented in STEM fields, not due to a lack of interest or ability but as a result of deeply rooted stereotypes, gendered expectations, and systemic barriers (Avraamidou, 2022; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2024). In

Ireland, research indicates that girls' mathematical abilities are underestimated from as early as age nine, contributing to confidence gaps and shaping future subject and career choices (McCoy, Byrne, & O'Connor, 2020). Adolescence is a critical period for fostering STEM identity and building confidence, with hands-on, flexible, and community-based approaches shown to be particularly effective (Makarova, Aeschlimann, & Herzog, 2019). Sustained support, ongoing mentorship, and access to real-world learning opportunities are crucial to empower girls, strengthen science capital, and promote long-term progression into STEM education and careers.

Summary of cross-project findings

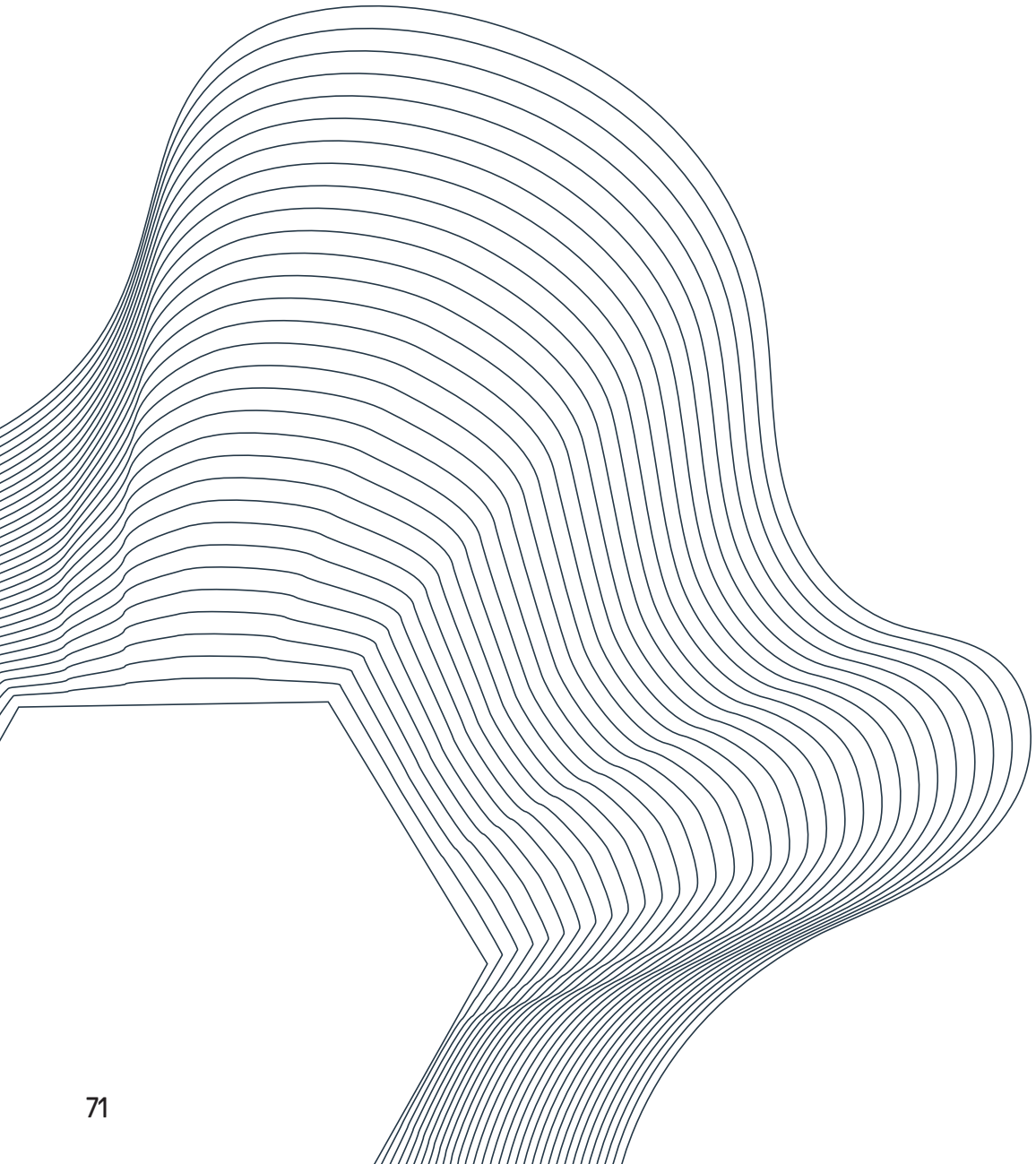
While the four programmes share many similarities in their strategic goals and their underpinning philosophies, they operate in different levels and contexts, educational, social, as well as geographical. The following table illustrates the overall findings with regard to the overarching themes of our cross-project framework.

Table 5: Cross-project findings

	Smaller scale-community level (Target population: Youth from Irish Travellers Community)		**Broader - multiple county level**	
Theme	**The Donegal Travellers Education**	**Inclusive Education**	**Teen Turn+**	**The Big Idea**
1a. Participation in the Programme (What Works)	▪ Community-based & relationship-centred approach ▪ Word of mouth communication ▪ Trust building	▪ Traveller-led cultural awareness ▪ Holistic approach: Involvement of families in decision-making ▪ Building trust	▪ Girls-only learning environment ▪ Encouragement from mentors and peers ▪ Hands-on, future-focused activities ▪ Relatable female role models	▪ Creative learner-led approach (freedom to choose the topic) ▪ Hands-on work ▪ Exploration of real-world issues
1b. Enablers to Access / Engage with Formal Education	▪ Partnership with the institutional/ school side ▪ Collaboration with the School Liaison Officer ▪ Advocacy and mediation role between families and schools	▪ Role models ▪ Family inclusion ▪ Collaboration with School Liaison Office	▪ STEM clubs/ workshops/ activities, mentoring, portfolio-building ▪ Linking STEM activities to real-world problems ▪ Hands-on learning experience ▪ Collaboration with companies ▪ School-level collaboration	▪ Professional growth ▪ Leadership skills ▪ Factors of peer work and collaboration

2. Barriers to Access / Engage with Formal Education	▪ Lack of trust in the school system ▪ Previous negative educational experiences ▪ Discrimination	▪ Structural - cultural (e.g., discrimination, past school experiences, literacy issues)	▪ Systemic and structural obstacles for girls to sustain interest in STEM ▪ Lack of access to STEM teaching at school ▪ Gender stereotyping & limited exposure to third-level STEM pathways ▪ Cultural and social barriers (especially for lower socio-economic backgrounds, or isolated rural backgrounds)	▪ Participants' prior disengagement reasons for early school leaving ▪ Feelings of isolation, lack of support and reported mental health challenges
3. Impact / Indicators of Change	For learners: Feedback and experiences of young people in the programme (confidence, voice, skills, identity, leadership, and wellbeing) For parents: Stronger perceived ability to support their children's education. For schools: Higher potential for intercultural awareness through partnerships with schools and further and higher education institutions.	For learners: Improved perceived literacy skills, confidence, sense of belonging, motivation to learn, and pride in identity. Educators and parents reported increased academic achievements. For parents: Increased value placed on education/parental empowerment.	For learners: Increased confidence, sense of belonging in STEM spaces, interest in STEM, interest in STEM related careers, skill development (coding, public speaking, business planning, presenting, robotics). For parents: Improved parental attitudes regarding girls' ability and achievement levels in STEM	For learners: Growth in self-confidence, creative problem-solving, teamwork For Youthreach staff: Increased understanding of creative education and pedagogy

4. Recommendations	▪ Emphasis on rural element and challenges it poses ▪ Need for sustainable funding	▪ Reduced timetables ▪ Awareness of traveller culture ▪ Need for sustainable funding	▪ Identify how retention can be achieved is still challenging ▪ Gaps in digital access ▪ Need for broader outreach and opportunities to collaborate with more schools	▪ Support from the programme team in sharing information beforehand and clearer expectations. ▪ Better preparation to navigate conflict/ difference of opinions on real-world issues



Final recommendations

a) Recommendations for the awardees

Evidence from the evaluation highlights many strengths in how awardees are supporting children and young people. Awardees are recommended to continue building on their achievements in order to go further in strengthening delivery and impact:

1. **Address hidden barriers to engagement:** Building on the holistic supports provided by some awardees, such as meals and transport, awardees should continue to identify and respond to less visible barriers such as digital access, stigma, or family responsibilities, that limit full participation and engagement. Ensuring equitable access for all learners supports the goal of sustained engagement and participation highlighted in each project's intended outcomes.
2. **Support sustained confidence, skills, and progression:** To maintain the confidence, skills, and aspirations developed through participation in the programmes, awardee could provide opportunities to learners to have ongoing involvement, for example, alumni activities or peer-led initiatives, helping participants to become role models, mentors or co-facilitators.
3. **Expand and consolidate partnerships with schools:** In line with the outcome area of enhanced collaboration and system engagement, awardees are encouraged to expand and formalise networks of partner schools, community organisations, and local agencies. This can improve visibility, referral pathways, and long-term sustainability and collaboration with the education system.
4. **Deepen family and community engagement:** Reflecting the family and community involvement outcome, awardees should continue to embed family voice and community participation in programme planning and delivery. Creating structured spaces for families and communities to contribute actively to decision-making can further strengthen trust, engagement, and inclusion in education.
5. **Strengthen evidence and communication:** While awardees are already gathering valuable qualitative evidence, it is recommended that sharing successes more widely could inspire others and build confidence in their model of delivery. Developing clearer ways of capturing, analysing and communicating outcomes and impact would not only support learning but also help secure sustainability by demonstrating impact to schools, communities, and future funders.

b) Recommendations for Rethink Ireland: Implications for funding agencies

In addition to the programme-level recommendations for the awardees, evidence from the evaluation, as well as stakeholders' reflections on how funders could better support programme delivery and sustainability, highlight opportunities for Rethink Ireland and other funding agencies to act as strong partners in fostering long-term impact. More specifically:

1. Recognition and investment in alternative education pathways

Evidence from the evaluation indicates that creative, flexible, and community-based models, such as informal learning and out-of-school initiatives, were perceived by learners and staff as particularly effective in re-engaging young

people. Stakeholders emphasised that sustained investment in these pathways is essential if Ireland is to meaningfully address educational disadvantage.

2. Reporting structures

Clearer and more consistent reporting formats would help programmes capture and communicate outcomes more effectively. This could include a streamlined, outcomes-focused template that combines quantitative indicators (e.g., participation rates, progression data) with space for qualitative evidence such as stories of change or participant feedback. Regular reflection or learning reviews between Rethink Ireland and awardees could also replace some written reporting. This would not only support accountability but also enable awardees to focus more of their time on delivery and reflection.

3. Closer and continuous communication

Over the evaluation period, the evaluators maintained regular contact with awardees through meetings, site visits, and shared events. Through this ongoing engagement, the evaluators observed that Rethink Ireland's collaborative and supportive approach was highly valued by the awardee teams. The funder-awardee relationship was viewed as enabling and constructive, with open communication that facilitated learning and adaptation. Building on this strong foundation, the evaluation suggests that more regular contact, through ongoing dialogue and reflective monitoring, would further strengthen the collaboration and allow challenges to be addressed in real time. Communities of practice or similar shared forums could create space for collective reflection, exchange of good practice, and stronger peer networks among awardees.

4. Review of deliverables during the award cycle

Awardees' work is dynamic and often adapts to complex and emerging needs. Deliverables should therefore be revisited during the course of the award to ensure they remain relevant, achievable, and responsive to the realities that awardees encounter on the ground. Looking ahead, deliverables that stem from the development of a Theory of Change at the beginning of the award should be reviewed and adapted on an ongoing basis. In practice, this means that the evolving nature of awardees' work needs to be recognised.

5. Support for sustainability

Based on evaluators' sustained engagement with awardees, it is recommended that early and ongoing support for sustainability planning would strengthen Rethink Ireland's already supportive approach. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of sustaining effective initiatives beyond the lifetime of the award. Practical support from funders in identifying new funding streams and building partnerships at the end of the award cycle would help to maintain and scale initiatives that have demonstrated impact. Awardees also suggested that support in developing business or sustainability plans would be valuable, ensuring that sustainable funding and long-term planning are integrated from the outset of the award rather than left until the end.

6. Dissemination and visibility

Funders are uniquely placed to help awardees reach wider audiences. Support to develop effective dissemination strategies and stakeholder engagement through existing networks, events, and communication channels would amplify the visibility of awardees' work, helping to strengthen recognition, legitimacy, and opportunities for wider reach.

7. Facilitation of wider partnerships

Funders could play an important role in creating links between awardees and local communities, businesses, and other organisations. Bringing these groups together would expand the pool of potential supporters and resources, offering new opportunities for collaboration and investment.

c) Recommendations for Government and Policy Action

The evaluation findings highlight a set of cross-cutting outcomes that are directly relevant to Ireland's current education policy landscape. These recommendations are grounded not only in the lived experiences of stakeholders but also in clear legal obligations. Among the various policies regarding educational disadvantage, the findings of this study are conceptually linked with the Education Act (1998), which mandates inclusive, diverse, and accountable education, as well as the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) that obliges the State to ensure school attendance and address early school leaving. In the same vein, findings are linked to the Equal Status Acts (2000–2018), requiring non-discrimination in education as explained in the table below.

Table 6: Alignment between evaluation findings ("what works") and national policy context

Area of focus	Key findings from	Relevant	Connections and recommendations
Progression to Further and Higher Education	Progression to further and higher education remains limited for disadvantaged groups, particularly Travellers. Participants and parents consistently reported that the gradual building of relationships with educators, mentors and the formal school system, supported engagement, retention, and confidence. While many described aspirations for further and higher education, stakeholders emphasised that sustained investment and long-term support is needed to translate these early aspirations into progression.	National Access Plan 2022–2028 (Higher Education Authority & Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022) Education Act (1998) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified 1992)	Evidence suggests that relationships are foundational for long-term progression. To deliver on the National Access Plan and legal obligations under the Education Act and UNCRC, the government should ensure continuity of mentoring and relational support, particularly for Traveller and disadvantaged students.

Traveller Student Engagement & Progression	Building trusted relationships and embedding culturally responsive practices are a key factor to Traveller student engagement and progression. Participants described a stronger sense of identity and belonging when culturally safe practices were embedded, and staff observed greater intercultural awareness in schools, which was perceived as fostering more meaningful and long-term parental engagement in schooling.	Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Department of Education, 2024) National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024) Equal Status Acts (2000–2018)	To actualise the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy and fulfil equality duties, culturally responsive, community-based approaches must be supported as mainstream and core practice across the system, not one-off interventions.
Girls in STEM	Girls who took part in Teen Turn PLUS reported that mentorship, role models, and hands-on projects gave them confidence and encouraged them to see themselves as belonging in STEM. Stakeholders perceived these approaches as particularly effective in breaking down stereotypes and widening career aspirations.	STEM Education Implementation Plan 2022–2026 (Department of Education, 2022) National Access Plan 2022–2028 (Higher Education Authority & Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022) Equal Status Acts (2000–2018)	Supporting more mentorship and project-based STEM opportunities is essential to achieve national commitments on gender equality in education and careers, as outlined in the STEM Plan, the National Access Plan, and equality law.

Family-School Relationships	Parents and educators described the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) role as crucial in building bridges between schools and families, enabling more open communication and stronger partnerships. Stakeholders perceived that the HSCL was not only a link between schools and families, but that having a dedicated person in this role was crucial for building sustained relationships, enabling communication, and supporting families to engage more fully in their children's education.	DEIS Plan (Department of Education and Skills, 2017) Education Act (1998) Education (Welfare) Act (2000)	The formalisation and long-term support of the HSCL role is essential to deliver on statutory duties for attendance and parental engagement. Evidence from the evaluation shows that investment in HSCL will support the delivery of the main goals of the Education and Welfare Acts, while building community trust.
Socio-Economic Disadvantage and Wellbeing	Socio-economic disadvantage intersects with wellbeing and attendance challenges. Young people described feeling more supported and motivated when teachers held high expectations and parents were actively involved in their education. Parents reported that clear communication and encouragement helped them to feel more confident in engaging with their children's learning. Stakeholders reported that wraparound supports, such as meals and transport, reduced stress and made regular engagement feel more possible.	Understanding Life in Ireland 2025: The Well-Being Framework 2025 (Department of the Taoiseach, 2025) OECD Education for Inclusive Societies – Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland (Department of Education, 2023) Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (Department of Social Protection, 2023) Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice 2018–2023. (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).	To meet obligations under the Education (Welfare) Act, attendance strategies should focus on wellbeing measures and wraparound support, as the evidence from the evaluation highlights the importance of those. Schools and teachers benefit greatly from capacity building, structured training, and ongoing support to fulfil their role to create inclusive environments where all cultures and students are recognised and valued, and where parents feel more able to engage.

Out-of-School and Alternative Education	Learners described alternative and out-of-school settings as safe, flexible, and empowering spaces where they felt more able to engage. Facilitators and parents reported that these environments helped sustain participation, particularly for young people who struggled in mainstream education.	Review of Out-of-School Education Provision (Department of Education, 2022)	The State has a responsibility to prevent early school leaving, which highlights the importance of recognising and supporting alternative education pathways.

Concluding remarks

Rethink Ireland has a long-standing commitment to addressing educational disadvantage by investing in social and educational innovations that promote inclusion and opportunity across the education system. The Equity in Education Fund (2022-2025) continues this body of work by supporting out-of-school and community-based projects that address barriers to engagement and create alternative pathways for young people at risk of exclusion. Education and related qualifications determine life chances; those who leave education without qualifications face greater obstacles to employment and are more vulnerable to poverty. As previous evaluations have shown (e.g., Kovačič et al., 2021), by supporting innovative, learner-centred projects, Rethink Ireland's approach has helped to open new pathways for learners who might otherwise have been left behind, while also fostering new models of community-based engagement that have lasting social benefits.

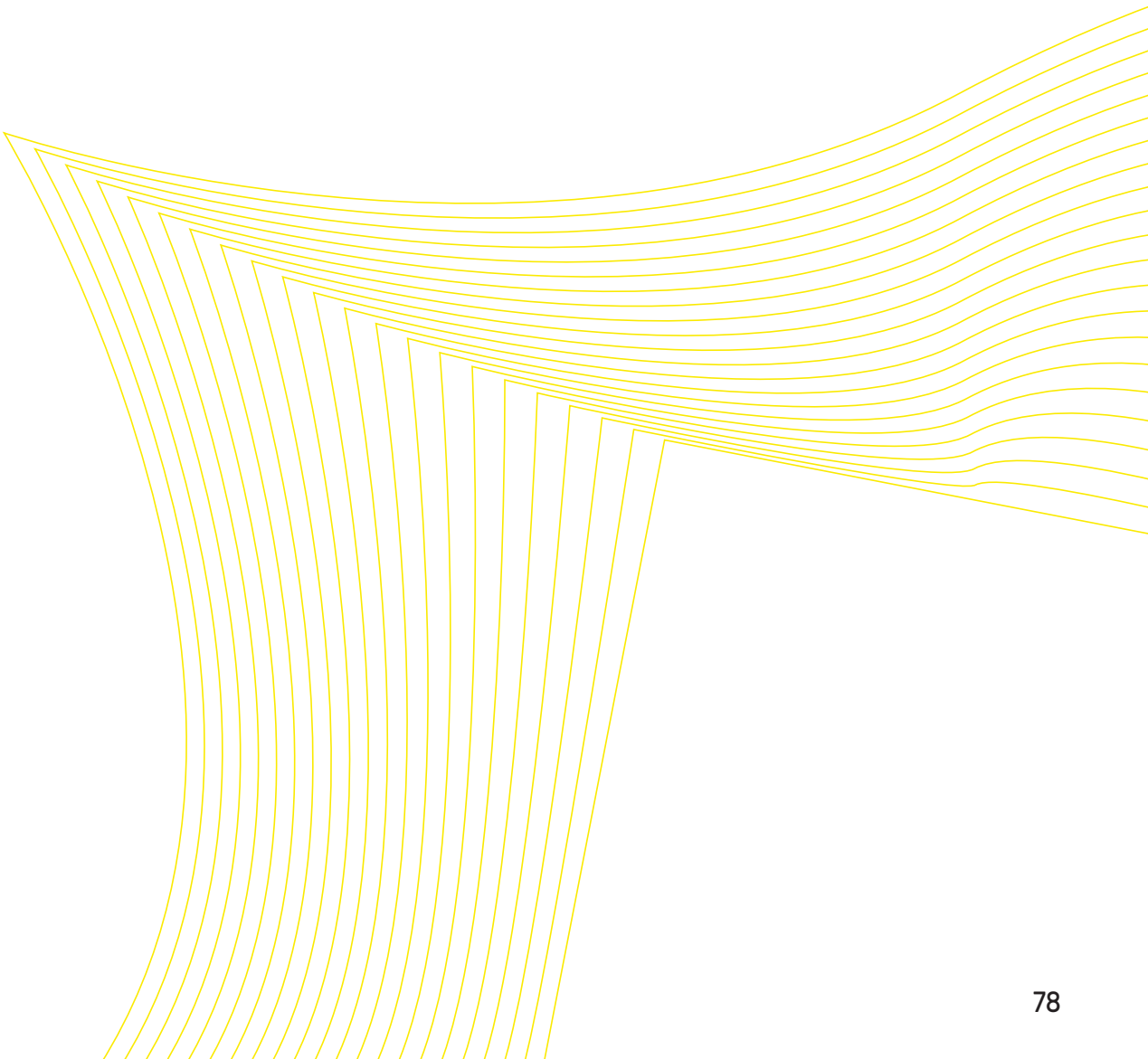
Importantly, these efforts also align with national policy commitments. To deliver on the National Access Plan and fulfil legal obligations under the *Education Act* and *UNCRC*, social ventures and those shaping policy must ensure continuity of mentoring and relational support, particularly for Traveller and disadvantaged students. Similarly, as the *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030* emphasises, culturally responsive, community-based approaches should be embedded as core practice across the education system, rather than one-off interventions. In addition, findings of this evaluation are in line with *STEM Education Implementation Plan 2022–2026*, which calls for expanding mentorship and project-based STEM opportunities, which are essential to advance gender equality in education and careers.

This evaluation highlights important opportunities for Rethink Ireland and other funding agencies to further strengthen their role as partners in fostering long-term impact. Recognising and sustaining investment in alternative education pathways—particularly flexible, community-based models—is critical in addressing educational disadvantage. In addition, refining reporting structures and creating more regular opportunities for communication and reflection between funders and awardees would help ensure accountability, while also freeing up time and resources for programme delivery. A more dynamic approach to deliverables, with flexibility to adjust as needs evolve, would also allow out-of-school education providers to remain responsive to the complex realities they encounter.

Furthermore, this evaluation study highlights that short-term, observable outcomes—such as improvements in engagement, confidence, and peer support—are viewed by participants, their families, and awardees as equally valuable as longer-term outcomes, such as retention or sustained educational attainment, which are often more difficult to measure. Both short and long-term outcomes contribute meaningfully to addressing disadvantage and should be considered when evaluating programme success. As illustrated in

the project theories of change (see Appendices), short-term outcomes, such as improved engagement, confidence, and peer support, represent the proximal changes that enable sustained participation and motivation to learn. These early shifts lay the emotional and relational foundations for intermediate outcomes such as stronger family-school connections, improved attendance, and clearer progression planning. In turn, these cumulative gains create the conditions for long-term impacts, including retention, attainment, wellbeing, and inclusion. While long-term impacts such as educational attainment, career advancement, or systemic inclusion require longer timeframes to evidence fully, the evaluation findings support the underlying change pathways proposed in the theories of change. These findings also highlight the importance of sustained funding, partnership continuity, and system-level support to fully realise the long-term ambitions articulated in each theory of change.

This layered process reflects a broader theory of change in which personal, relational, and community-level changes reinforce one another over time. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of aligning programme-level learning with system-level supports to sustain the momentum generated by these initiatives and to inform the strategic integration of out-of-school education within Ireland's broader educational landscape.



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Appendix

Donegal Travellers Project - Theory of Change

Activities	Ways of working	Hoped for outcomes	Impact
Recruit 8–10 young people in JC cycle to participate in youth leadership programme	Ensure participants already have buy-in from their families and remove gender and any other access barriers	A group is established and all participants have the opportunity to enjoy the experience	More young people from the Traveller and Roma communities are becoming active role models for education progression for their peers and the community.
Design Youth Leadership programme in partnership with young participants	Young People's Rights based and led/ informed by lived experience Focus on co-design and ownership	**Participants experience an increase in confidence, leadership, pride and voice**	
Compliment activities with a creative media project	Enable young people to tell their own story in their own way	Voice of young people is amplified and accessible to policy makers, education providers and the Traveller / Roma Community	
Establish a Youth Advisory Group of 3 people in Senior Cycle to help steer the direction of the project	Young people's rights based and led/ informed by lived experience Barriers to participation removed	Programme is informed by lived experience of young people as they exit the post-primary school system	

Inclusive Education - Theory of Change

What problem are you trying to solve?	What is our proposed solution to the problem?	Who might experience changes as a result of what we do?	What are some of the characteristics of our focus group?	Activities	Outputs	What changes are our focus group likely to experience?	Well-defined Outcomes	Impact
Young Travellers, Roma and those in Direct Provision face barriers to continued education - physical, social, economic, psycho-social and self motivation barriers. These barriers result in early school leaving and reduced life opportunities.	Integrated approach to Traveller / Roma / DP students education Culturally sensitive approach with zero tolerance to racism and discrimination	Post Primary student Travellers, Roma and those in Direct Provision Their parents Younger children for whom they are role models	Living conditions not conducive to study Parents find it difficult to support (e.g. language, own education) Overall discrimination affecting many aspects of school life – incl self esteem Lack of visible role models in the community Financial and logistical barriers	One to One Mentorship with formal Check-ins Study Hub and catch up classes to support students to complete second level Personal Development Plans Cultural Engagement opportunities Peer to Peer mentors Parent and family engagement Logistical / transport support Introductions to other activities	Attendance and engagement at Hub. Mentorship and Plans Improved attendance at school Reduced early school leaving Increased engagement with Youth activities outside of school	Academic achievement – beyond any perceived limitations Empowerment of the student and an increased sense of belonging Personal goals and support to achieve them Pride in cultural identity Better cultural awareness at school	Feel cared for and supported – self worth and self value Confidence in ability to determine their own fate Being a role model for the next generation	Young people from the Traveller/ Roma / Direct Provision community enjoy the same opportunities as others in society within a mainstreamed support system that ends the cycle of early school leaving
	Cultural training for teachers and students in schools	Teachers and school community		Cultural Training		Better understanding of the challenges for all students. Raised expectations for all students		

Primary group – young people

Secondary group – teachers and school

The Big Idea - Theory of Change

<table>
<tr>
<td>What problem are you trying to solve?

▪ Creative thinking is the No.1 skill needed by society and industry and not being taught in schools.

▪ We are facing the biggest challenges the world has ever faced and not giving disadvantaged young people the tools they need to solve them.</td>
<td>What is your proposed solution?
Programme
▪ Through a creative empowered immersive educational programme, we teach disadvantaged youth from any background creative thinking skills.
Community
▪ We have developed a connected community in industry to transfer knowledge and support disadvantaged learners to develop 21st century skills.
Partners
▪ Build a network of innovative companies from diverse sectors and third level institutions to help drive connections to education and promote creative thinking practice internally.</td>
<td>Hoped for outcomes

▪ Disadvantaged Youth
▪ Co-Ordinators
▪ Mentors
▪ Youthreach networks
▪ Community Groups and Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some of the characteristics of these groups of people? (Learner, Beneficiaries)

▪ Lack of confidence
▪ Complex needs
▪ Limited understanding of career and further education pathways and opportunities
▪ Limited exposure to creative education programme and experiences.
▪ Limited access to external programmes.
▪ Negative experience of post primary.</td>
<td>Activities

For Learners
▪ The B!G Idea Programme
▪ Think B!G learning materials
▪ Co-ordinator CPD
▪ Co-ordinator Community of Practice
▪ Co-ordinator Dashboard
▪ Mentor Interviews & Advice
▪ Live online Q&A
▪ Showcase
▪ Exhibition
For Coordinators
▪ Access to material
▪ CPD – Personal Development Community Links -YR
▪ Connection to Industry Mentors - Pathways</td>
<td>Outputs

▪ No. of modules delivered
▪ No. Co-ordinators
▪ No. Youthreach centres
▪ No. Project submissions
▪ No. Pitch submissions
▪ Number of mentors involved
▪ No. of Mentor sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What changes are people likely to experience?

▪ Increase confidence
▪ Increase self esteem
▪ Increase networks

▪ Increase awareness of employment pathways
▪ Increase awareness of education pathways
▪ Build relationships with role models
▪ Increase knowledge of creative skills
▪ Improve teamwork skills
▪ Improve communication styles

▪ Increase self awareness
▪ Increase engagement with local community
▪ Increase empathy skills</td>
<td>Well defined outcomes

▪ Increase creative thinking skills
▪ Increase wellbeing
▪ Increase sense of empowerment</td>
<td>Impact

▪ Enable and empower marginalised young people with critical creative thinking skills to be used in all aspects of their future lives.</td>
</tr>
</table>

TeenTurn PLUS - Theory of Change

What Problem are we trying to solve?	What is our proposed solution to the problem?	Who might experience changes as a result of what we do?	What are some of the characteristics of these groups of people?	Activities	Outputs	What changes are these people likely to experience?	Well-defined outcomes and
Girls from under-represented and isolated communities are excluded from education and careers in STEM	TeenTurn+ A progression to the TeenTurn program	▪ Girls from isolated rural communities; ▪ girls from refugee, Direct Provision, and Traveller communities; ▪ their families, friends, and school peers; ▪ their communities; ▪ tech companies.	▪ Have progressed through TeenTurn ▪ Interested in the next challenge ▪ Looking to attract talented young recruits & To give back	Training in ▪ Advanced Programming ▪ Cybersecurity ▪ Robotics & Automation ▪ Physics ▪ Support of mentors	▪ 250 girls active retained on the program; ▪ Program delivered in 5 West of Ireland locations ▪ Increase in mentors ▪ Increase in engagement with companies.	▪ A change in mindset about what their future careers can look like ▪ They feel confident, supported, and included; ▪ ▪ They have access to a large network of like-minded peers ▪ Their families and communities feel engaged.	▪ Location or community is no longer a barrier to girls studying STEM ▪ Girls can visualise a career in STEM ▪ TeenTurn+ girls have **Impact** Girls see a bright future in STEM irrespective of their