



# Increasing Employability Skills through Third Sector Programmes: A UK-case study

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The Institute for Social Innovation and Impact (ISII) at the University of Northampton evaluates and measures the social impact of social innovations in the UK and around the world, as well as exploring the financing of, and policy support for, social innovation.

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# Background and Objectives

- In the UK as of May 2022, the NEET rate for young people aged 16-24 years stood at 10.4%, equivalent to 704,000 young people, up 0.2% on the previous quarter but down by 1% when compared with the pre-COVID period (ONS, May 2022 ). This can be broken down to 11.2% of males and 9.5% of females (ONS, May 2022).
- The Youth Futures Foundation (2021) argue that many young people do not have access to support or appropriate information to find employment or access higher education.
- Unemployment for 18-24 year old young people stood at a record low of 247,000 individuals, albeit there was a record increase of 48,000 in young people classed as 'economically inactive' (ibid). This decline reflects a general downward trend in NEET levels over the last decade, with NEET 16-24 levels standing at 16.2% back in March 2012 and a series low of 9.2% achieved in June 2021 (ibid).
- This research investigates the experiences of young people participating in an Inspire Programme delivered by a charitable organisation in the United Kingdom. It seeks to understand the role employers play in teaching young people the skills required for work and in empowering them to become community role models.

# Capabilities Approach

- Sen's (1999) Capabilities Approach (CA), which was expanded by Nussbaum (2000) is a normative framework using ideas that are based on social justice (Cin et al.,2020).
- Sen's (1993) definition of a capability is “a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being [it] represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (p. 30).
- As Walker and Unterhalter (2007) further describe, capabilities, therefore, are opportunities or freedoms to accomplish by an individual what they consider valuable.
- While CA was developed as an approach to welfare economics and development, it has been widely applied to a variety of different fields including young people's education and employment.
- To integrate the CA with work, scholars' (Edgell and Graham, 2017; Edgell and McQuaid, 2016) utilised CA to offer a different perspective on youth employment in the United Kingdom by focusing on young people's freedom to make choices that they value rather than focusing solely on having to take any job (Edgell and McQuaid, 2016).

## Research Participants and Setting

- Research was conducted with a charitable organisation delivering an Inspire Programme in the United Kingdom.
- Delivered in partnerships with reputable organisations including the RAF, Microsoft, Boeing and Northrop Grumman.
- Designed to provide young people with the practical skills required for entering the workplace through direct engagement with employers.
- Help students develop core competencies in communication, leadership, resilience, working with others, setting and achieving goals and confidence.
- This competency approach complements the capabilities approach (Sen, 1985, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000) by putting young people at the centre of their own journey of change, encouraging them to own their futures
- The research was conducted with students, parents, stakeholders and teachers engaged on programmes delivered across England and Wales.

## Methods

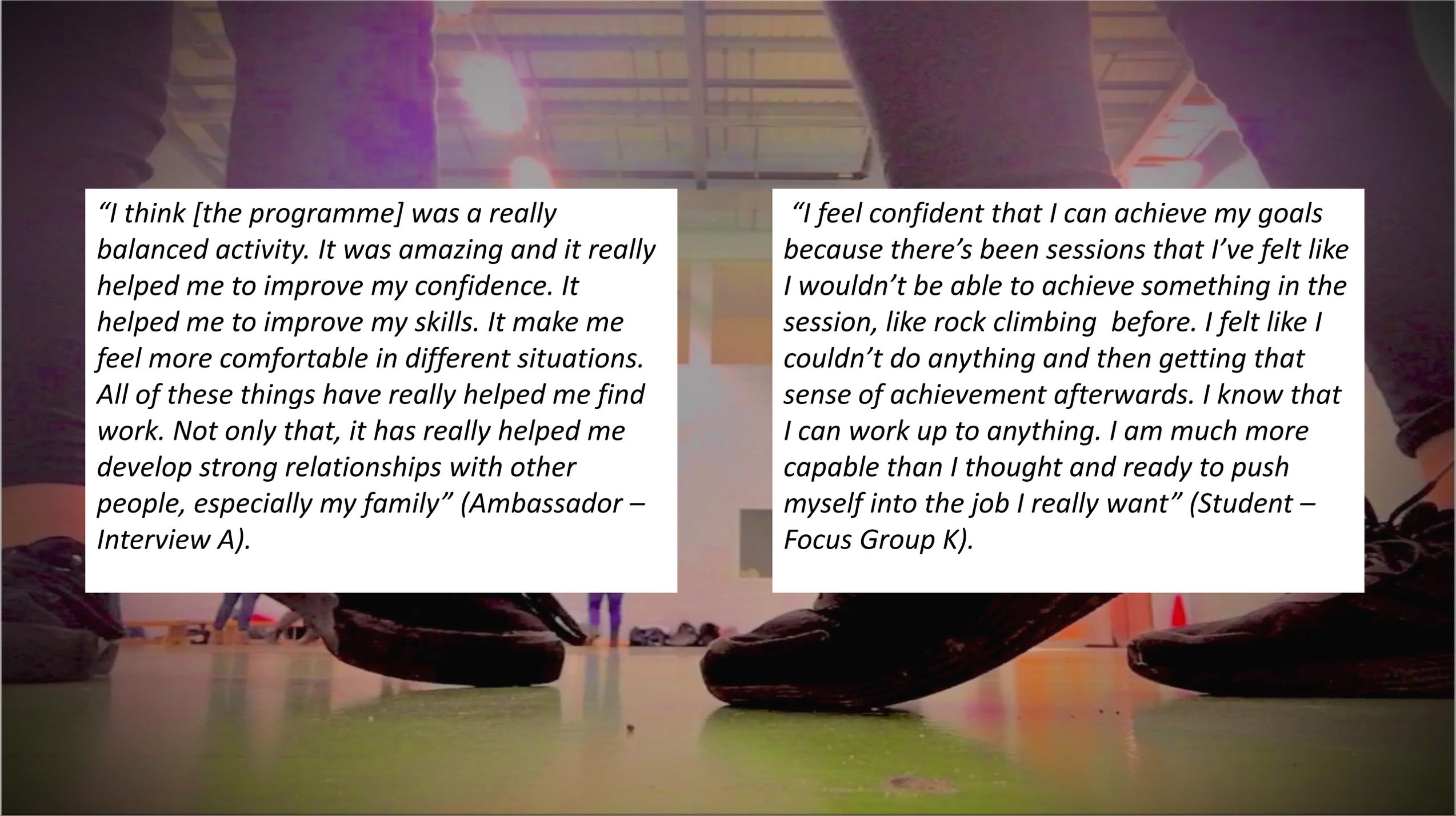
- Semi-structured interview and focus group schedules were co-designed with the organisation to understand the experiences of young people, teachers and stakeholders engaged on the programme.
  - Semi-structured interviews (N = 7) and focus groups (N = 14) were conducted with 65 individual participants between August 2020 and January 2022.
- Photo Stories, an innovative method adapted from Photovoice, provided a visual representation of young people's experiences.
  - Photo Stories was conducted with 10 young people engaged in the programmes between December 2021 and February 2022.
- Ethical considerations were paramount for the research and the team adopted an approach centred on two fundamental issues - the research teams experience working with vulnerable young people and the researchers understanding of the impact of the researchers' presence on young people (Paterson-Young, 2021; Barker and Weller, 2003).

## Analysis

- Qualitative data was analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process involved 'data familiarisation'; 'data coding'; 'theme development'; 'theme review and development'; 'theme refinement and naming'; and 'reporting' (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2020).
- This approach identifies patterns within qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017), allowing researchers to familiarise themselves with data, generate codes, and defines categories/themes (Braun and Clark, 2006).
- The refinement of themes ('theme refinement and naming') led to the identification of three themes including *improving young people's confidence and aspiration, preparing young people for the future, and innovative delivery to ensure service continuity*.
- Photo's from the Photo Stories method were triangulated with other qualitative data to provide visual representations for each theme.

# Improving young people's confidence and aspiration

- The programme adopts a competency approach which complements the capabilities approach (Sen, 1985, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000), providing young people with support to understand available opportunities and negotiate access to said opportunities.
- Young people participating in interviews noted that the programme enabled the development of confidence and self-esteem.
- Young people gained knowledge of the labour market (i.e. young people connected with employers) whilst learning individual skills (i.e. confidence) which is an approach recommended by the capabilities approach (Egdell and McQuaid, 2016).
- Empowering young people to develop confidence, then, contributes to enhancing their capabilities (Egdell and McQuaid, 2016). Confidence extends beyond improving self-esteem, enabling young people to engage with others and develop social skills.

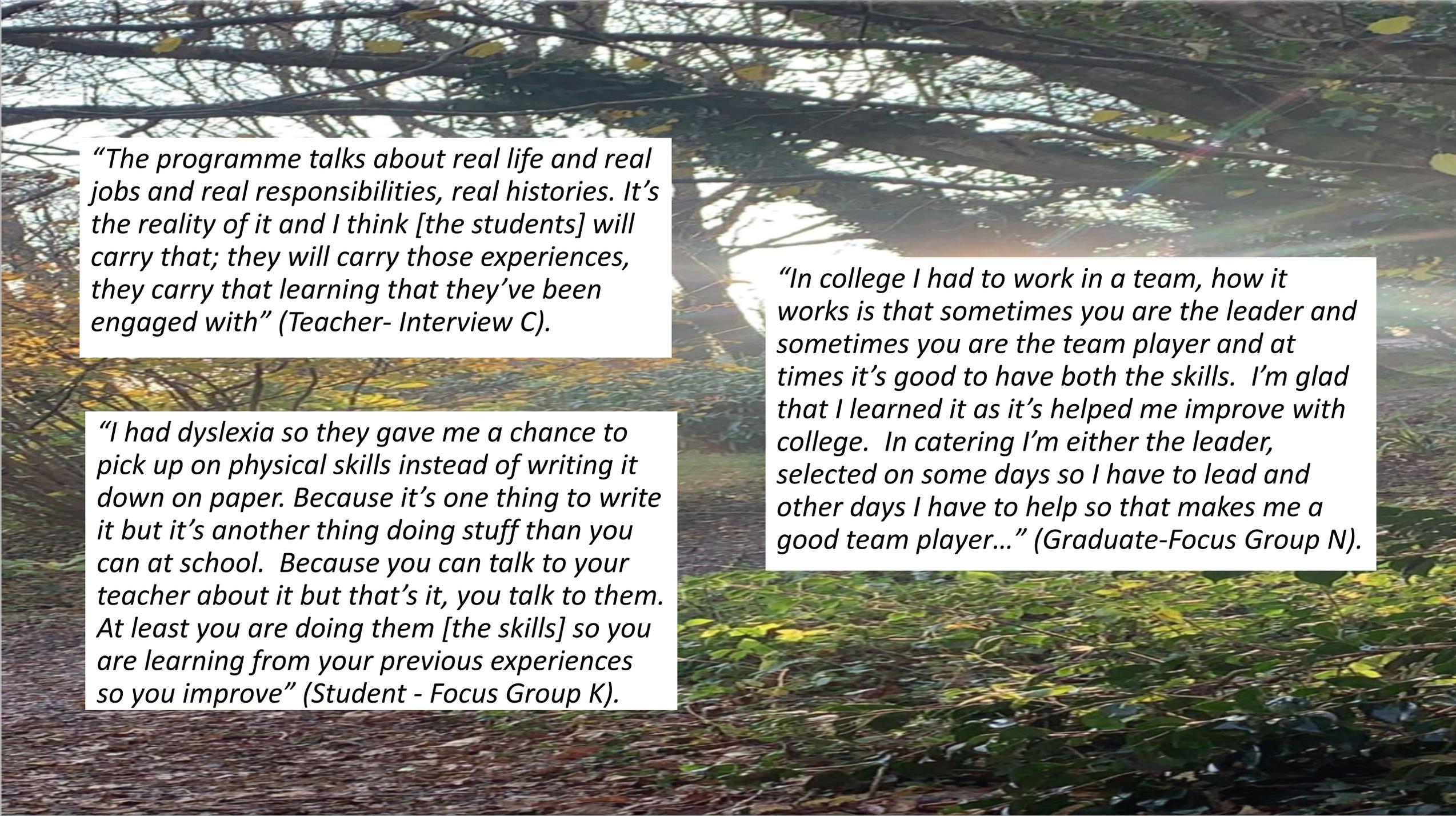


*“I think [the programme] was a really balanced activity. It was amazing and it really helped me to improve my confidence. It helped me to improve my skills. It make me feel more comfortable in different situations. All of these things have really helped me find work. Not only that, it has really helped me develop strong relationships with other people, especially my family” (Ambassador – Interview A).*

*“I feel confident that I can achieve my goals because there’s been sessions that I’ve felt like I wouldn’t be able to achieve something in the session, like rock climbing before. I felt like I couldn’t do anything and then getting that sense of achievement afterwards. I know that I can work up to anything. I am much more capable than I thought and ready to push myself into the job I really want” (Student – Focus Group K).*

# Preparing young people for the future

- The transition to work from education can be a complex and challenging process and the transferable skills young people gain by participating in the programme prepare them for their future.
- The programme helps young people develop “conversion factors” (Robeyns, 2005) and understand how these factors mediate the transformation of commodities into valuable skills.
- The programme is real-world based, with one of the teachers reflecting on the link between the activities and real-world tasks, noting that the activities young people take part in are always about real jobs and responsibilities.
- Structural inequalities experienced by young people from disadvantage backgrounds, are assessed within the programme to ensure support is need based.
- Enabling young people to think about the future and identify careers (i.e. Marine Cadets) complements the capability approach which outlines the benefit of supporting young people to identify valuable careers (Egdell and McQuaid, 2016).



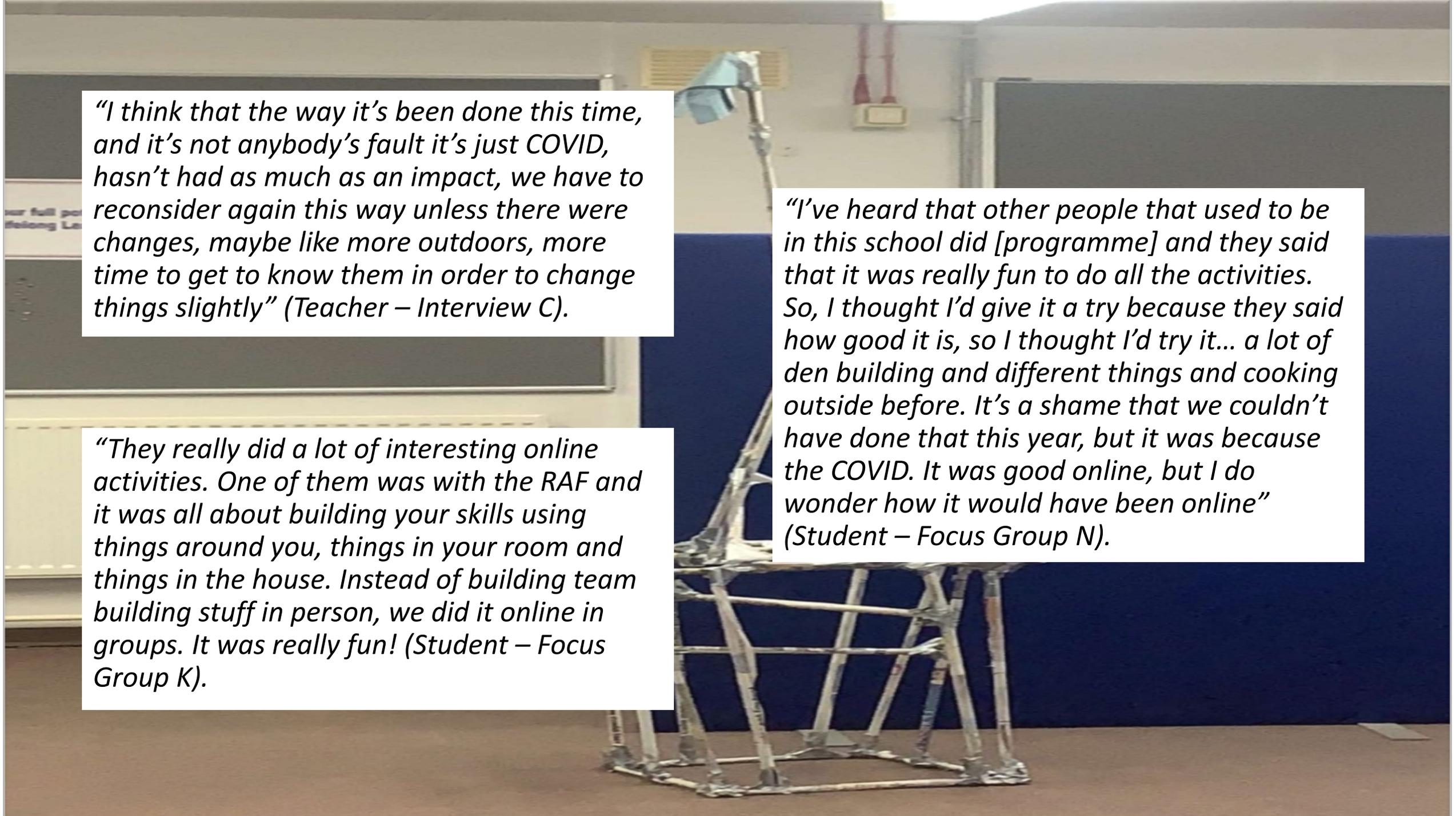
*“The programme talks about real life and real jobs and real responsibilities, real histories. It’s the reality of it and I think [the students] will carry that; they will carry those experiences, they carry that learning that they’ve been engaged with” (Teacher- Interview C).*

*“I had dyslexia so they gave me a chance to pick up on physical skills instead of writing it down on paper. Because it’s one thing to write it but it’s another thing doing stuff than you can at school. Because you can talk to your teacher about it but that’s it, you talk to them. At least you are doing them [the skills] so you are learning from your previous experiences so you improve” (Student - Focus Group K).*

*“In college I had to work in a team, how it works is that sometimes you are the leader and sometimes you are the team player and at times it’s good to have both the skills. I’m glad that I learned it as it’s helped me improve with college. In catering I’m either the leader, selected on some days so I have to lead and other days I have to help so that makes me a good team player...” (Graduate-Focus Group N).*

# Innovative delivery to ensure service continuity

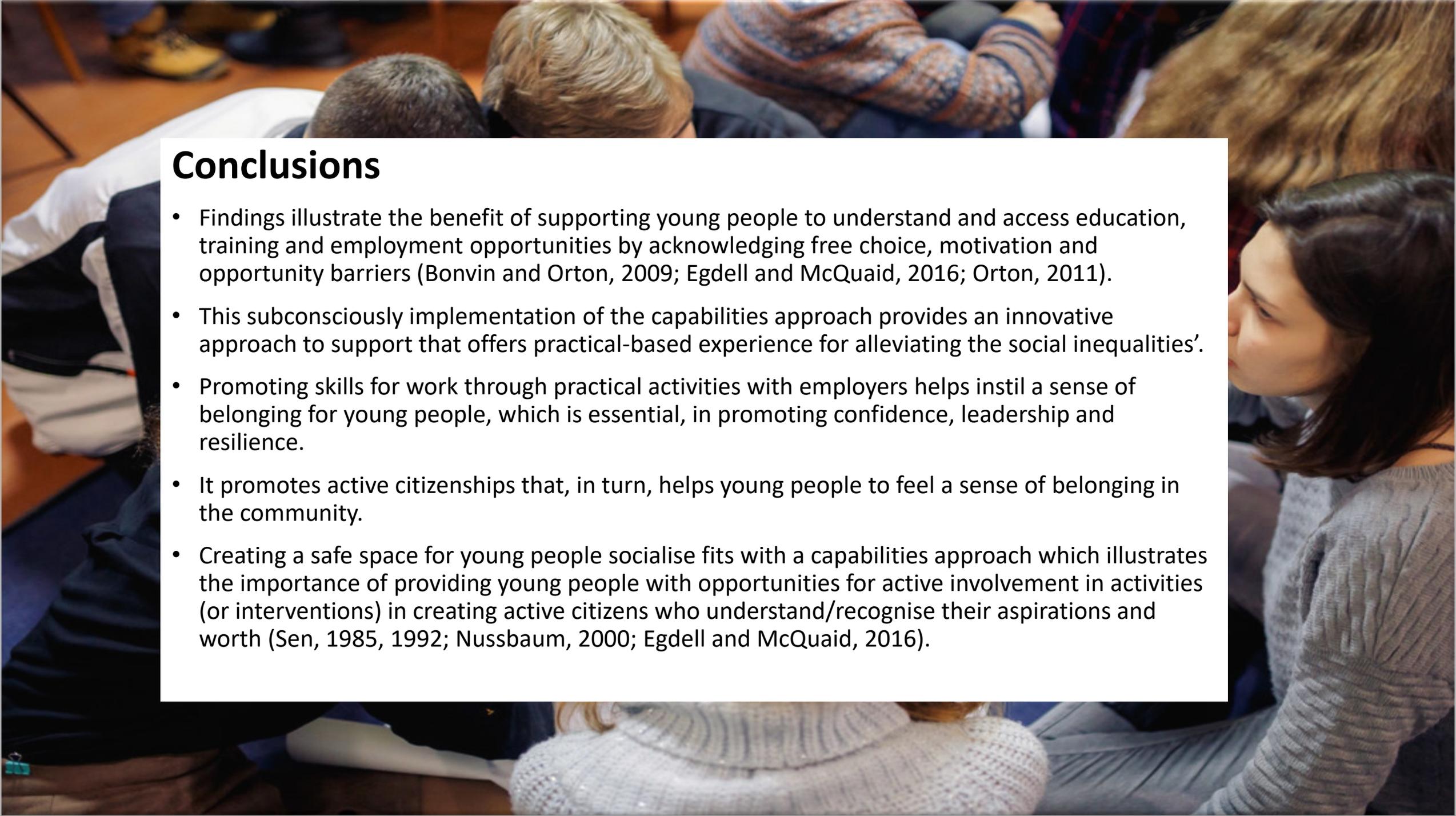
- The rapidly changing landscape presented by COVID-19 had a “devastating” impact on young people (Harris and Goodfellow, 2021), with limited in-person support exasperating pre-existing vulnerabilities.
- Challenges presented by COVID-19 led the organisation to develop innovative approaches to delivering youth sessions with virtual sessions (co-created with employers including the RAF).
- Virtual sessions kept students engaged in the programme however the organisation reinstated in-person sessions for students once lockdown restrictions were lifted.
- Young people engaged in the programme discussed the benefits of online sessions during the pandemic, with the online team building and social networking exercises viewed positively. However young people were keen to return to in-person sessions, with emphasis on spending time with peers in weekly sessions.
- Creating a safe space for young people socialise fits with a capabilities approach which illustrates the importance of providing young people with opportunities for active involvement in activities (or interventions) in creating active citizens who understand/recognise their aspirations and worth (Sen, 1985).

A photograph of a classroom or workshop area. In the foreground, there is a desk with a blue lamp. The background features a blue wall and a white door. The text is overlaid on the image in white boxes.

*“I think that the way it’s been done this time, and it’s not anybody’s fault it’s just COVID, hasn’t had as much as an impact, we have to reconsider again this way unless there were changes, maybe like more outdoors, more time to get to know them in order to change things slightly” (Teacher – Interview C).*

*“They really did a lot of interesting online activities. One of them was with the RAF and it was all about building your skills using things around you, things in your room and things in the house. Instead of building team building stuff in person, we did it online in groups. It was really fun! (Student – Focus Group K).*

*“I’ve heard that other people that used to be in this school did [programme] and they said that it was really fun to do all the activities. So, I thought I’d give it a try because they said how good it is, so I thought I’d try it... a lot of den building and different things and cooking outside before. It’s a shame that we couldn’t have done that this year, but it was because the COVID. It was good online, but I do wonder how it would have been online” (Student – Focus Group N).*

A group of young people are sitting on the floor in a circle, engaged in an activity. The image is partially obscured by a white text box in the center. The people are wearing casual clothing, and the setting appears to be an indoor space with a wooden floor.

## Conclusions

- Findings illustrate the benefit of supporting young people to understand and access education, training and employment opportunities by acknowledging free choice, motivation and opportunity barriers (Bonvin and Orton, 2009; Egdell and McQuaid, 2016; Orton, 2011).
- This subconsciously implementation of the capabilities approach provides an innovative approach to support that offers practical-based experience for alleviating the social inequalities’.
- Promoting skills for work through practical activities with employers helps instil a sense of belonging for young people, which is essential, in promoting confidence, leadership and resilience.
- It promotes active citizenships that, in turn, helps young people to feel a sense of belonging in the community.
- Creating a safe space for young people socialise fits with a capabilities approach which illustrates the importance of providing young people with opportunities for active involvement in activities (or interventions) in creating active citizens who understand/recognise their aspirations and worth (Sen, 1985, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000; Egdell and McQuaid, 2016).

Thank you for listening!

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