

# Youth First Rwanda Realist Evaluation Summary Report

September 2025

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## Project Background

WorldBeing's **Youth First Rwanda (YFR)** program is a school-based resilience and health intervention designed to strengthen emotional wellbeing and improve educational outcomes among adolescents (ages 13–15) in government-supported lower secondary schools. The program uses a **training-of-trainers model** and a structured curriculum that adapts global evidence and best practices from emotional resilience, positive psychology, social-emotional learning, and conflict resolution into activities and materials tailored for Rwandan youth. YFR was piloted in 2020 and formally launched in 50 schools across six districts in 2021. In 2022, it expanded to five additional schools in a seventh district, with the long-term goal of embedding wellbeing programming within Rwanda's national education system.

## Study Purpose

In the 2022–23 academic year, WorldBeing launched a study to (1) measure YFR's impact on students with a focus on **agency** as the key mechanism linking program activities to wellbeing and school outcomes; and (2) explore how, why, and for whom the program works. In 2023–24, an additional round of data collection was added to assess YFR's longer-term impacts on students' wellbeing and education outcomes, as well as its effects on teachers. Findings from this research informed program refinement and provided evidence to guide replication and scale up of YFR in Rwanda and other low- and middle-income countries.

## Research Design

The study employed a **realist evaluation**, a theory-driven approach that seeks to explain not only whether an intervention works, but also **how, why, and under what conditions** it produces outcomes. The evaluation began with the development of an initial program theory, based on prior studies, program documentation, and input from program designers and implementers (see Figure 1).



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The second phase tested this theory through a **mixed-methods design**. For the quantitative component, baseline and endline surveys were conducted with Senior 1 (grade 7) students in 50 YFR schools and 50 comparable non-YFR schools. For the qualitative component, focus group discussions were held with students and in-depth interviews with teachers and school leaders in a subsample of nine YFR schools.

Building on these findings, WorldBeing launched a **follow-up study** to extend theory testing. This phase again used a mixed-methods approach, beginning with student focus group discussions in nine YFR and nine comparable schools. It was followed by an additional round of surveys with the same cohort of students across all 100 schools (50 YFR and 50 non-YFR) and a new teacher survey with Senior 1 teachers in those schools.

## Key Findings

### **YFR strengthened students' agency skills.**

Survey data from the 2023 endline showed that students in YFR schools made significantly greater gains than comparison students in knowledge of core social-emotional skills—planning, self-awareness, emotional competence, communication, problem solving, and the ability to navigate challenges (see Table 1). They also reported greater confidence in using these skills (see Table 2). Qualitative findings reinforced these results and highlighted other short-term outcomes, such as increased understanding of gender equality and adolescent health. Together, these findings confirm that YFR is achieving its short-term outcomes.



### **YFR improved wellbeing and school outcomes.**

Follow-up survey data (2024) demonstrated statistically significant impacts on students' emotional resilience, coping skills, psychosocial wellbeing, peer and teacher relationships, gender attitudes, sense of belonging at school, time spent on homework, and grade progression (see Table 3-5). These results provide evidence that YFR is achieving its long-term outcomes. Taken with the 2022–23 evaluation, they validate the program's theory of change: strengthening students' inter- and intra-personal assets (agency) is a key pathway to improved wellbeing and educational outcomes.



**YFR cultivates higher-order psychosocial skills with lasting impact.**

Qualitative findings showed that YFR students not only shared the same foundational skills as their peers but also demonstrated more advanced and nuanced abilities. They articulated layered understandings of social challenges, identified a wider range of resources, proposed more innovative and goal-oriented solutions, expressed stronger awareness of gender inequalities, and described more reflective study habits and stronger teacher relationships. These differences remained evident six months after program completion, underscoring YFR's potential for lasting impact. Importantly, the findings also revealed that conventional measurement tools may not fully capture these higher-order skills, highlighting the need for future evaluations to use approaches that detect nuanced changes rather than only foundational competencies.



**YFR strengthened teacher capacity.** Teacher survey data from the follow-up showed statistically significant improvements in knowledge of agency skills, confidence in using these skills, emotional resilience, and knowledge of facilitation among teachers in YFR schools relative to teachers in non-YFR schools (see Table 6). Observation data also confirmed that teachers delivered YFR sessions with high quality and fidelity. These teacher outcomes are critical, as they directly supported gains observed in students.

**Program impact varied across districts.** Positive effects were most frequent in Kayonza, Musanze, and Rulindo, where session delivery quality, support from Head Teachers, and regular implementation support were particularly strong. These findings suggest that school- and district-level factors can amplify program effectiveness.

**We understand more how YFR works.** The realist evaluation showed that, for students, attending YFR sessions facilitated by trained teachers led to immediate gains in awareness of agency skills and gender equality, which then supported stronger peer and teacher relationships, greater school engagement, and ultimately, improvements in wellbeing and education-related outcomes. For teachers, training and ongoing support improved their facilitation and classroom practices, sense of teaching self-efficacy, and relationships with students—factors that strengthened YFR's impact on students.

**Contextual factors shaped program outcomes.** YFR was effective across all student groups but, for some short-term outcomes, was slightly more impactful for those more marginalized—older students, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and those not living with parents. Girls and boys both benefited, though in different ways: girls showed greater gains in gender attitudes, while boys participated more in extracurricular activities. On the teacher side, program success depended heavily on resilience, motivation, and support from school leadership, reinforcing the importance of high-quality training and mentoring, especially as YFR scales up in government systems.

**Not all assumed mechanisms and factors were central.** The study found that students' career and life aspirations did not change and were not central to other outcomes, even though skills related to aspirations such as goal-setting and planning did improve. Similarly, teacher gender equality attitudes did not show measurable change or significant associations with other outcomes, including YFR session delivery or classroom teaching practices. These findings warrant further exploration and have been removed from the revised program theory (see Figure 2). Some contextual factors—such as student home language, student reading ability, teacher demographics, or school infrastructure—had little effect on program outcomes, suggesting that YFR can succeed across diverse settings. At the same time, manageable teacher workloads, adequate scheduling, and supportive school environments remain essential ingredients for sustaining program quality and student transformation.



## Conclusion and Next Steps

This evaluation demonstrated that the YFR intervention has had a measurable impact on students' agency, wellbeing, and education outcomes. It also highlighted the positive effects on teachers, including increased knowledge and confidence in key skills, emotional resilience, and facilitation techniques. Furthermore, the study synthesizes several critical factors contributing to the program's success and offers valuable insights into how, why, and for whom the program works.

Collectively, the findings from all phases of this realist evaluation will enable WorldBeing to provide the Rwanda government with a detailed understanding of the necessary parameters for YFR to create a meaningful impact on students, even in complex, unpredictable, and diverse settings. As the program prepares for scale-up and institutionalization, these insights will be essential for ensuring continued success. The findings regarding the program's impact on teachers also offer a significant opportunity for advocacy with the government, demonstrating that the format, content, and intensity of the teacher training are effective. Moreover, the strength of the follow-up results for both students and teachers suggest that the program's positive impact will likely endure, even if some dilution occurs during government-led scaling.

To support the continued success, impact, and scale-up of the program, we have identified the following next steps:

1. Share the findings regarding YFR's significant benefits for students and teachers.
2. Sustain key implementation factors surrounding teacher training and support, as these can make a big difference for program impact.
3. Leverage support from head teachers.
4. Consider increased engagement with parents.
5. Conduct future research to explore differential mechanisms and explain outstanding questions.

These next steps will ensure that the program continues to evolve, expand, and make a meaningful impact on students, teachers, and the broader community, while providing a strong evidence base to inform policy and practice in Rwanda and beyond.



Figure 1. Initial Program Theory for Youth First Rwanda

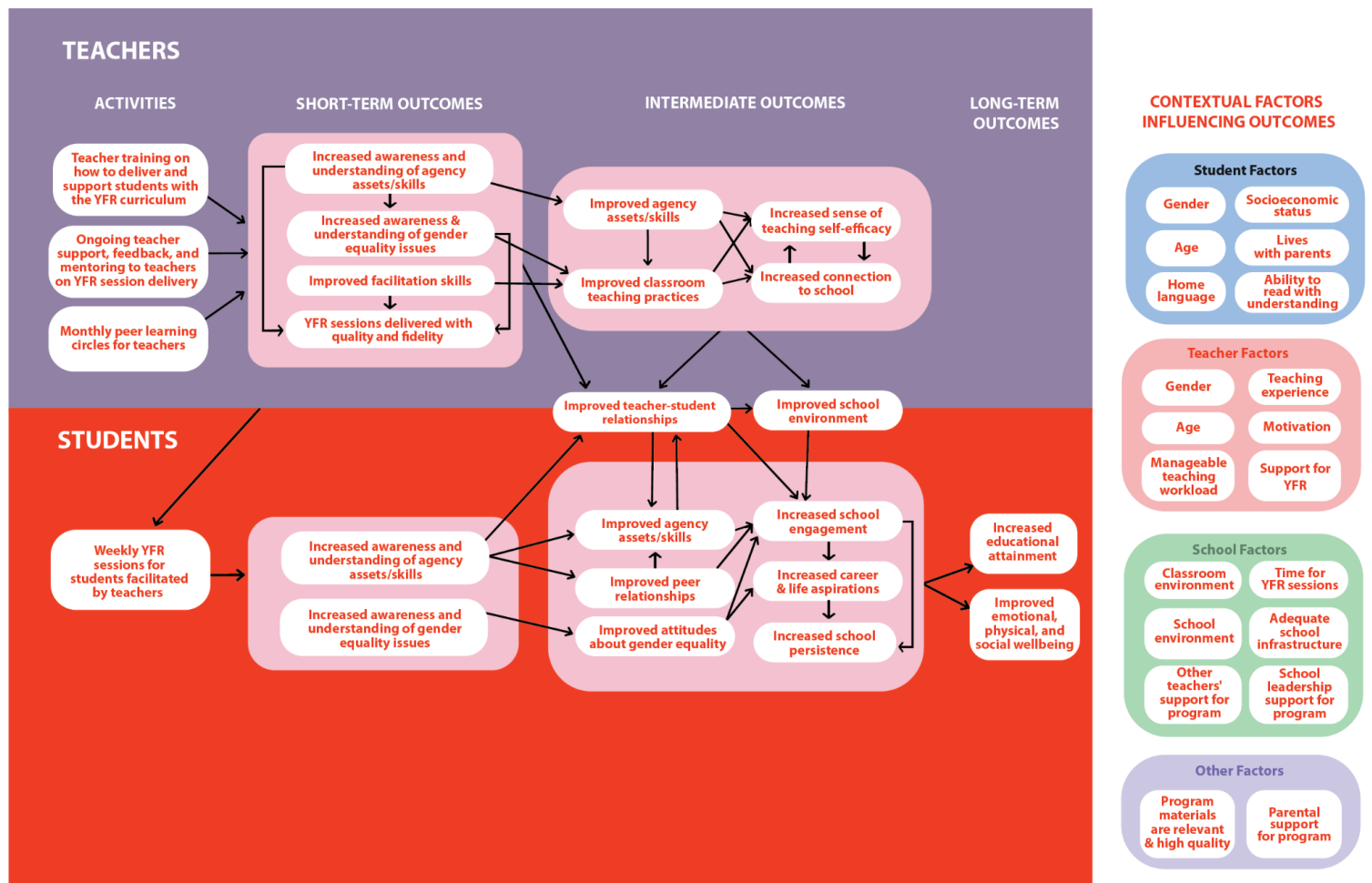
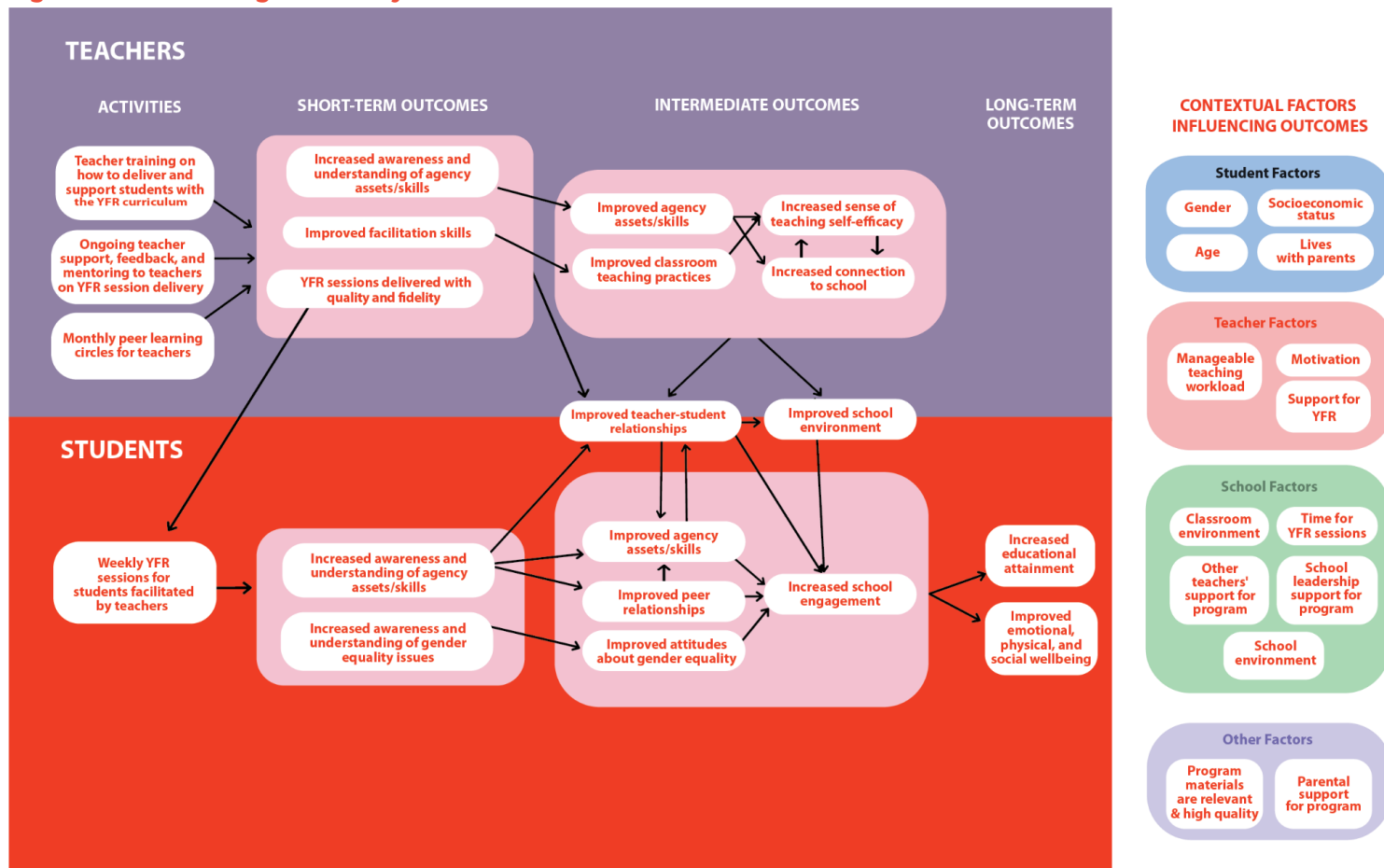


Figure 2. Revised Program Theory for Youth First Rwanda



**Table 1. Baseline-Endline Student Survey Results – Knowledge of Core Social-Emotional Skills**

Scale	Group	N	Baseline Mean	Std Error	Endline Mean	Std Error	Change	Difference	Sig.
SEL knowledge index (0-100)	Treatment	3502	69.52	0.33	78.35	0.32	8.83	2.70	**
	Comparison	3467	65.79	0.36	71.93	0.35	6.13		

Legend of statistically significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note: SEL knowledge index calculated by averaging the correct response rate on knowledge items related to identifying character strengths, managing emotions, facing challenges, setting goals, and solving problems.

**Table 2. Endline Student Survey Results – Confidence in Core Social-Emotional Skills**

Item	Group	N	n	%	Difference	Sig.
Can identify character strengths in myself and others (mostly or extremely confident)	Treatment	3753	3255	87%	12%	***
	Comparison	3693	2774	75%		
Can manage emotions in a healthy way during challenging situations (mostly or extremely confident)	Treatment	3747	2964	79%	7%	***
	Comparison	3686	2649	72%		
Can successfully face challenges in school (mostly or extremely confident)	Treatment	3741	3018	81%	4%	*
	Comparison	3692	2819	76%		
Can set a goal for myself and plan to reach that goal (mostly or extremely confident)	Treatment	3751	3372	90%	4%	*
	Comparison	3688	3167	86%		
Can solve problems myself or get help to solve them in everyday life (mostly or extremely confident)	Treatment	3755	3291	88%	5%	***
	Comparison	3696	3051	83%		

Legend of statistically significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 3. Baseline-Follow-Up Student Survey Results - Mean Emotional Resilience Index Scores**

Index	Group	N	Baseline Mean	Std Error	Follow-Up Mean	Std Error	Change	Difference	Sig.
Emotional resilience index (0-100) <sup>1</sup>	Treatment	2230	63.82	0.39	79.68	0.33	15.87	5.14	*
	Comparison	2000	62.79	0.45	73.51	0.35	10.73		

Legend of statistically significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>1</sup> Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale – 10. Campbell-Sills, L. & Stein, M.B. (2007). Psychometric analysis and refinement of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale: Validation of a 10-item measure of resilience. *Journal of Trauma and Stress*, 20(6), 1019-1028.

**Table 4. Follow-Up Student Survey Results - Mean Index Scores for Scales Measured Only at Follow up**

Index	Group	N	Mean	Std Error	Difference	Sig.
Coping skills index (0-100) <sup>2</sup>	Treatment	2155	81.02	0.30	5.09	***
	Comparison	1863	75.93	0.31		
Adolescent wellbeing index (0-100) <sup>3</sup>	Treatment	1292	86.77	0.32	5.97	***
	Comparison	1190	80.80	0.38		
Friendship intimacy index (0-100) <sup>4</sup>	Treatment	2153	84.04	0.41	5.76	***
	Comparison	1968	78.28	0.36		
Gender attitudes index (0-100) <sup>5</sup>	Treatment	1295	58.15	0.37	6.59	***
	Comparison	1162	51.56	0.40		
School belongingness index (0-100) <sup>6</sup>	Treatment	2719	73.17	0.43	9.57	***
	Comparison	2381	63.60	0.45		
Teacher support index (0-100) <sup>7</sup>	Treatment	3079	79.41	0.37	9.18	***
	Comparison	2748	70.23	0.41		

Legend of statistically significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 5. Follow-Up Student Survey Results – Frequencies of Grade Progression and Doing Homework**

Index	Group	N	n	Percentage	Difference	Sig.
Progressed from Senior 1 to Senior 2	Treatment	3111	2759	89%	5%	***
	Comparison	2783	2349	84%		
Spent 5 or more hours on schoolwork outside of school in previous week	Treatment	3198	1832	57%	8%	*
	Comparison	2888	1457	49%		

Legend of statistically significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 6. Follow-Up Teacher Survey Results - Mean Index Scores for Scales**

Index	Group	N	Mean	Std Error	Difference	Sig.
Knowledge of assets and skills index (0-100)	Treatment	122	75.06	1.46	18.96	***
	Comparison	56	56.10	2.41		
Confidence in assets and skills index (0-100)	Treatment	157	85.14	0.93	6.12	***
	Comparison	85	79.02	1.36		
Emotional resilience index (0-100) <sup>8</sup>	Treatment	151	82.60	0.95	8.03	***
	Comparison	84	74.57	1.72		
Facilitation index (0-100)	Treatment	154	64.61	2.68	25.20	***
	Comparison	85	39.41	4.27		

Legend of statistically significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

<sup>2</sup> 12-item Brief COPE inventory of coping. Carver, S.C. (1997). You want to measure coping but your protocol's too long: Consider the Brief Cope. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 4, 92-100.

<sup>3</sup> 16-item EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Wellbeing. Kern, M.L., Benson, L., Steinberg, E.A., & Steinberg, L. (2016). The EPOCH measure of adolescent well-being. *Psychological Assessment*, 28, 586-597.

<sup>4</sup> 8-item Friend's Functions subscale of the McGill Friendship Questionnaire. Mendelson, M.J., & Aboud, F.E. (1999). Measuring friendship quality in late adolescents and young adults: McGill Friendship Questionnaires. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 31 (2), 130-132.

<sup>5</sup> 11-item Roles in Society subscale from the Gender Equality Attitudes Study. UN Women. (2022) The levers of change: Gender equality attitudes study 2022. UN Women.

<sup>6</sup> 5-item Classroom Life Scale. Van Ryzin, M.J., Gravely, A.A., & Roseth, C.J. (2009). Autonomy, belongingness, and engagement in school as contributors to adolescent psychological well-being. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 38, 1-12.

<sup>7</sup> 10-item Teacher Support and Attunement subscale of the Caring Student-Teacher Relationship Scale. Whitehead, J., Schonert-Reichl, K.A., Oberle, E., & Boyd, L. (2021). Development and validation of a measure to assess early adolescents' perceptions of caring student-teacher relationships. *Frontiers in Education*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> 10-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale – 10 (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007).