WINGS to Fly: What can be Learned from the Evaluation of a Programme for Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing and the Resulting Knowledge Partnership?

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Abstract

This article describes the partnership between Pathways to Resilience Trust and human services and social work educators at Griffith University during the evaluation of the WINGS to Fly programme in Queensland, Australia. WINGS is a professional development programme to support educators in early years services to improve outcomes for children from birth to five years of age. Designed as a strengths-based approach, WINGS encourages educators to bring a curiosity to their practice, and to notice the impact of their interactions and communication on children developing social and emotional skills. The pilot was examined based on realist evaluation principles. The findings suggest the training and resources provided to educators acted as facilitating mechanisms that improved their skills and capacity to support children's social and emotional learning and a greater sense of wellbeing. The learnings from this programme and the partnerships established laid the foundation for a more formalised knowledge partnership. This knowledge partnership extended to the development, implementation and evaluation of youth-oriented programmes based on the key concepts of the Neurosequential Model in Education to further explore

what works and how service models in human services are evolving, and in turn, influence social work teaching and research activities.

Keywords: *Early childhood; Social and emotional wellbeing; Self-regulation; Professional development; Realistic evaluation; Knowledge partnership*

Introduction

Child and adolescent mental health is an important issue in Australia (Centre for Community Health (CCH), 2018) because children's learning is seriously compromised when they are struggling with mental health issues and this leads to a range of longer-term problems. A recent report indicates that one in seven (13.9%) Australian children and adolescents aged four to 17 years experienced a mental disorder—attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (7.4%), anxiety disorders (6.9%), major depressive disorder (2.8%) and conduct disorder (2.1%) (Lawrence et al., 2015, p. 25). In addition, one in five Australian children are at risk of starting school developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the five key domains, closely linked to child health, education and social outcomes (Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2015). At the same time, increasing numbers of children in Australia are spending time in formal childcare settings, which have the potential to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing given the importance of the early years. In 2017, almost 1,261,041 (or 31.3%) children aged from six weeks to 12 years attended Australian Government Child Care Benefit approved child care services, an increase of 3.3% from 2016 (Productivity Commission, 2018).

The introduction of Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) and the National Quality Framework (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009) for the education and care of children include an explicit focus on children's social and emotional wellbeing. The EYLF states, "When children feel safe, secure and supported they grow in confidence to explore and learn" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20). For educators, there is an increased focus on their capacity to support children's social and emotional wellbeing, yet this focus can be a source of stress, in particular, managing the needs of children and parents (Davis et al., 2011).

One of the challenges to nurturing children's social and emotional wellbeing is the assumption that young children lack awareness of mental states, which makes communicating about early child mental health challenging. This challenge assumes that "very young children are not aware of, and do not understand, their thoughts, and emotions" (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2013, p. 24). This has led to the development of a plethora of programmes to support educators in the early years learning services and schools. Educators in the early years learning services and schools are encouraged to have deeper understandings about, and promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). These programmes included Be You, Emerging Minds, and the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Learning Hub. These programmes have resulted in robust

professional development (PD) including frameworks to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing in the education space.

For example, *Be You* is a national mental health initiative promoting social and emotional wellbeing for children and young people across education settings. It is a free, flexible, evidence-based online PD that provides, both individual educators and whole learning communities in the early years learning services and schools with tools and information to support children from birth to 18 years of age towards better health, mental wellbeing and managing life's difficulties (*Be You*, 2019). *Be You's* programme—grouped under these five domains mentally healthy communities, family partnerships, learning resilience, early support and responding together—aims to reduce the risk of future mental health issues among children and create positive, inclusive and resilient learning communities. Similarly, Emerging Minds (Emerging Minds, 2019) aims to strengthen children's resilience and improve their mental health and emotional wellbeing. It provides professionals who work with children access to a national web hub offering free online programmes and training, tools and evidence-based practice and information to support children's emotional and social wellbeing. While the above programmes are unique in their aims and frameworks, the evaluation of the WINGS to Fly (WINGS) programme emphasises the importance of enabling educators to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children and to implement evidence-based practice in early childhood education in the Australian context. This initiative was one of the first programmes developed by the Pathways to Resilience Trust based on the neurosequential model in Education. It laid the foundation for the ensuing partnership that developed with the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University.

In this article, we describe the partnership between the Pathways to Resilience Trust and human services and social work educators in the evaluation of a programme known as WINGS, and the resulting knowledge. This article is developed and co-authored between industry partners and academics. We draw on our findings from the evaluation of the WINGS programme to present what works, and how it works, when it comes to ongoing PD for early childhood educators. We will describe how this industry partnership has contributed to changes in the university teaching curriculum and research initiatives. A brief discussion is also included regarding how this partnership has further evolved with the development, implementation and evaluation of a raft of programmes including *Journey to the Island of Calm, Meet your Brain, Empowering Youth to Thrive and the Rewire the Brain* initiatives. Moreover, the opportunities this afforded for the dissemination of key findings, for professional development and university-led learning and teaching activities (e.g., student placements, summer scholarships) and for evaluative research for both honours students and academic staff are discussed. Initially, we present a brief overview of the WINGS programme describing the methods, theoretical base and phases of the study, including the basis of the partnership that was established in order to understand the underlying evidence-base and the key principles and theories that informed its development. We conclude the article with a brief discussion about how the knowledge partnership continues to inform knowledge transfer and research and development activities.

Development of the WINGS to Fly (WINGS) programme

The WINGS programme is designed as a social and emotional learning (SEL) evidence-based PD programme to support educators in the early years' services to improve overall outcomes for children from birth to five years of age including at-risk, vulnerable and traumatised children. Developed in 2014 by Pathways to Resilience Trust (Pathways), the WINGS programme aims to redress the assumption that children lack awareness of mental states, to enhance the pedagogical practice of educators in the early years and build relationships that support children's social and emotional wellbeing.

The concept of wellbeing is complex and multifaceted. However, we are guided by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018) definition of mental health as a state of wellbeing and Heyeres et al.'s (2020) conceptualisation of wellbeing from a whole-of-body-and-mind experience. Wellbeing is defined as a good balance between mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health and the foundation for leading a fulfilling and productive life (Heyeres et al., 2020; WHO, 2018). Statham and Chase (2010) have conceptualised children's wellbeing as multidimensional, incorporating physical, emotional and social wellbeing. Children's social and emotional wellbeing—thinking, feeling, resilience and coping skills—is integral to their overall health, development and wellbeing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2012). Indeed, children with high levels of social and emotional wellbeing are more likely to negotiate successfully physical, intellectual and social challenges during childhood and adolescence (AIHW, 2012). Thus, using a strengths-based approach and informed by neuroscience (Perry, 2006), the WINGS programme has a focus on providing educators who work with young children with knowledge, strategies, practical experiences and guidance in ways to interact with children, which build resilience and coping skills. Building resilience is especially important for children's social and emotional wellbeing given the changes that occur as children transition into adolescence and adulthood. It is considered necessary that adults working with young children need to recognise the importance of resilience and social and emotional wellbeing as critical to the ability of children to function, and to provide environments that encourage positive mental states and adaptive functioning (Shanker & Barker, 2018).

WINGS recognises the importance of interactions and communication, and the role of the professional learning environment in fostering the key learning components for children's social and emotional wellbeing. Specifically, WINGS fosters critical reflection by encouraging educators to reflect upon not "what will I do with children" but "how will I be with children?" As a PD programme, it uses workshops and mentoring to develop educators' understanding and skills, supporting their professional learning and development. The WINGS programme contains experiences and information about child development with a strong emphasis on brain development in the early years and especially the impact that trauma has on the developing brain (Perry, 2006, 2016).

Unlike Be You's flexible online professional learning package that does not need to be completed by a set date, WINGS training lasts for 12 (2 x 6-hour days or 6 x 2-hour evenings)

sessions. The professional learning associated with the WINGS programme draws on characteristics of effective PD for early years' educators. Participants in the programme can benefit from observing more experienced mentors or facilitators working with children. The programme includes coaching and mentoring for practical strategies and is used with educators to promote and support changes in daily practices that impact on the emotional climate and physical environment of the early learning services which, in turn, promote children's social and emotional wellbeing.

WINGS contains 10 modules developed in partnership with staff and experts in mental health and early childhood education, and directly relate to the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). The key intent of the experiences is based on the interactions and communication between adults and children to enhance the development of self-regulation and resilience and other dispositions (DEEWR, 2009; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008). At the end of the PD sessions, there are mentoring sessions in the services. Participants receive a manual, which contains practical strategies. Resource packs, including puppets and children's stories, are also used in the strategies provided. Unlike Be You framework, which allows educators and services to start their PD at the point that suits them best, WINGS has a deeper connection with educators through its PD, mentoring and modelling of practices in classroom. While similar programmes such as Emerging Minds, and Be You with only educators, WINGS works with both educators and children and focuses on their mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and resilience.

Methodology

The pilot of WINGS programme was conducted in 2016 and the evaluation was designed in concert with the development of the pilot. The evaluation was, therefore, formative and was conducted by the first author. WINGS included information about social wellbeing (AIHW, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2015; Seligman, 2011) and neuroscience (Perry, 2006). WINGS was piloted with five services in Queensland, Australia using realist evaluation and received ethics approval from the Griffith University Ethics Committee (HREC ID9597 WINGS: Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Early Years (birth–5 years)).

Realist evaluation

The pilot of WINGS programme was an opportunity to review the impact of the PD of educators within early learning centres. Traditional methods of review that focus on measuring and reporting programme effectiveness are not easy to administer and often provide little or no clue as to why the intervention worked or did not work when applied in different contexts or circumstances. The evaluation of WINGS using a realist evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) started with the principle that this programme works by enabling the participants to make choices. Choices are supported by providing participants with new information throughout the programme, a safe place to reflect on their interactions with children and resources to build social and emotional development in young children. The combination of reflection, information and resources are the mechanisms within the WINGS programme that explain how a programme leads to expected programme outcomes. Consequently, the decision

to use a realist evaluation—a theory-driven approach grounded in realism and developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997)—for the WINGS programme was to provide an explanatory analysis and discern what aspects of the programme worked. In other words, one of the tasks of a realist evaluation is to identify or ask the question: "What works, for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts and how?" (Marchal, Belle, & Westhorp, 2015, para.3).

Realist evaluation was developed in response to interest in understanding how interventions or social programmes work rather than providing success or failure assessment of their effectiveness (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation is useful to understand why an intervention produces dissimilar outcomes when implemented in different settings. It specifies what mechanisms (how people interpret and act upon ideas and opportunities presented by the programme) cause which outcome (intended or unintended consequences) and in which context (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The context pertains to for whom and in which circumstances (Cargo & Warner, 2013). Contexts are broad ranging and can include characteristics of the community, programming environment (e.g., resourcing) and participant (e.g., level of formal qualification and experience). From a realist evaluation perspective, the same programme (WINGS) can work in different ways for different participants, depending on context (social and cultural conditions external to the interventions). Therefore, we used a realist evaluation approach to ensure findings reflect theoretical understandings and empirical evidence, and focus on explaining the relationship between the context in which the intervention is applied, the mechanisms by which it works and the outcomes which are produced. The first step was to propose the hypothesised context-mechanisms underpinning the research while also acknowledging that each childcare centre differs demographically, socially, economically and geographically. The programme theory (or theories), the underlying assumptions about how an intervention is meant to work and what impacts it is expected to have were made explicit (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Realist evaluation seeks to build on initial programme theories, by testing and refining them. Therefore, the initial sets of programme theories are propositions, which span contexts, mechanisms and outcomes and drive the remaining aspects of the evaluation (Cheyne, Abhyankar, & McCourt, 2013; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Refer to Table 1, which provides a valuable picture of the theoretical model adopted for the evaluation and its application.

Table 1. Proposed Context Mechanism Outcomes Configurations for WINGS Programme

Theory Area	Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Children's social and emotional wellbeing	Children are reared in a partnership between parents and educators Communication strategies used by child care educators and parents affect children Educators are central to high quality	Educators who communicate effectively with children can change behaviours Children model their behaviours on those around them including other children, parents and educators	Effective strategies used will help children to experience competency in social and emotional skills Children demonstrate social and emotional competencies including self-regulation, cooperation, relationships, strong attachments Meeting National Quality Standards
Training of staff	Educator PD needs to be continuous and involve mentoring and resources such as a manual PD used practical strategies Child care involves relationships between educators and parents Educators need to be confidence and knowledgeable about social and emotional wellbeing	Experiential learning is important to creating change in practice. PD workshops included opportunities to practical strategies. Continuity of PD programme is enhanced if multiple workshops, training manuals and mentoring sessions are included.	Educators with access to high quality training are less likely to burn out and have better emotional health and this impacts on children Educators using effective strategies enhance children sense of wellbeing and resilience as part of emotional and social development Recognition and reflection of personal circumstances influences social and emotional wellbeing

The phases of the project

Phase One: Identifying programme theory

Data collection

Programme theory may be derived deductively, inductively or formulated from stakeholders' mental models (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). The researchers interviewed the Pathways staff who developed the WINGS programme and additionally attended training sessions to ensure familiarity with the programme theory and the process of the interventions. The interview explored stakeholders' accounts of the rationale, expectations and key aspects of the programme. The staff member who developed the programme was also the facilitator of the PD sessions (and took an active role in Phase Two of the project). The interviews, supported by literature, provided data used to formulate the programme theories.

Results

Hypothesising the programme theory began with understanding the evidence linking emotional and social wellbeing of children with the capacity and skills of the adults in children's lives. As a result of Phase one, it was hypothesised that, in order for the programme to achieve optimum effectiveness, there should be adequate training and support systems available. Consequently, a manual was developed to support the training sessions as well as the follow-up mentoring sessions. An emerging focus for Phase two of the study was, therefore, to see if educators were confident and more knowledgeable as a result of the training they had undertaken.

Phase Two: Testing programme theory

Data collection

The PD programme was tested by the facilitator with educators recruited from four childcare centres and one kindergarten. The participants were identified through purposive sampling. Participants completed pre- and post-surveys that asked them to rate their knowledge and confidence in supporting the emotional and social wellbeing of children. The survey was developed from the THRIVE programme (Davis et al., 2011) which involved a partnership with Family Day Care educators to build capacity with mental health literacy and strategies. Based on the findings of Farrell and Travers (2005), it included items such as "How would you rate your knowledge about children's social and emotional wellbeing?" and "How would you rate your knowledge of who to contact and what to do if you are worried about the social and emotional wellbeing of a child in your care?" Items rate on a scale zero to 10 where zero = *almost no knowledge* and 10 = *very knowledgeable*. Additional open text questions were asked in relation to risk and protective factors and strategies to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Intervention–training workshops

Participants ($n = 58$) attended a series of four workshops (each three hours in duration) linked to content in the training manual. The workshops consisted of presentations, digital clips and individual and groups tasks drawn from the WINGS' modules. The facilitator asked participants to record their ideas at the beginning and the end of the session using the *most significant change* (MSC) methodology (Davies & Dart, 2005). The MSC is a participatory approach to monitoring and evaluating change. It involves gathering and analysing personal accounts of change.

At the conclusion of the four workshops, the facilitator began a series of mentoring sessions with each of the participants during the opening hours of the service. The facilitator kept a researcher's journal about her experiences in the workshops and mentoring sessions.

Focus group and interviews

In addition, there were focus groups interviews conducted with the participants who had undertaken the training workshops and mentoring. The participants comprised six directors,

49 educators and three regional managers. A total of 88% of educators had completed a Certificate III, Diploma or Advanced Diploma in Children's Services and 12% had a Bachelor qualification. Overall, the sample pool was less qualified for their roles than the national averages. The proportion of the sample that held a vocational education and training (VET) qualification was above the national average: the most recent data indicate that 70% of educators have a VET qualification and the proportion of the sample that had university qualification was below the national average of 30% (Irvine, Thorpe, & McDonald, 2018; Productivity Commission, 2011).

Specific areas of interest that were identified for further exploration are outlined in Table 2 and written as questions to examine the WINGS programme using the realist evaluation process.

Table 2. Questions to Use in the Realist Evaluation Process for WINGS

Questions
· What are likely to be the key decisions in implementing WINGS in childcare settings?
· What do we need to know in formulating programmes to nurture social and emotional well-being in children?
· Would it (WINGS) work here?
· Should the programme be targeted at educators, parents, and centre management? And if so, how?
· Should WINGS be adapted to local needs? Are we likely to need to adapt the programme over time?
· What pointers can you give us in making these decisions?
· How can we track the programme and keep it on track? (Modified from Pawson & Tilley, 2004)

The researchers interviewed staff facilitating the WINGS training and attended training sessions to ensure familiarity with the programme theory and the process of the interventions being examined.

Results

Participants recorded the responses about the most significant change that they had learnt during the training session. In sessions 2, 3 and 4, they were also asked to record the most significant strategy they had used in their practice with children during the period since the last training. Participants noted that understandings about the importance of communication strategies were critical. Overt emphasis on communication was imbued in each of the module topics. Further, each strategy included examples of the kinds of questions and statements participants can use to facilitate the communication. The facilitation style used prioritised the communication strategies, as participants were encouraged to try some of the strategies with each other. The topology of most significant knowledge gained by participants is presented in Figure 1.
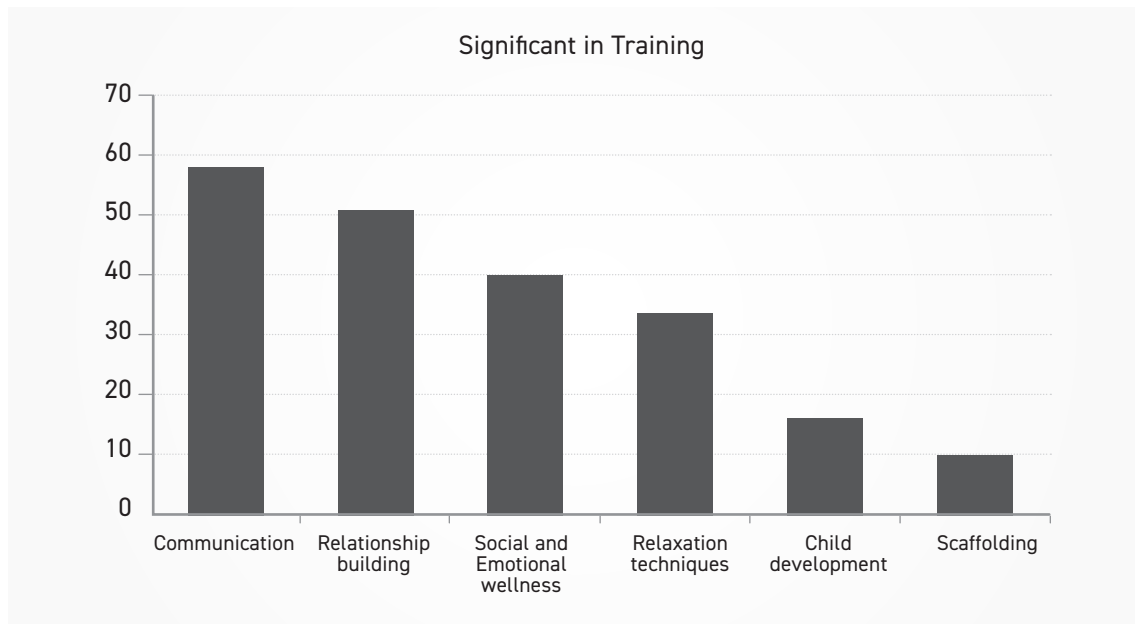
Figure 1: Most significant elements of knowledge gained during training. Drawn from participants' weekly responses about most significant change.

The programme highlights the importance of talking and listening to children and 35% of participants remarked about the importance of talking to babies. The following responses exemplify the importance of attunement and active listening:

> I have learnt to take more time with new babies when settling them. I understand the importance of making them feel safe and secure—I have been following this practice and it works. (Participant 49)

> I remember the trainer said put something in every child's emotional cup. This has been a goal of mine. I am more mindful of creating more pleasant nappy changing experiences. (Participant 52)

> I wondered why the child might be angry e.g., I am more aware of how we say and do things and the effect they have on children. (Participant 51)

The modules about feeling calm and relaxed made a difference to the manner in which they responded and defused rather than escalated the behaviour of the child. The modules were rated most highly across all the centres. Typical responses included:

> Much more tolerant with the children particularly the babies and toddlers. (Focus Group Two)

> Stop Calm Down was used by me and other staff to help us not burn out. Further it helped you to think before you took actions. (Focus Group Two)

The manner in which the educators built relationships and connected with the children had the second highest response. Relaxation and calming techniques were noted as a priority

of significance in the training sessions and it was the top action undertaken by educators working with all the age groups. Participants reported using the strategy themselves as well as teaching the children. A two-year-old child in site 1 articulated the strategy (Stop, calm down) to caregivers when he was faced with adversity.

> I think the mentoring was the most important part of the programme. (Participant 50)

The mentoring sessions provided feedback about the usefulness of the PD sessions as well as being a change for the facilitator to demonstrate strategies for the staff. In addition, participants acknowledged that the reflective process encouraged within the programme made them consider circumstances from others perspectives.

> I definitely think more about how I engage with children and not think the worst if someone does not acknowledge me. (Participant 48)

Mentoring strategies (Nolan, Morrissey, & Dumenden, 2013) have been found to be highly effective in supporting educators to connect theoretical information and up-to-date research with practice. Particularly, educators acknowledged that their understanding and confidence to use effective strategies had improved after the training programme. See Figure 2.
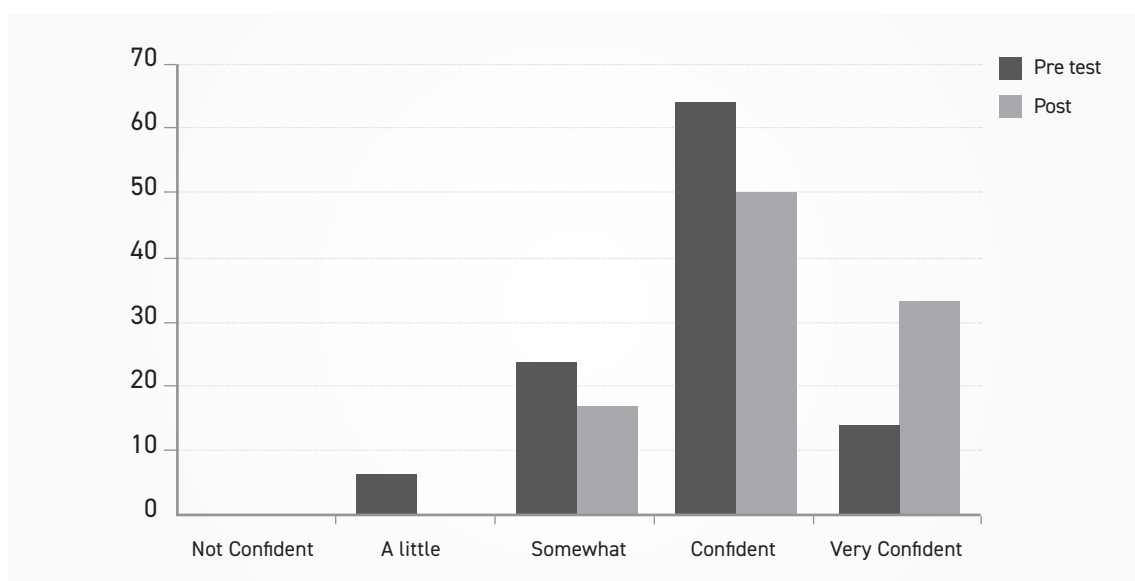

Figure 2. Confidence in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Further analysis of the pre- and post-survey scores noted that, in relation to *Knowledge* and *Confidence* about social and emotional wellbeing there was a significant positive trend. See Figure 3 and Figure 4, which provide point estimate of change with 95% confidence intervals.
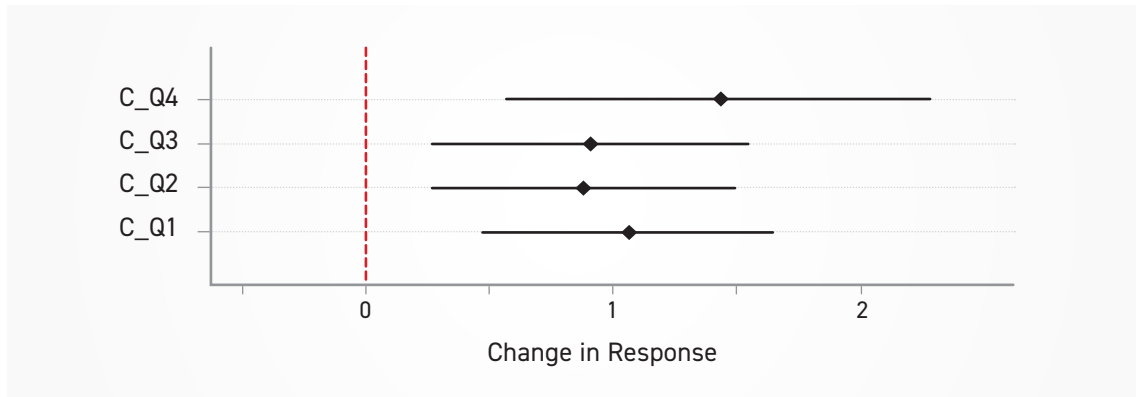
Figure 3. Change in confidence.

The educators were asked questions about confidence: C1—Overall how confident are you in your ability to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing? C2—How confident are you in your ability to identify children's social and emotional problems? C3—How confident are you in talking to parents? C4—How confident are you in talking with parents about problems? The educators particularly reported a change in confidence in communicating with parents about children's social and emotional growth, which is important to creating a trusting environment for children to build relationships with adults and other children. Strengthening this partnership is critical to creating the context for optimal growth
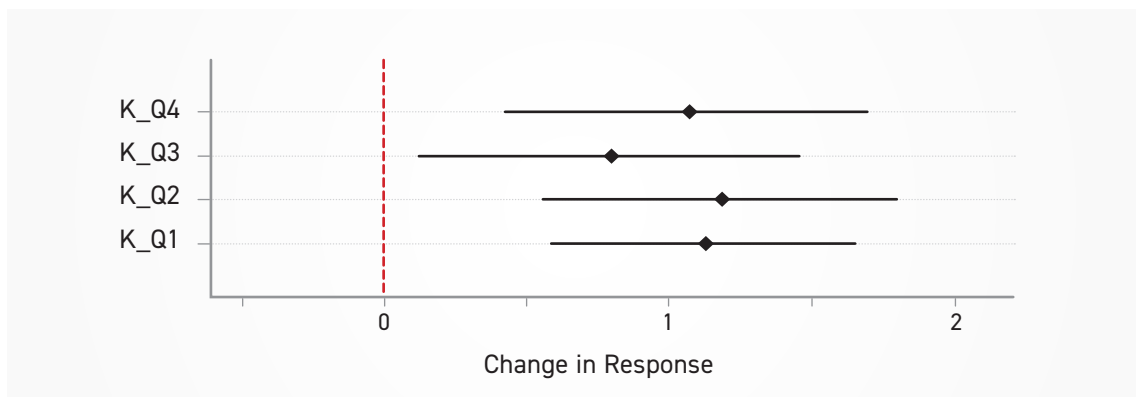

Figure 4. Change in knowledge.

In relation to knowledge, the educators were asked: K1—How do you rate your knowledge about children's social wellbeing? K2—How do you rate your knowledge about children's emotional wellbeing? K3—How do you rate your knowledge about who to contact if you are worried about children's social and emotional wellbeing? C4—How do you rate your knowledge about what to do if you are worried about children's social and emotional wellbeing? Educators created awareness about social and emotional wellbeing through sharing knowledge with each other and parents and more particularly helping children to recognise and regulate their feelings.

It also gave us the reasons why we do what we do. Things that we do are valued. (Focus Group Two)

This acted as a facilitating mechanism as children had altered behaviours and they were also able to support their peers to regulate their behaviours. These changes in behaviour have an overall positive influence on the whole of the group setting. Educators spent less time on managing behaviours and more time engaged in learning opportunities.

Phase Three: Refining programme theory

Analysis of qualitative data

The initial programme theories were compared and contrasted with the educators' responses in phase two synthesised to offer explanations about the programme.

Qualitative data, for example the analysis of the phase 2 data, the MSC, were coded and themed; in this instance with nine foci of understandings and seven educator behaviours identified.

Results

The collated findings from the research study are presented in the format of Context, Mechanism and Outcome associated with realist evaluation. The results are grouped into two categories: children's social and emotional wellbeing (Table 3); and training of staff (Table 4). These tables include more specific details about the intervention (Mechanism) and the context in which the intervention occurred and the associated outcomes.

Table 3. Theory Area One: Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Communication strategies used by child care educators affect children	Demonstration of practical ideas – small group discussions, story reading	Exceeding expectations in National Quality Standard Assessment
Educators are central to high quality	Supply of puppets and books that highlight emotions and social competencies	Children of all ages self-regulate
Children model their behaviours on those around them – children parents and educators	Explicit links to the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009) in training manual and workshops	More connected relationships with adults and other children
		Reduced separation trauma
		Adults state that they are trying to step into children's perspectives understand their perspectives
		Less stress demonstrated by children as they move through groups at the centre
		Adults aware of their own social and emotional wellbeing and how it impacts on their relationships with others
		Children aware of their own social and emotional wellbeing and how it impacts on their relationships with others

In the interviews and follow-up visits, educators noted changes in the children's behaviours and changes they had made to the physical environment. The separation anxiety between mothers and children reduced as children problem-solved about strategies to help reduce the discomfort they felt saying goodbye to parents at the beginning of the child care sessions. In one "toddler room", there was a profound change as a two-year-old who had exhibited chaotic behaviour and was rejected by the other children developed the ability to self-regulate. The educators used the strategies from WINGS to increase the toddler's ability to communicate feelings. This increased the sense of trust and safety for all children in the toddler room. Perhaps the impacts are best summarised by Participant 2:

> Within one week of using WINGS strategies, the fight/flight response usually used by [child] changed. [Child] started to use more descriptive communication. It was amazing to see a two-year-old focus. (Participant 2)

Table 4. Theory Area Two: Training of Staff

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Educator PD needs to be continuous and involve mentoring and resources such as a manual	Lead staff at early learning centre continue to provide support after the training sessions	Leadership within staff team
PD used practical strategies	Manual with information about children's development linked to practical ideas for interactions with children of all ages	Using the same professional language helps to unite the staff team
Experiential learning is important to creating	Training conducted onsite in early learning centre	Less reliance on PD about behaviour modification and opportunities to engage in topics such as sustainability
	All staff at early learning centre committed to participate in training and mentoring as part of WINGS	Staff more focused on learning opportunities rather than controlling behaviours

It appeared that the programme had a positive influence on the knowledge and confidence of educators regarding being able to support children social and emotional wellbeing.

Discussion

This research was undertaken to evaluate the contexts in which the PD programme WINGS could make a difference and an unexpected consequence was the strengthening of the partnership between Pathways to Resilience Trust and human services and social work educators at Griffith University. Overall, the findings suggest the training and resources provided to educators as part of the programme acted as facilitating mechanisms that improved their skills and confidence to support children's social and emotional wellbeing. The programme elicited positive change in the way in which educators communicated with children. The contextual

issues around the qualifications and experience of the educators did not make a difference to the way in which educators changed their own behaviours in response to the training as all educators gained knowledge and confidence. The findings were used to redevelop the university curriculum about practice with children. University staff revised course content and assessment based on the findings from the evaluation of the WINGS programme.

Research continually points to the quality of the care environment as being one of the leading factors in increasing the resilience and wellbeing of young children (Hall et al., 2009; Melhuish, 2016). By increasing the capacity and competency of the educator, we, in turn, can increase the quality of outcomes for the children. The quality of the care environments was enhanced by WINGS with the emergence of individuals who led the rest of the staff in using strategies. These characteristics may have reduced staff turnover and enhanced capacity to meet the assessment ratings of the National Quality Standard.

A positive outcome from WINGS was the impact on staff wellbeing and turnover. Staff turnover has the most far-reaching and potentially long-lasting consequences to the wider community as this affects the quality of the relationships between educators and children in childcare (Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, & Mauzy, 2007). Furthermore, high staff turnover can affect the quality of professional practice and undermine the professional culture (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). This can have a cyclic effect on staff as it contributes to levels of stress and depression on the employees who remain in the centre and can cause further turnover (Groeneveld, Vermeer, van IJzendoorn, & Linting, 2012). Experiences such as these may potentially undermine educators' capacity to provide their own personal wellbeing, which, in turn, affects their ability to provide quality care for the children in their centre (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). WINGS undertaken by staff teams contributed positively to staff wellbeing and staff culture.

A shortage of service leaders appears to create additional pressure; with educators sometimes promoted beyond their skills, experience and knowledge (Bretherton, 2010). Without ongoing mentoring and skills development, these leaders may subsequently "burn out" and leave the sector (Productivity Commission, 2011). The sequential model and sustained period of WINGS training meant it was not only necessary to have sufficient time to engage with the content but it also allowed participants time to use the strategies and "get and give" feedback to the facilitator. The model blending theory and practice in the training sessions was reflected in the whole programme. Further, it built the capacity of the service leaders to support the staff and each other.

The rationale for this evaluation was not to determine whether WINGS "worked" but to explore and explain how it worked (or not) in childcare services. On reflection, the use of a realist evaluation approach (e.g., Pawson & Tilley, 1997) appears to have been well suited to the purpose of this evaluation. Most notably, it enabled the identification of particular contexts and pre-requisite conditions for success. For example, it appears that the WINGS programme worked when there was a high level of motivation and commitment by all staff

members in the service. In addition, it worked when members of the staff team worked together—when there was a lead educator to help the staff translate the knowledge on a daily basis.

There were significant changes noted in children's ability to self-regulate. Children were using strategies that increased their language capacity to solve problems, particularly in their social actions. Observation data collected from educators about children's behaviours noted that there were changes in the physical environment as well as the emotional climate of the childcare classrooms. The more children were able to self-regulate and use language to communicate their feelings and solve problems, the more there was an increased ability to think and focus—which had a cumulative effect. The evidence of changes from children's behaviour signified changes in staff professional practices.

Limitations

Due to the complexity of the circumstances in supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing, this evaluation focused on the educators involved in the daily care of children. As an exploratory study, the findings provided valuable insights but generalisations are not able to be made about the impact of the educators' increased knowledge and practice supporting children's wellbeing. However, the findings can be used to refine university curriculum to suit particular cohorts of early childhood educators and other professionals. Moreover, the findings afforded opportunities for improving professional development, social work field education placements, and university summer scholarships and for evaluative research for both honours students and academics.

Impact on partnership development

Following the evaluation of the WINGS programme and given the success of the working relationships established, a formalised knowledge partnership contract was established with the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University. This included deliverables for a raft of programmes for children and young people, developed in accordance with emerging evidence about emotional and social wellbeing and the underpinning neuroscience. These related to the subsequent programme development, implementation and evaluation of Journey to the Island of Calm, Meet your Brain, Kaleidoscope, Empowering Youth to Thrive and the Rewire the Brian initiatives, as outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Extract of Other Deliverables from Knowledge Partnership Contract between Pathways to Resilience Trust and Griffith University

Partnership Activity in Focus	Deliverables
Develop tools to support the evaluation of the impact of the Journey to the Island of Calm	Selection and administration of evaluation tools PILOT: Interviews of staff and analysis of children responses at Woodridge North State School Writing of program logic and evaluation plan – submitted to AIFS Expert Panel Evaluation in conjunction with at Leichardt SS Evaluation Report – AIFS
Develop tools to support the evaluation of the impact of the Meet Your Brain (originally the Resilient Brain)	Selection and administration of evaluation tools Analysis of student pre and post responses Interviews of staff
Develop tools to support the evaluation of the impact of Kaleidoscope	Selection and administration of evaluation tools
Develop tools to support the evaluation of the impact of the Empowering Youth to Thrive Project.	Selection and administration of evaluation tools Training of staff to use the COCR model to engage with participants in the development of the project and at the end of the project
Establish research protocols and ethics for the evaluation of the Rewire the Brain program	Meeting with Stronger Brains and Pathways to develop research protocols and ethics application Selection and administration of evaluation tools Preparation of evaluation report for DSS

In addition to the stated deliverables and reporting of evaluation findings to funding agencies and the Pathways to Resilience Trust, the resulting knowledge partnership has led to improved opportunities for university students and to multiple academic publications. It has led to summer scholarship and honours dissertations and co-authored publications with Pathways staff, and co-presentations at state, national and international conferences; participation in national expert advisory panels; the incorporation of programme examples in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and curriculum; as well as opportunities for undergraduate and postgraduate field education placements. Consistent with the intent of the knowledge partnership, the focus on disseminating knowledge and programme learnings in addition to building capacity for reflective practice, evaluative research and other continuous improvement activities has enabled multiple benefits and opportunities for both parties to the agreement to be realised. Perhaps more important have been the opportunities and benefits extended to broader stakeholder groups, including tertiary students, educators and service providers as well as the opportunities for delivery of PD across the globe. The partnership has been particularly

valuable in developing and disseminating knowledge about the application of emerging service models in novel contexts and different populations, for instance with vulnerable young people and young adults at risk of long-term unemployment (e.g., Keegan, Cartmel, & Harris, 2020).

Conclusion

This article contributes to research and evaluation in relation to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy, and to the development of professional learning and knowledge partnership. The evaluation of the WINGS programme has demonstrated how the programme's intervention is delivered and implemented. It has also shown why the context of the childcare setting influences how the programme works. In particular, the knowledge of the educators and their capacity to use effective strategies within their programmes to achieve the most benefits were examined. As such, PD of educators should focus on deepening the knowledge of educators about children's development and the characteristics of adult/child communication. However, it has also demonstrated the significance of partnerships between the community and universities to disseminate research and practice.

Children's social and emotional wellbeing is linked to their communication and self-regulation skills. These capabilities provide the foundation on which further skills such as literacy and numeracy develop (Melhuish, 2016). Adults working with children in group settings need to be confident and have a deep understanding of brain development in the early years and the way their practices can support children's resilience and wellbeing.

To this end, the partnership between the Pathways to Resilience Trust and human services and social work educators at Griffith University has played a vital role in identifying and disseminating knowledge, particularly in relation to emerging service models designed to meet the needs of children and young people, and the application of the Neurosequential Model in different education contexts. WINGS to Fly laid the foundation for this partnership and for the organisations' further investments in the development and trialling of innovative models, in particular, with adolescents with diverse and complex needs. It would, therefore, appear that the partnership itself has now also gained its wings with knowledge transfer activities extending across Australia and internationally through a mix of intervention strategies in childcare settings, conference presentations, workshops and publications.

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