

REALIST EVALUATION:

Tracing the Evolution of Realist Program Theory over the
Years of the Resilient Futures Project in South Australia

Bronny Walsh, September 2018

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- Agencies and young people involved in the Resilient Futures Project in SA
- Dr Gill Westhorp and Daniel Ball of Community Matters

This Presentation

- demonstrates how Realist Evaluation can respond to transformation within programs.
- traces the evolution of the evaluation, demonstrating the changes in program theory, evaluation questions and methods required as the program evolved.
- Presents key findings from the final round of the evaluation.

Resilient Futures Project

- to improve **wellbeing for young people** from disadvantaged communities by delivering, through schools and youth sector agencies, resiliency training and mentoring support for young people.
- The **evaluation** was intended to **inform future decision-making** about the Resilient Futures program, and to inform program improvement over time.
- A **realist evaluation methodology** was selected because it was a learning-oriented methodology which could contribute to program refinement, while also explaining different outcomes for different sub-groups and in different contexts.

The Program

- The program was being developed, tested and refined during the evaluation.
- Resilient Futures was designed as a large scale program for multiple partners and 850 young people.
- The program model moved from delivery of a prescriptive pre-designed program in which high fidelity was expected, to.....
- supporting and resourcing the delivery agencies to adapt and use core materials in ways that were appropriate to their own setting. It became a more flexible multi-modal program that incorporated intentional practice as a means of maintaining program fidelity.
- This required a significant change in the program theory and a change in evaluation methods.

Why Realist Evaluation?

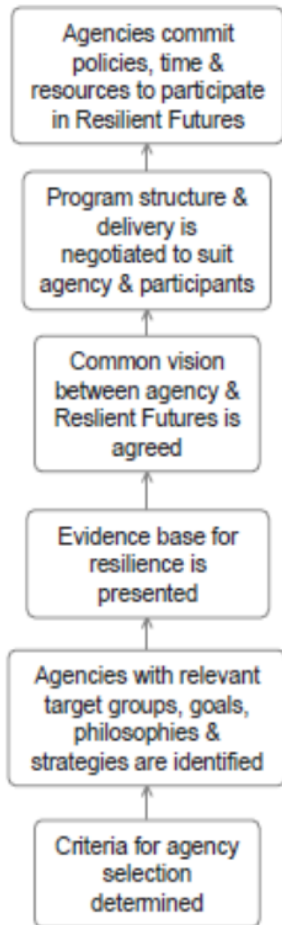
- It is a learning-oriented methodology which can support program refinement.
- It recognises that programs work differently for different sub-groups and in different contexts and provides a way of exploring and explaining those different outcomes.

Why Realist Evaluation, cont.

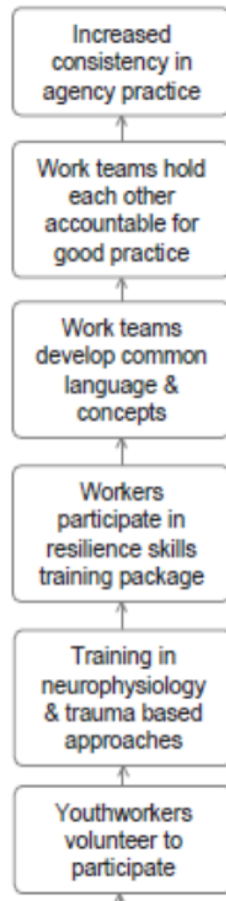
- “For whom does this work, in what contexts, in what respects, to what extent, and how?”
- Enables program personnel to improve the program design, adapt the program for different contexts or population groups, and change delivery modes while still enabling underlying mechanisms to operate.
- Iterative process, gradually developing and refining program theory through recurrent rounds of evaluation.

Resilient Futures - Overview model

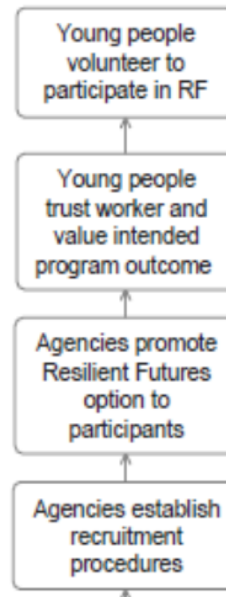
Agency involvement



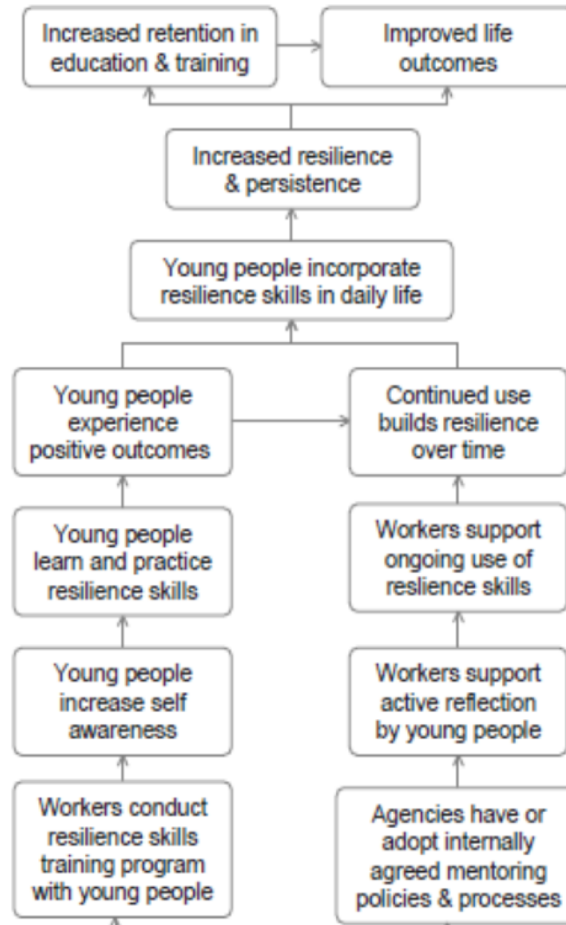
Workers



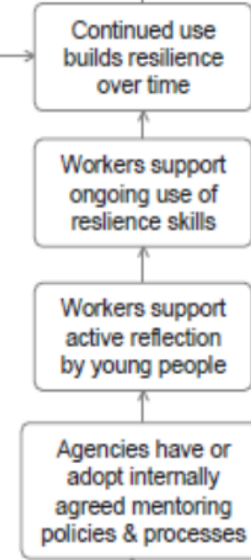
Young people's engagement



Resilience skills



Mentoring



Feedback and Change

Initial

- Faithful implementation of program model
- Minor adaptations only of content

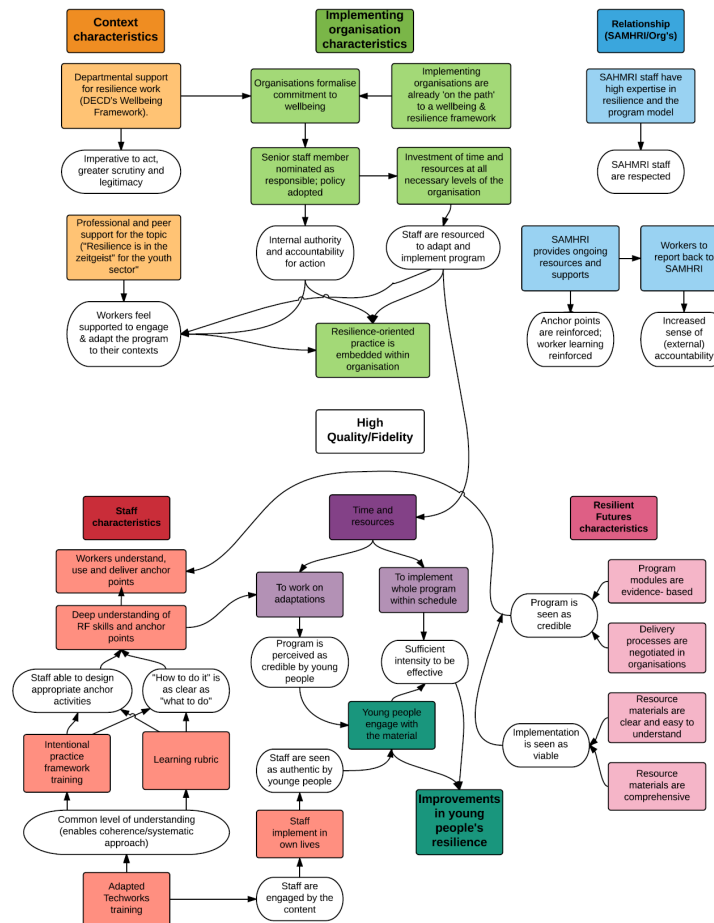
Adaptation

- Workers and agencies encouraged to become competent and knowledgeable in program content
- Actively adapt to their context and the young people they serve.

Quality Adaptation Process

Six categories of context were hypothesised as being important to quality adaptation of the program. These were:

1. Context characteristics,
2. Implementing organisation characteristics,
3. Relationships between SAHMRI and agencies,
4. Staff characteristics,
5. Time and resources, and
6. Resilient Futures characteristics.



Evaluation Questions – Young People

- To what extent and in what ways does participation in the Resilient Futures program impact young people's sense of subjective wellbeing, and how?
- For what sub-groups of young people is the Resilient Futures program effective, how and why?
- In what ways are young people's educational aspirations and achievements affected, in what contexts, how & why?

Evaluation Questions - Workers and agencies

- How and why do workers/agencies adapt the program model to fit their needs or the needs of their clients? How are the 'needs' determined?
- What factors enable or inhibit adaptation of the model?
- What impacts does participation in the Resilient Futures program have for agencies' work with young people, in what circumstances?
- What aspects of the 'Resilient Futures' program influence which aspects of youth agency practice, in what ways, and how?
- In what ways were workers/agencies supported by SAMHRI to adapt and implement the Resilient Futures program?

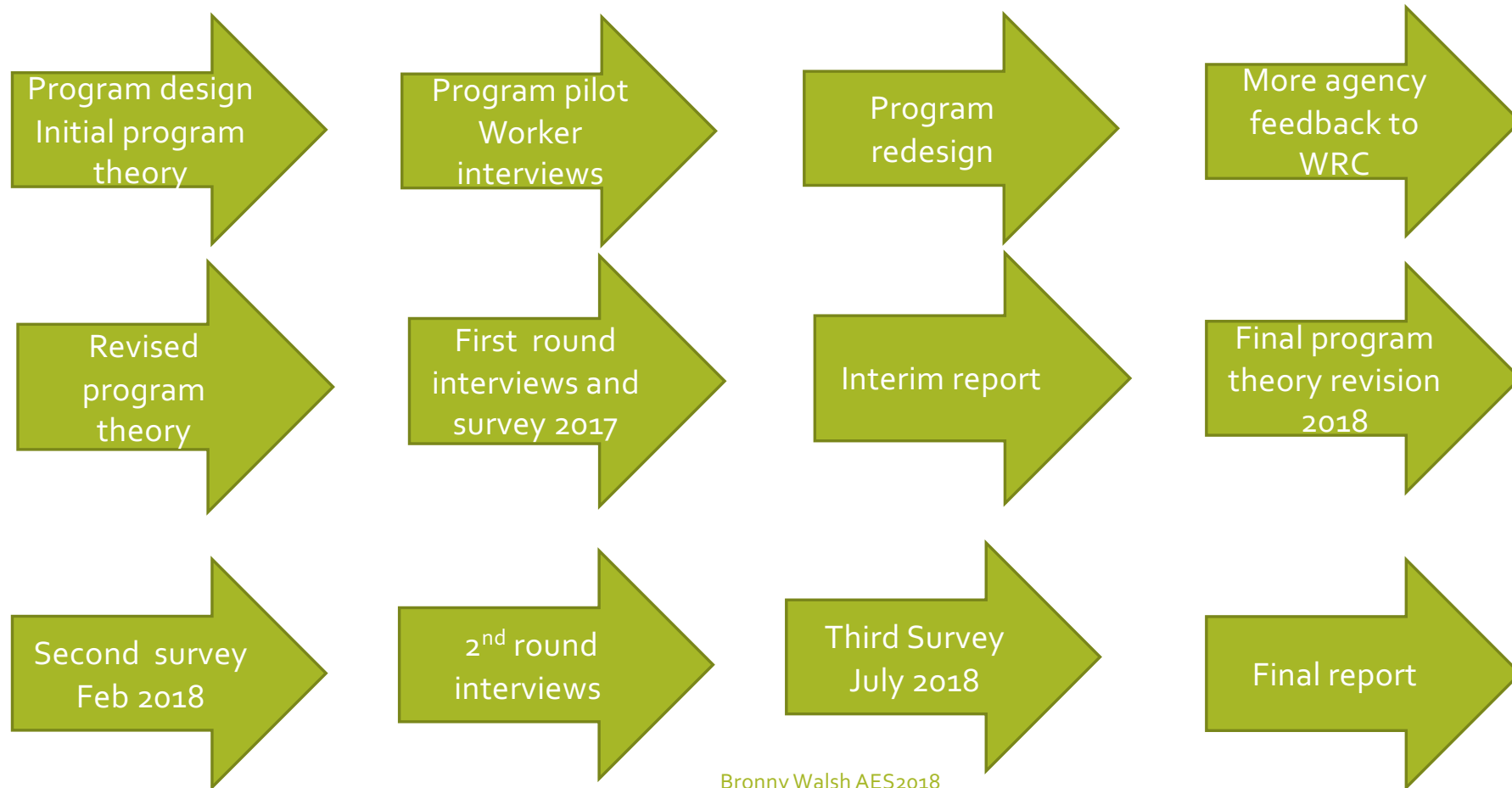
Evaluation Questions -Program model and contributions

- How do agencies go about implementing the model? Do different modes of implementation influence the nature of outcomes for young people, and if so how?
- Are the adaptations of the model in-line with SAMHRI's expectations? In what ways are the adaptations faithful or unfaithful to the intent of the model?
- Which 'switches' are covered, how, and how do workers ensure that they have covered the anchor points?
- Does the number of anchor points per switch (usually 4-6, in one case 10) affect the difficulty of teaching the skill? How do workers manage the different number of anchor points?
- In what circumstances does mentoring contribute to outcomes for young people, how and why?
- What impacts do different agencies' models of coaching, mentoring or case management have for which sub-groups of young people, in what contexts, how and why?
- In what ways do on-line resources contribute to outcomes for young people, how and why?

Evaluation Questions -

- How and in what ways do the following contribute to outcomes:
 - Common language
 - Intentional practice
 - Implicit and explicit practices (what is it that the best implicit practitioners are doing? What is the value of the RF skills and resources to “good practitioners?”)
 - What changes to program have negative impacts on fidelity to program principles and outcomes?
- What are the relationships between practice change and system/agency change?
- What is the added benefit of the coach/mentor relationship with young people to the outcomes for young people?

Timeline



Contexts and Mechanisms

1. Selective Targeting

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Existing knowledge of potential participants by staff Group delivery of program Selective targeting of young people who could work well together Selective targeting of readiness to change	Positive peer relationships	Reduced disruptive behaviour in groups
Existing knowledge of potential participants by staff Group and individual program options available Selective targeting of group or individual delivery	Good 'fit' between program mode and individual learning style	Young people enabled to learn effectively

Contexts and Mechanisms

2. Reinforcement

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Multiple staff receive training and discuss Resilient Futures in the workplace	Reinforcement of concepts/language for staff	Shared language and consistent agency practice
Multiple staff in the organisation are using the language/skills in interactions with young person	Reinforcement of skills/language for young person	Strengthened outcomes for young people.

Contexts and Mechanisms

3. Satellites

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
One or few staff within an office trained in Resilient Futures	No reinforcement of concepts/language for staff Reduced capacity for collaborative work	Reduced capacity for implementation
One or few staff within an office trained in Resilient Futures Trained staff member with high existing expertise	Personal commitment to positive psychology concepts Understanding of Resilient Futures skills and tools	Implementation within program operated by trained staff member, but not other programs in the site

Contexts and Mechanisms

4. Credibility and Trust

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
Workers use skills in their own life and are able to provide examples to young people	Increased credibility of and trust in workers by young people	Increased willingness of young people to engage
Workers use skills in their own life and are able to provide examples to young people	'If it worked for them, it can work for me' – increased credibility of skills/program	Increased willingness of young people to engage

Contexts and Mechanisms

5. Appropriateness of Delivery

Context	Mechanism	Outcome
One-on-one delivery for young people with high levels of anxiety, traumatic backgrounds or in crisis.	Safety (lack of judgement, do not need to expose issues in front of group)	Young person engages with facilitator and content.
Group delivery in trusted groups	Peer reinforcement, sharing of ideas 'Not the only one'	Improved engagement and learning outcomes Less sense of isolation, improved understanding of peers
Young people with previous negative experience with positive psychology	Implicit delivery (does not trigger previous experience)	Young people do not 'switch off', continued willingness to engage

Outcomes for Young People – 3 main groups

1. More positive young people, who are widely supported to take resilience skills on board and have the highest level of outcomes.
2. Young people living with a level of depression and anxiety, who still get the outcomes but may be slower to reach them and may need more support.
3. Those young people who are more traumatised, less mature, less confident and are not ready nor able to connect with the work and do not achieve the resilience skills outcomes.

