



# Getting to the value add

Timely insights from a realist developmental evaluation

Phillip Belling and Liam Downing

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**Phillip Belling**

Senior Evaluator  
Early Childhood Outcomes  
NSW Department of Education  
Adjunct Research Fellow, CDU



**Liam Downing**

Manager, Evaluation and Data  
Quality Teaching Practice  
NSW Department of Education

“Traditional evaluation models often do not lend themselves to the changeable and adaptive nature of working within innovations because they are not sufficiently flexible to capture the ongoing development in innovation, nor are they responsive to the immediate information needs of innovators and policy makers.”

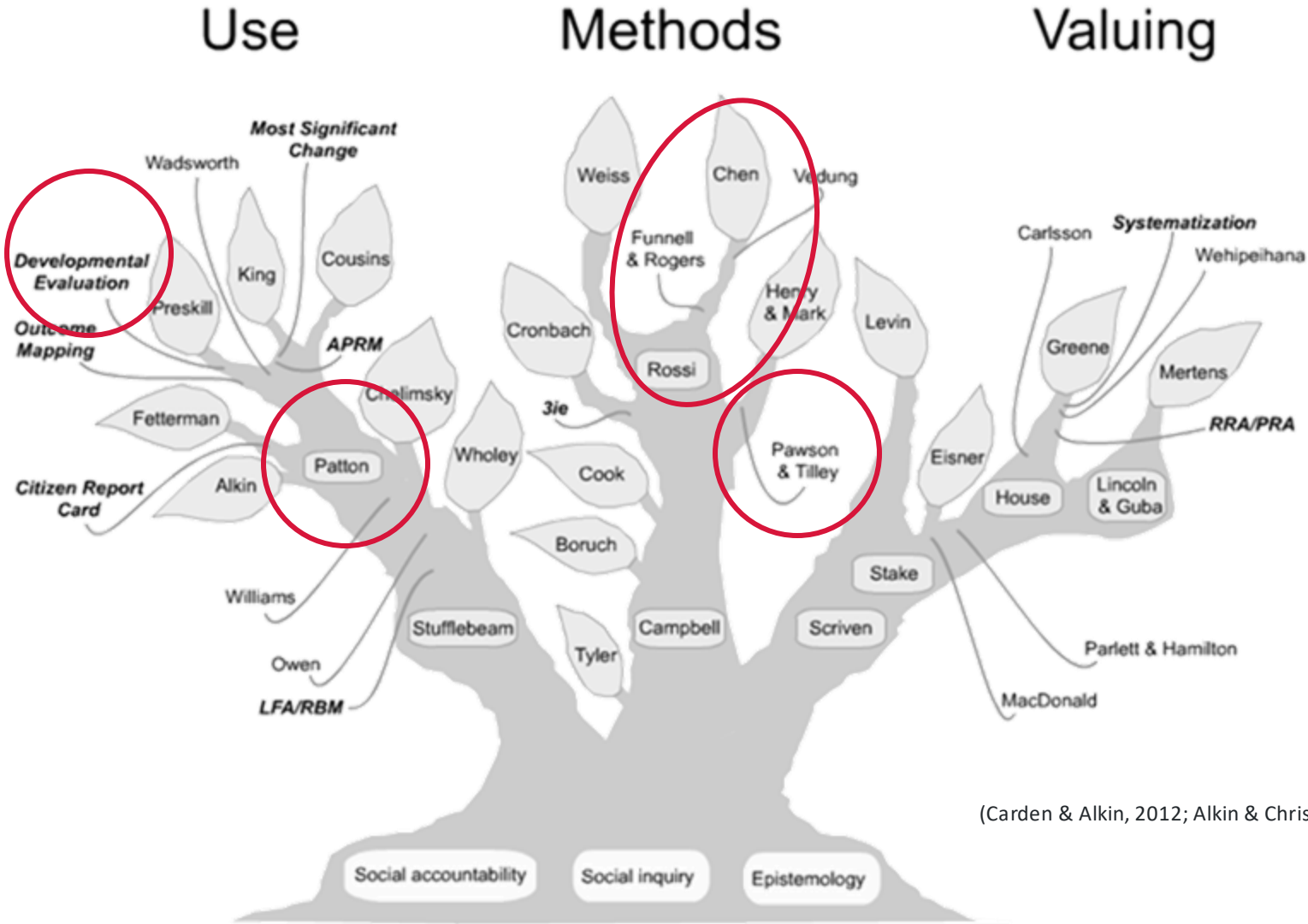
(Earl and Timperley, 2015: pp 34-35)

**Evaluating big  
innovation needs  
agility, timeliness  
and deep  
connections to  
innovators**



# Situating realist and developmental approaches in the theory

“Relationships between theories are represented in the form of an Evaluation Theory Tree with each of the main branches representing one of the dimensions: methods, judgment/valuing, and use. Each theorist has been presented on the tree on a branch that represents his or her main emphasis among these three branches.”  
 (Carden & Alkin, 2012)



(Carden & Alkin, 2012; Alkin & Christie, 2004)



## We need useful detail about in-context impact

*“Realist approaches assume that nothing works everywhere for everyone: context makes a big difference to programme outcomes. A realist evaluation asks not ‘what works?’ but ‘how or why does this work, for whom, in what circumstances?’ ”*

(Westthorp, 2014)



Requires understanding of a realist approach to causation (Tilley & Westhorp, 2020)

Time and resources required to do a good realist evaluation (Marchal et al., 2012)

Our work aims to support evidence-informed innovation, so timely insight is key



*“Developmental evaluation provides evaluative information and feedback ... to inform adaptive development of change initiatives in complex dynamic environments.”*  
(Patton, 2021)

# Design elements: Realist evaluation

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understanding to inform decision-making</li></ul>
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Realist questions</li></ul>
Program theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Context–Mechanism–Outcome statements</li></ul>
Methodology and design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To test and refine theory; to adjudicate between theories</li></ul>
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mixed</li></ul>
Instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Purpose designed</li></ul>
Data collection and recording	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To enable analysis</li></ul>
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intra-program, inter-context, according to theory</li></ul>
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consistent with methodology; includes refined theory</li></ul>

# Design elements: Developmental evaluation

Purpose

- Understanding to inform decision-making, as required to illuminate ongoing innovation

Questions

- Strategic and integrating questions to clarify ambiguity

Program theory

- Emergent modelling via theory of change articulating fundamental assumptions

Methodology and design

- Capture system dynamics, interdependencies, models and emergent interconnections

Methods

- Mixed ... a broad array of methods

Instruments

- Adapted, emergent

Data collection and recording

- Using data in a meaningful way to inform innovation in progress

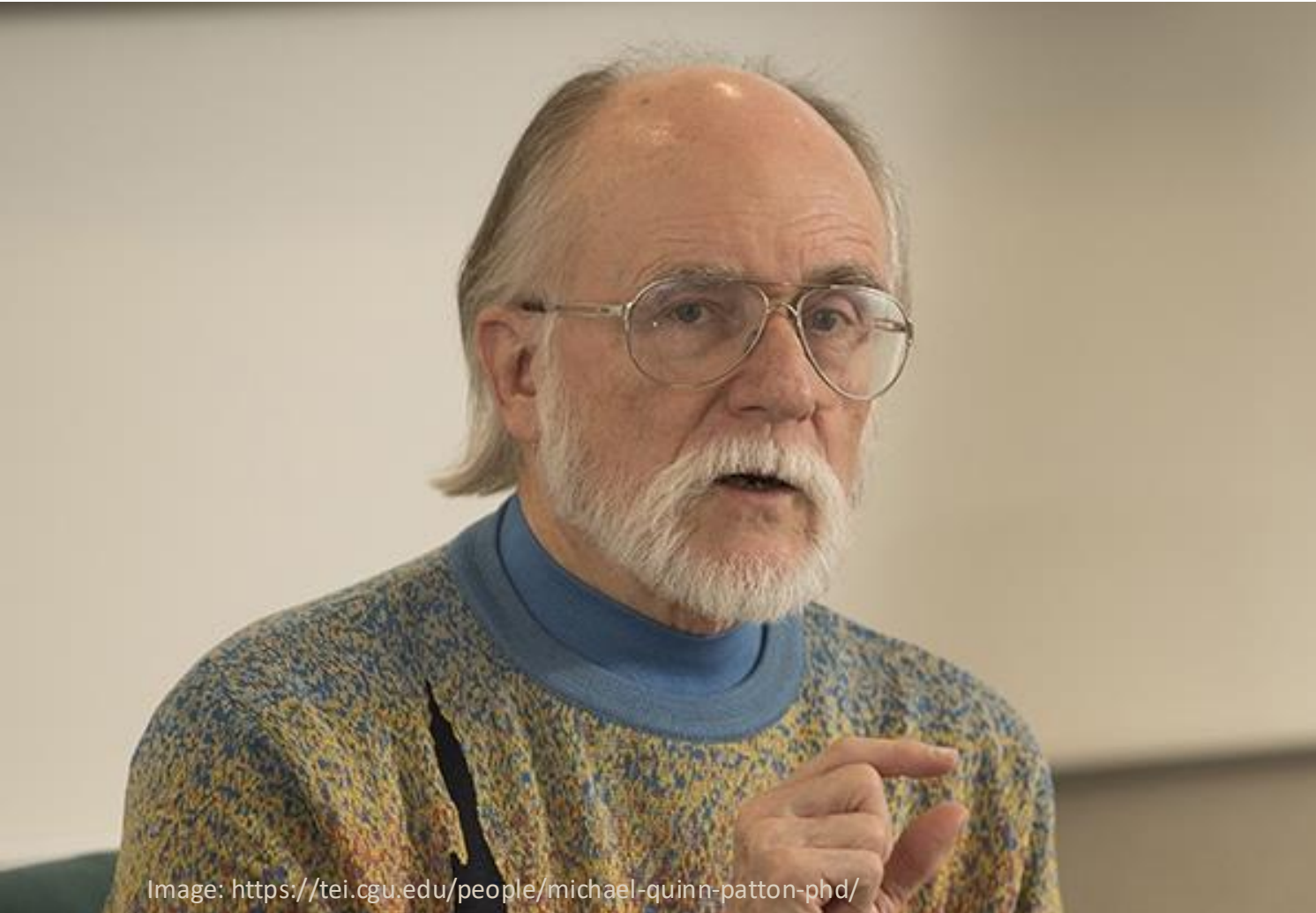
Analysis

- Multiple variations on contribution analysis

Reporting

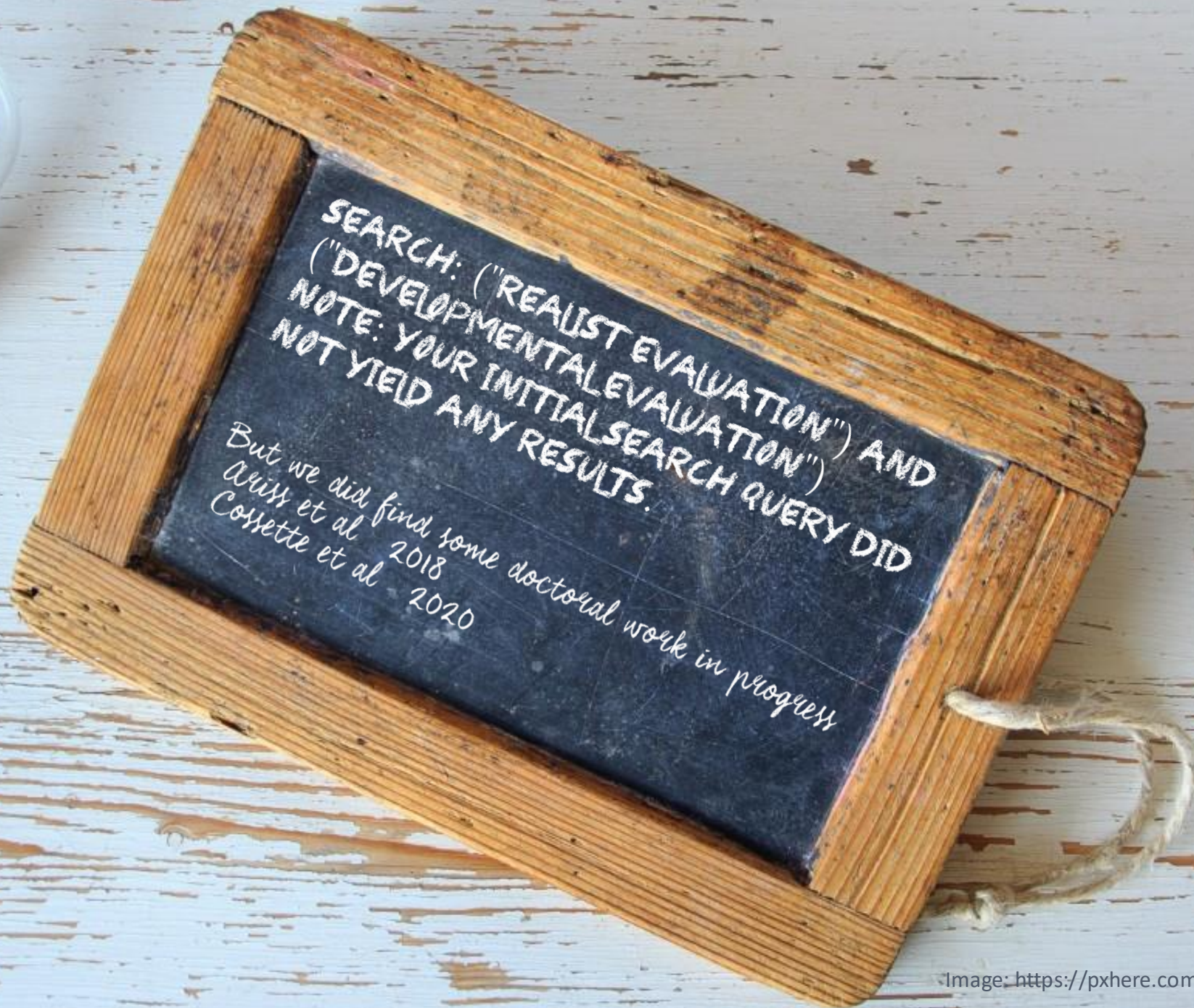
- Utilization-focused

# Patton's tentative embrace of realist evaluation



*“Developmental evaluation takes [realist] inquiry and adds a dynamic dimension in recognition that the very notion of ‘what works’ is subject to change under conditions of complexity.”*

(Patton, 2011)

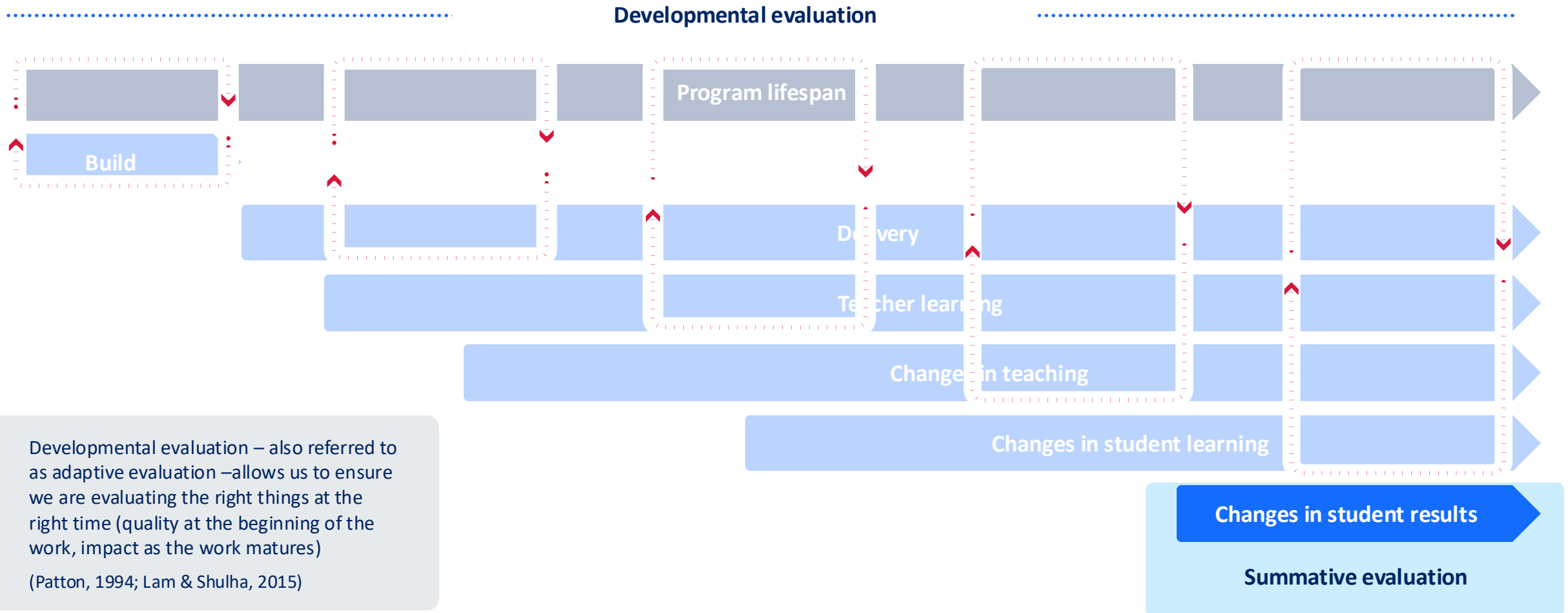


SEARCH: ("REALIST EVALUATION") AND  
("DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION")  
NOTE: YOUR INITIAL SEARCH QUERY DID  
NOT YIELD ANY RESULTS.

*But we did find some doctoral work in progress*  
*Ariss et al 2018*  
*Colette et al 2020*

# Developmental evaluation focuses on continuous, evidence-informed iteration

Each step provides solid grounding to make sound decisions





**But developmental evaluation  
can leave gaps and does not  
fulfil Patton's promise of fully  
accounting for context**

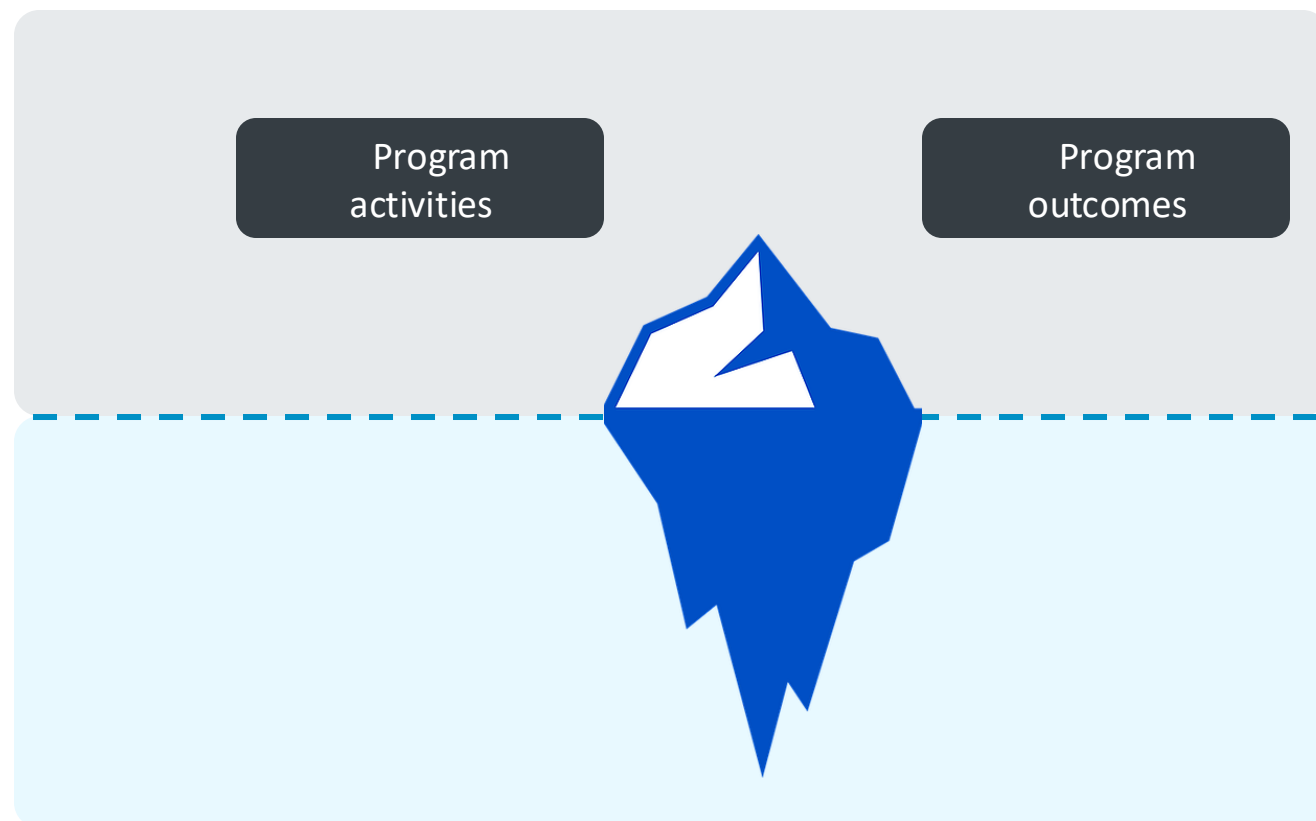
# Realist evaluation goes beneath the surface to uncover the hidden mechanisms of change

It builds our understanding of complex causal pathways to outcomes in social settings

A realist approach explicitly looks beyond the average effect of 'what works' style evaluations

It asks questions about what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how

Evaluators investigate the mechanisms of change and seek to understand how these mechanisms operate, well beyond an 'average effect'



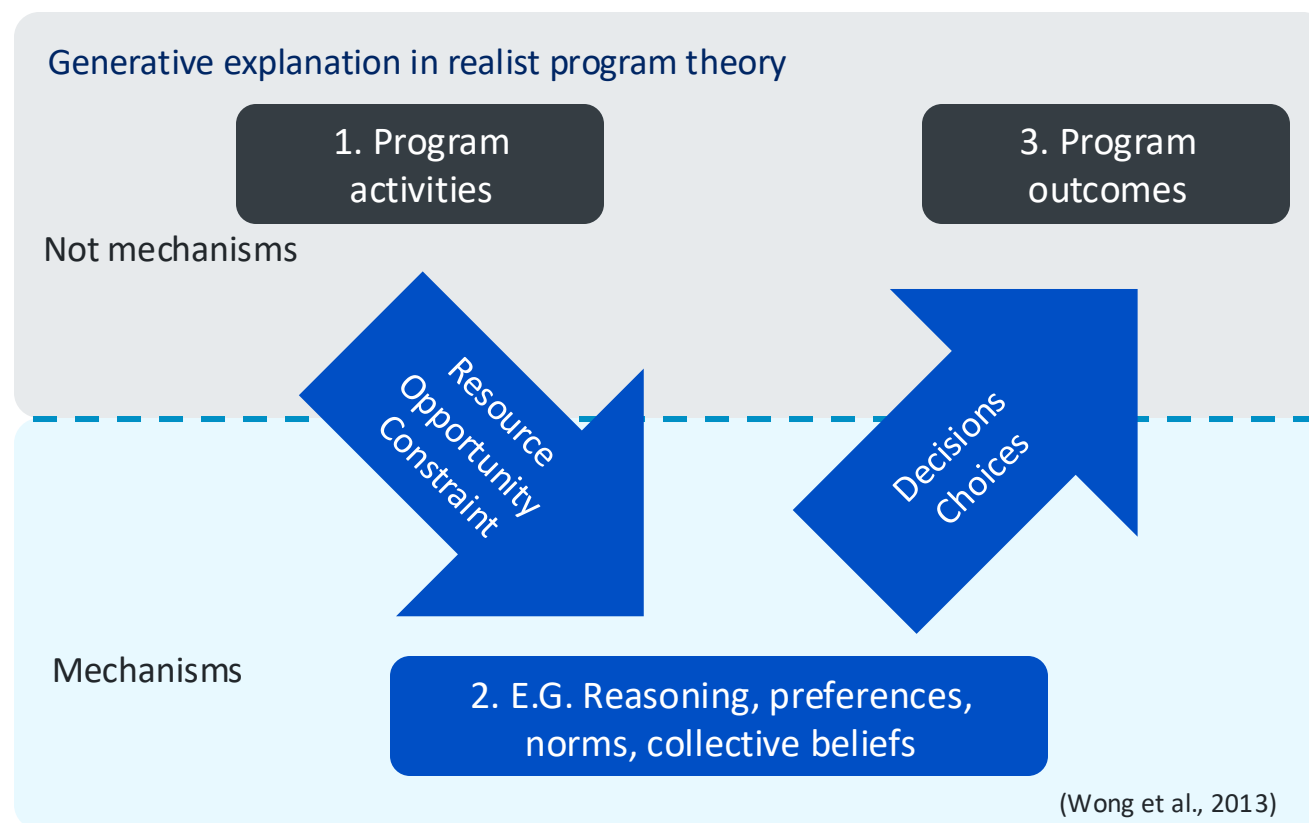
# Realist evaluation goes beneath the surface to uncover the hidden mechanisms of change

It builds our understanding of complex causal pathways to outcomes in social settings by getting under the tip of the iceberg

A realist approach explicitly looks beyond the average effect of 'what works' style evaluations

It asks questions about what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how

Evaluators investigate the mechanisms of change and seek to understand how these mechanisms operate, well beyond an 'average effect'





**Traditional realist evaluation raises methodological problems, and also requires substantial time and resources to be achieve credible evaluation findings**



Low & medium  
Pre-intervention  
writing ability



High  
Pre-intervention  
writing ability

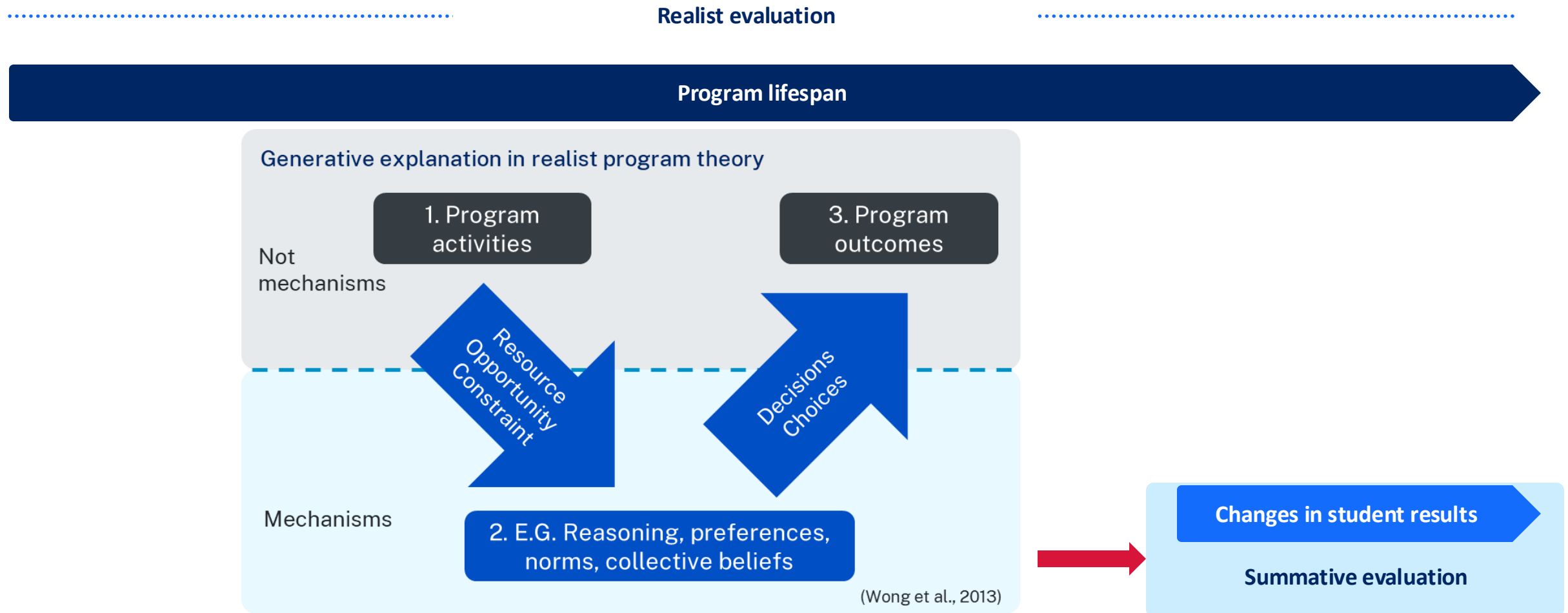
In early program iterations, realist-informed evaluation ensured all subgroups were attended to

Students with high writing ability prior to the intervention were significantly less likely than those with low or medium pre-intervention writing ability to see growth in their levels of writing achievement.

Area	Context	Implementation	Mechanism
<p>SWS allocation</p>	<p>SWS allocated with full 0.6 release</p> <p>Principal &amp; school executive commitment to WiS over 2 year phase of WiS engagement</p> <p>Teacher with high level skills in professional collaboration &amp; commitment to strengthening writing instruction takes on role as SWS</p> <p>School community 'buy in' for SWS role &amp; allocation secure</p>	<p>Budget &amp; timetable allocation over 2 year phase of WiS engagement</p> <p>NWS available to provide (somewhat) tailored support</p> <p>Participation in the WiS PL</p> <p>Access to WiS resource hub</p>	<p>Trust of school community and leadership in SWS</p> <p>SWS high confidence</p>
<p>SWS allocation</p>	<p>SWS allocated with low release</p> <p>school culture - leaders through to staff - values pragmatism and compromise in service of identified areas of need</p> <p>colleagues recognise, engage with &amp; support SWS in their role</p>	<p>Alignment of WiS to school planning, PL&amp; improvement</p> <p>NWS available to provide (somewhat) tailored support</p> <p>Participation in the WiS PL</p> <p>Access to WiS resource hub</p>	<p>Motivation</p> <p>Safe fail mindset</p>

# Realist evaluation typically aims to interrogate the overall program theory

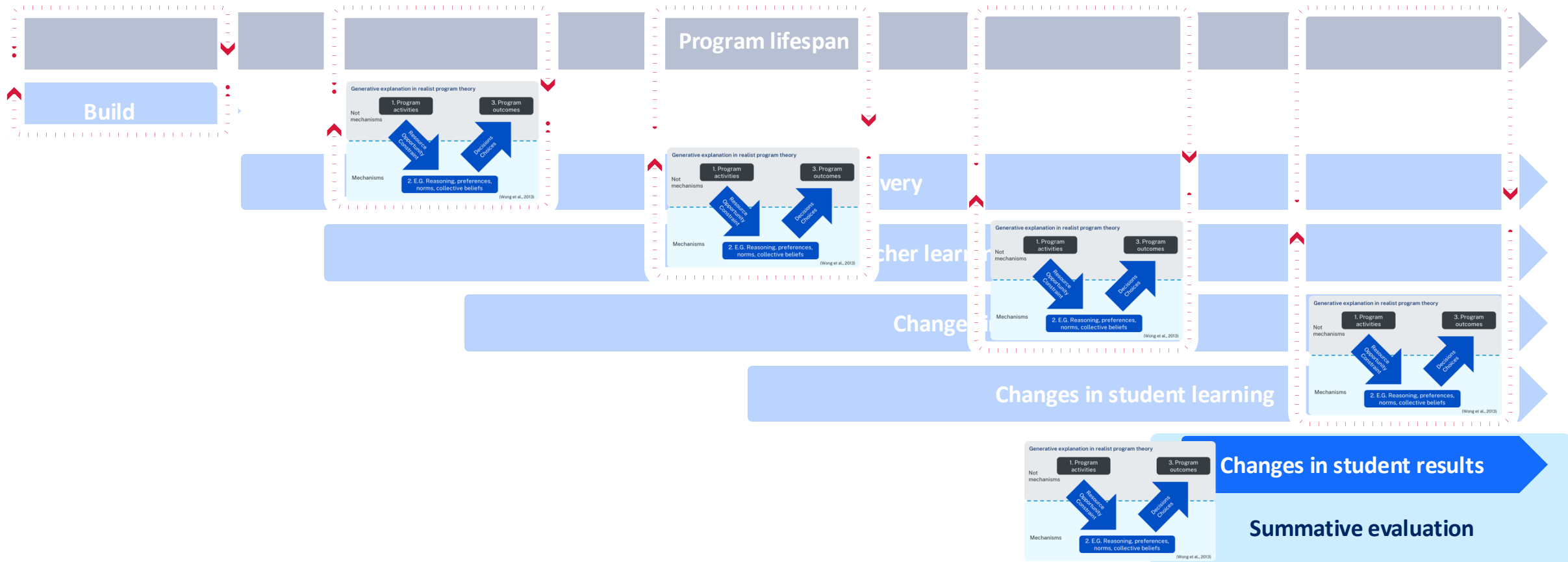
Mid-range theory is tested through realist methods in a developmental evaluation context



# Realist developmental evaluation empowers us to dive inside developmental evaluation cycles by explicitly integrating realist theory

Middle-range theory is tested through realist methods in a developmental evaluation context

## Realist developmental evaluation



## Getting to the value add

Realist evaluation allows us to unearth pathways to impact for different people in different places



Developmental evaluation responds to complexity and provides real-time information about change



**Realist developmental evaluation** supports innovators to understand generative causation rapidly and robustly, at each stage of program iteration



# Towards Realist Developmental Evaluation (RDE)

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understanding to inform decision-making, responding to emergent needs for innovation or in response to disruptive events</li></ul>
Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Realist questions, to test and refine theory, targeted to program phases and sub-group experiences</li></ul>
Program theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provisional, using logic models to surface causal assumptions as pieces of theory, and Context-Implementation-Mechanisms-Outcome configurations at relevant levels of systems</li></ul>
Methodology and design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To surface emergent hypotheses; to test and refine theory; to adjudicate between theories amid complexity</li></ul>
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mixed; realist-informed methods, aiming to illuminate context and mechanism as much as process quality and outcome</li></ul>
Instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Purpose designed, adapted</li></ul>
Data collection and recording	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enabling analysis to inform refinement and innovation</li></ul>
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Intra-program, inter-context, capturing adaptation and scaling, purposefully testing relevant fragments of program theory</li></ul>
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Methodologically consistent, refining theory, aimed at utilisation and knowledge transfer</li></ul>

**Thank  
you!**



**Phillip Belling**

Senior Evaluator  
Early Childhood Outcomes  
NSW Department of Education  
Adjunct Research Fellow, CDU



**Liam Downing**

Manager Research and Evaluation  
Safety Environment & Regulation  
Transport for NSW

**Time for  
questions  
and  
discussion!**

# Towards realist developmental evaluation (RDE)

Design elements	Realist evaluation design	Developmental evaluation design	Realist developmental evaluation design
Purpose	Understanding to inform decision-making	Understanding to inform decision-making, as required to illuminate ongoing innovation	Understanding to inform decision-making, responding to emergent needs for innovation or in response to disruptive events
Questions	Realist questions	Strategic and integrating questions to clarify ambiguity	Realist questions, to test and refine theory, targeted to program phases and sub-group experiences
Program theory	CMO statements	Emergent modelling via theory of change articulating fundamental assumptions	Provisional, using logic models to surface causal assumptions as pieces of theory, and Context-Implementation-Mechanisms-Outcome configurations at relevant levels of systems
Methodology and design	To test and refine theory; to adjudicate between theories	Capture system dynamics, interdependencies, models and emergent interconnections	To surface emergent hypotheses; to test and refine theory; to adjudicate between theories amid complexity
Methods	Mixed	Mixed ... a broad array of methods	Mixed; realist-informed methods, aiming to illuminate context and mechanism as much as process quality and outcome
Instruments	Purpose designed	Adapted, emergent	Purpose designed, adapted
Data collection and recording	To enable analysis	Using data in a meaningful way to inform innovation in progress	Enabling analysis to inform refinement and innovation
Analysis	Intra-program, inter-context, according to theory	Multiple variations on contribution analysis	Intra-program, inter-context, capturing adaptation and scaling, purposefully testing relevant fragments of program theory
Reporting	Consistent with methodology; includes refined theory	Distillation of data into knowledge	Methodologically consistent, refining theory, aimed at utilisation and knowledge transfer

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“According to realism, the world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of observable and measurable events, but also of structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These structures may be present even where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of events” (Van Belle et al., 2016).

“Causality concerns not a direct relationship between two observable and discrete events, but a relationship between “the ‘causal powers’ or ‘liabilities’ of objects or relations, or more generally, their ways-of-acting of ‘mechanisms’ and the outcomes of those mechanisms” ”  
(Van Belle et al., 2016. Quoting Andrew Sawyer, 1992/2010).

# Realist evaluation: Purpose, strengths and issues

(Tilley & Westthorp, 2020)

## Purpose

Explains patterns of outcomes by investigating how and in what circumstances they are caused.

## Strengths

Focuses attention on decisions made at all stages of implementation ... as contributors to outcomes, and on the effects of context.

## Issues

Requires understanding of a realist approach to causation; and [requires] adaptation to work effectively in very large-scale evaluations.

# Realist evaluation: Methodological and practical issues

(Marchal et al., 2012)

## “Traditional” realist evaluation: Methodological problems

- Describing the middle range theory
- How deep to go to unearth mechanisms
- Differentiate mechanism from intervention
- Differentiate mechanism from context
- Demonstrate attribution

## “Traditional” realist evaluation: Practical issues

- Time and resources required to do a good realist evaluation
- Lack of practical guidance

Marchal, B., van Belle, S., van Olmen, J., Hoérée, T., & Kegels, G. (2012). Is realist evaluation keeping its promise? A review of published empirical studies in the field of health systems research. *Evaluation*, 18(2), 192–212.

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