# **Resilient Futures: An individual and system-level approach to improve the wellbeing and resilience of disadvantaged young Australians**

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# **Abstract**

Young people living in disadvantage are at elevated risk of a range of negative life outcomes, including social exclusion, impaired health and wellbeing, and low educational or vocational participation.

In this context, the Resilient Futures program was conceptualised and developed as a strength-focused intervention whose design was underpinned by a broad interdisciplinary range of scientific evidence. The program utilises an ecological framework that sought to target key proximal and distal factors associated with youth social exclusion, disengagement and disadvantage. The target participant group was 850 disadvantaged young South Australians drawn from multiple educational, mental health and youth justice agencies; who were project partners in co-designing and supporting the implementation. The intervention was designed to build wellbeing and resilience skills through explicit (direct teaching) and implicit (mentoring, case management) teaching methods, supported by system-focused methods to build the capacity of service providers.

This article describes the iterative development of the Resilient Futures program, including a significant early program reorientation towards the use of a non- prescriptive and flexible delivery method. This pivot was guided by the implementation science literature, and underpinned by an intentional practice model and approach that was operationalised at both the program design and service delivery layers of the program. We summarise key challenges in delivering a wellbeing and resilience program across multiple sites for a disadvantaged cohort, and the methods the project team developed to bring focus to implementation quality and rigour. Preliminary qualitative evidence supporting the effectiveness of the program is also provided.

# **Keywords**: resilience, wellbeing, resilient futures, TechWerks, intentional practice

**Public Significance Statement**: Delivering mental health interventions to young people is challenging and complex. For the past two years, the Wellbeing and Resilience Centre has delivered a large-scale evidence-based program called Resilient Futures to build resilience in some of the most disadvantaged young people in South Australia. This article serves as an innovative case study of how the science of wellbeing and resilience can be translated into practice, but also outlines the challenges faced in delivering this project, and the new methodologies developed to overcome them.

# **Introduction**

Adolescence is a time of both vulnerability and opportunity. While most young Australians aged between 12 and 25 live successful and fulfilling lives, there are a disadvantaged cohort of young people who are not faring as well. For example, in 2016, 13% of young people aged from 15 to 24 lived in poverty (Australian Council of Social Service, 2016). One in four young people aged 16 to 24 experienced a mental health disorder within a 12-month period (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). One in 477 young people aged from 10 to 17 were on a youth justice supervision order on any given day in 2015, and in 2016 more than 40% of this group were Aboriginal (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). Disadvantage can be both triggered and/or perpetuated through school disengagement. As young people transition into high school, there is up to a 7% decline in school attendance rates from the period Year 7 (age 13) to Year 10 (age 15) (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013), with approximately 20% of Australian youth not completing Year 12 (age 17) or an equivalent educational milestone (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011). For young people with backgrounds of disadvantage, school and education remain key protective factors (McNeely & Falci, 2004).

There is overwhelming evidence that negative developmental trajectories initiated in childhood and adolescence can have long-term social impacts (Tremblay, 2010). Young people living with disadvantage, with histories of offending, school disengagement or mental health problems are at much higher risk of developing psychological or behavioural disturbances in adulthood, and becoming disengaged from work, social institutions, and society (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). The social problems caused by young people’s social exclusion and disengagement with school and society are both extensive and compounding. Therefore, the development of evidence-based interventions for this cohort remains of key interest to various stakeholders such as researchers, policy makers and program developers.

# **A Scientifically Informed Approach**

Previous research in the areas of education, youth development and positive psychology, and developmental and clinical psychology, all provide scientifically informed insight and suggestions regarding how to address various issues related to young people’s social exclusion and disengagement.

In the area of education, and specifically educational engagement, which has both psychological (cognitive and affective) and behavioural features (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), there is overwhelming evidence that a young person’s engagement with school and education is a significant protective factor, which lowers the risk of future negative outcomes such as poor health and substance use (Gruber & Machamer, 2000; Li et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2015). In particular, education is an evidence-based protective factor for reducing the risk of future offending (Sallybanks, 2013). Supporting the role of psychological antecedents, educational engagement can be fostered by increasing a young person’s aspirations for educational, vocational, or life accomplishment (Martin et al., 2015), and by strengthening self-efficacy which has been identified as a central moderator of educational outcomes, notably for young people with at-risk backgrounds (Schunk, 1991).

The youth development literature has brought increasing focus to strengths-based approaches, based upon the belief that the true capacities and potential of young people was being underestimated through historical models and research focusing on youth deficits (Damon, 2004). North American developmental scientists have integrated both positive psychology and youth development concepts in a research and practice movement titled “positive youth development” (PYD; Damon, 2004; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008; Larson, 2000; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2005; Park, 2004). This approach explains optimal adolescent development as being a function of the “combined role of characteristics of the person and ecological assets in the family, school, or community settings” (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011, p. 1107). Such an approach has coincided with the broader psychological movement towards positive psychology (Jarden & Jarden, 2016; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The broader developmental psychology literature has suggested understanding resilience, wellbeing and educational engagement within an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). That is, risk and protective factors may exist within a young person’s own world (e.g., proximal factors like skills, values, cognitive capacity) or the multiple systems or distal factors supporting a young person (e.g., family, community, peers, media). Variations in offending, educational engagement and wellbeing outcomes are dependent on the interaction between both proximal and distal factors (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2011). For example, growing a young person’s social-emotional competencies (e.g., self-awareness, resilience skills) or developmental resources for resilience and wellbeing can manifest in meaningful behavioural outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

There are also a range of other proximal and distal factors that need to be considered within the design and implementation of an intervention targeting disadvantaged young people. These factors include: developmental functioning, trauma history, socio-economic advantage and disadvantage, and social exclusion; each of which will be briefly outlined.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds present with higher rates of relational trauma and abuse, and this can manifest as emotional regulation problems, which can have neuro-developmental antecedents (Perry, 2001). Developmental trauma can manifest with pervasive symptoms that include depression, various medical illnesses and developmental delays, and a variety of impulsive, oppositional and self-destructive behaviours (Font & Berger, 2015; Perry, 2001). Despite this, the transition through adolescence is a time of massive neurological growth and reorganisation (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). Based upon this evidence, interventions provided to young people with backgrounds of trauma need to be mapped to their neurodevelopmental level (Perry, 2006) and be conducted in a trauma-informed manner (Wall et al., 2016).

There are also a range of sociological determinants and distal factors associated with youth disadvantage and disengagement. One important factor is social inclusion. Socio-economic disadvantage, often represented by household income and associated exclusion from social and community participation, plays a key role in understanding the patterns of disadvantage seen in young people (Martin, Conger, Sitnick, Masarik, Forbes, & Shaw, 2015). By drawing upon the concept of social exclusion, a more nuanced understanding of disadvantage is possible by emphasising deprivation in a range of domains such as joblessness, low educational outcomes, low income, lack of access to services and social groups, and poor physical and mental health (Tsakloglou & Papadopoulos, 2002).

Collectively, this evidence, drawn from the psychological, sociological and health literature, provided the underpinning knowledge base to inform the design of a strength-focused intervention to address proximal and distal antecedents of disadvantage, and by doing so, increase social inclusion, participation and engagement of South Australian young people. It was from this scientifically informed base that the Resilient Futures program was formed.

# **The Resilient Futures Program**

In early 2015, the Resilient Futures program was conceptualised to increase the educational participation, wellbeing and life prospects of young South Australians at risk of negative future outcomes. The program was developed by the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute’s (SAHMRI) Wellbeing and Resilience Centre (WRC) with $1.2m AUD philanthropic funding from the Wyatt Trust (www.wyatt.org.au) and the James and Dinna Ramsay Foundation (www.jdrfoundation.com.au).

The broad objectives of the Resilient Futures program were two-fold. First, to measure and build the resilience and wellbeing of 850 disadvantaged young people aged between 16 to 21 by providing wellbeing and resilience skills training, reinforced through ongoing mentoring and access to online tools and resources. Second, to invest in the skills and knowledge of youth workers and educators with a systems view to improving the professional practice of building wellbeing and resilience skills in young people, bringing a focus to addressing key distal and proximal factors associated with social exclusion and disadvantage. The initial outcomes of the Resilient Futures program were:

* To strengthen youth engagement in educational and vocational pathways.
* To build social and emotional competencies (cognitive-behavioural skills) as effective problem-solving, coping, communication, and self-regulation skills when dealing with adversity.
* To strengthen aspirations, self-confidence and self-efficacy to overcome socio-economic disadvantage and increase social participation.

With these broad objectives and intended outcomes as guides, the Resilient Futures program was initially operationalised through three program pillars: 1) explicitly delivered resilience skills training, 2) skills embedding and consolidation (mentoring, online support), and 3) key strategic delivery partnerships. Each of these mechanisms comprised of several components which are now described in more detail.

1. **Explicitly delivered resilience skills training.**

Pillar one included the explicit delivery of wellbeing and resilience skills, which involved content adapted from the TechWerks Resilience Training program (www.technologywerks.com). The TechWerks program is based upon best-practice positive psychology (Hone, Jarden, & Schofield, 2015; Parks & Schueller, 2014) and cognitive behavioural therapy (Beck, 1995) and developed with reference to the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program delivered at scale within the United States army (Harms, Krasikova, & Vanhove, 2013). The TechWerks program teaches ten specific skills designed to enhance resilience and wellbeing, which bring a content focus to effective problem-solving, adaptability, positive coping, self-regulation, and social support. The ten adapted Resilient Futures skills include:

1. *Growth Mindsets*. This cognitive skill encouragers individuals to believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work.
2. *Event-Thought-Reaction Connections*: This skill increases individual awareness of how thoughts drive reactions to events, and is used to determine if thoughts and reactions are helping individuals work towards their goals, act upon their values, improve their performance and strengthen their relationships.
3. *What’s Most Important*: This skill increases individual awareness of what influences unproductive reactions (emotional and/or physical) that may interfere with their performance, goals or relationships.
4. *Balance Your Thinking*: This skill helps individuals cognitively appraise situations in an accurate manner that is based upon evidence.
5. *Cultivating Gratitude*: This skill seeks to build optimism, positive emotions and resilience by bringing ongoing attention to gratitude as a cognitive process.
6. *Mindfulness*: This skill teaches individuals to regulate their attention in a focused, open and non-judgemental manner.
7. *Interpersonal Problem Solving*: This skill teaches individuals the elements to address interpersonal problems in a respectful manner with healthy and productive emotional expression, and use of compromise.
8. *Active Constructive Responding*: This skill increases awareness of communication patterns and responses that maintain, strengthen, and cultivate important relationships.
9. *Capitalising on Strengths*: This skill increases individual awareness of theirs and others personal strengths, and how to apply strengths across all life domains.
10. *Values Based Goals*: This skill increases individual awareness of their values, and how to translate these values into actions and goals.

At the point of initial development, the TechWerks’ skill of ‘meaning making’, which is a skill that teaches individuals how to cognitively appraise challenges and failures in a healthy and productive way through a focus on meaning, was replaced with the skill of ‘growth mindset’. Growth mindset, a construct developed by psychologist Carol Dweck (2012), and is associated with stronger educational and life outcomes in young people (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), thus was seen as a necessary addition.

The TechWerks Resilience Training was designed to be delivered as a five day ‘train-the-trainer’ program where individuals complete the explicit skills training in the first 2.5 days, then participate in an additional 2.5 days of training to practice teaching the skills within their own organisations. The program draws upon the work of Martin Seligman and others whose research has shown that resilience, wellbeing and positive emotional states can be measured and learnt through skill-building interventions (e.g., Beck, 1976; Emmons, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Seligman conceptualises optimal wellbeing as having five key elements captured by the acronym PERMA (Seligman, 2012), which are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment, and this model is incorporated into the TechWerks program.

With reference to the literate base noted earlier, the TechWerks program content was adapted to meet the needs of the Resilient Futures program participant group. Adaptations evolved through an iterative co-design process that included consultation with all project partners and experts in child development and trauma. Specifically, the original skills content was focused on higher order meta-cognitive processes, and given that abstract reasoning skills are likely to be underdeveloped in the target group for Resilient Futures (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), the material was operationalised in concrete terms. Adaptations were also based on trauma-informed constructs (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2012), which included a stronger content focus on self-regulation, which is a higher order skill associated with wellbeing and thriving states in adolescents (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, et al., 2011). The adapted ten skills were operationalised in a manual as ‘anchor points’ (or teaching outcomes to be brought to focus within explicit program delivery). The manual also included many suggested program activities for program facilitators.

1. **Skills embedding and consolidation.**

Pillar two involved the embedding and consolidation of the TechWerks skills. The program proposed a working theoretical framework for skill development and expression. That is, the primary intent of the explicit skills delivery approach was to raise awareness and knowledge of each skill element, providing the foundation for skill acquisition and expression to occur through mentoring and coaching support. When the young person started to internalise and value the skill across a range of settings, it was hypothesised that the conditions were present for the skill to be internalised as a mindset shift.

This internalisation process was enabled through embedded mentoring and coaching for all participants within the Resilient Futures program. Structured and ongoing relationships between significant adults and young people through mentoring, coaching or case management approaches was used to support the skill acquisition process through modelling, priming and cueing, rehearsal, reflection and practice. Specifically, adults supported young people to further explore and operationalise the Resilient Futures program material into their lives. These empirically based mentoring practices also brought attention to proximal and distal factors of socio-economic disadvantage, and represent evidence-based and higher impact mentoring approaches (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002).

The consolidation and embedding process was also facilitated through online support and a web-based platform. These program elements were applied to strengthen the skill internalisation process through the process of cueing and priming across a diverse range of settings. The web-based platform served as an accessible, comfortable, and potentially anonymous site for young people who might otherwise choose to avoid more formal services (Oh, Jorm & Wright, 2009). The platform extends the reach of the Resilient Futures program by providing participants with a site to continue their engagement with the Resilient Futures program content, provide access to extension content on wellbeing and resilience skills, and establish contact with their mentors.

1. **Key strategic delivery partnerships.**

The SAHMRI Wellbeing and Resilience Centre identified key agencies to collaboratively partner with in the delivery of the Resilient Futures program. Partners were chosen primarily based on their long-term engagement with vulnerable young people in disadvantaged communities, and their commitment to structured adult-to-young-person relationships through mentoring, coaching or case engagement approaches. In addition, evidence of an organisational commitment to learning, improving systems of professional practice, innovation, stable management and staff groups were also considered important, as was a willingness to co-invest in the program. On this basis, seven initial partners were chosen:

* Three alternative schools that focused on reconnecting disengaged learners to education through accredited and non-accredited learning using wellbeing strategies.
* A youth agency that provided case management and learning to disengaged leaners and young people in custodial care.
* An international aid agency that focused on youth justice and custodial care.
* A specialist mental health provider.
* A therapeutic care agency specialising in residential services for young people who have been removed from their families.

# These partnerships, drawn from multiple sites across education, mental health and youth justice service providers, provided the basis to deliver the first iteration of Resilient Futures, which is now described.

**The Evolution of Resilient Futures**

In the first iteration of the Resilient Futures program (version 1.0), the skills teaching methodology drew heavily on the explicit precision skills delivery approach articulated in the TechWerks manual. The trainers’ manual for the Resilient Futures program version 1.0 included a highly scripted eight-session program that integrated additional resources and activities that were nuanced to the participant cohort (e.g., included audio-visual media). The Resilient Futures program started by delivering this prototype to three participant groups via two partner agencies in early 2016, before being incrementally rolled out to all seven partners across 2016.

The first iteration of the Resilient Futures program met with mixed success. Partner feedback reported that the teaching methodology achieved high engagement with young people from cohorts having stronger associations with mainstream education sites. However, the program did not gain traction as a viable methodology for the most disengaged learners, that is the primary target group for the Resilient Futures program. Partners universally reported that the adapted skills and the prescriptive teaching methodology, mapped to a traditional classroom pedagogical approach, did not engage the participant cohort. Partner feedback indicated that the Resilient Futures program was not manifesting in the desired program outcomes.

A key insight and outcome from this piloting was that program partners started to develop a range of different delivery models and made significant content adaptations nuanced to their contexts (specific youth needs and organisational setting). Adaptation occurs frequently in the implementation of many evidence based programs conducted in real world settings, where practitioners adapt program procedures, dosage, content and target groups to their contextual setting (Moore, Bumbarger and Cooper, 2013). The Resilient Futures program management team supported and monitored this adaptation process. Key changes included partners integrating skills content into 1) accredited and non-accredited programs, 2) one-on-one and group therapeutic or clinical settings, and 3) project based delivery models which included integrating content within the visual arts, performance, photography, film-making and gaming. Through this process, the Resilient Futures program organically adapted as a model comprised of core components (e.g., core skill outcomes) that were supported by a dynamic teaching delivery method that included a constellation of adaptable teaching or learning elements.

The need for these adaptations highlighted the short-comings of delivering a prescriptive wellbeing and resilience skills intervention across a heterogeneous participant group, and across education, mental health and youth justice sites. As such there was an identified need to apply a flexible teaching and service delivery methodology that could support multi-site application, and respond to the needs of the heterogeneous participant cohort. However, with flexibility, concerns were raised in terms of program fidelity, which refers to the degree to which the program is delivered to a high standard and consistent manner, with similar dosages across participants. Program fidelity is strongly associated with higher program impact (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lipsey, 2009), and best-practice program implementation considerations (Blase, Van Dyke, Fixsen, & Bailey, 2012). As often occurs within large scale and highly applied interventions (Malti et al, 2016), the project team sought a balance between implementation fidelity and partner agency flexibility in the delivery of the program. Within the Resilient Futures program, this was operationalised as a process that enabled partner agencies to flexibly adapt the program to the unique characteristics of the agency and its young people, whilst ensuring fidelity to the content and rigor to the teaching method. The implementation methodology of ‘intentional practice’ was identified as a core mechanism to uphold rigour and fidelity, but at the same time support flexibility and innovation in service delivery. It was this aspect of intentional practice that was introduced as a key program addition and pivot.

**Infusing the implementation approach of Intentional Practice.**

Developed with reference to the implementation science literature (e.g., Blase, Van Dyke, Fixsen, & Bailey, 2012; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lipsey, 2009), Intentional Practice is a methodology which seeks to bring ongoing awareness to the intent of an intervention, including the desired outcomes (‘what’) and the processes or mechanisms (‘how’) by which they are achieved (Raymond, 2016b). The modelling of intentional practice was developed through a review of clinical, forensic and educational interventions, and the identification of program features associated with higher impact outcomes (see Raymond, in press). The intentional practice approach can be operationalised through three key questions:

1. What is the *intent*, energy or purpose driving the intervention?
2. What *outcome* is at the focus of the intervention?
3. How, or by which method or *practice*, is this outcome being achieved?

These questions can be operationalised at multiple levels, including institutional (e.g., strategic intent), program development (e.g., logic modelling), and at the individual practice layer (e.g., as a clinical, teaching or program facilitation method). A model of intentional practice, titled the *Life Buoyancy Model* (Raymond, in press), operationalises the three questions, and supports its application across all three layers. This modelling was conceptualised and organised with reference to the program logic literature (Cooksy, Gill, & Kelly, 2001), which is a method to describe the relationship between program components, processes and outcomes. The model’s categories were also labelled and defined with reference to the positive psychology literature (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Importantly, the model operationalises a ‘growth-focused’ intent to intervention design and planning. That is, the core intent or purpose of interventions are to ‘grow’ or ‘build’ the capacity of individuals for improved wellbeing and engagement outcomes (Raymond, 2016a). This growth-focused orientation operationalises positive psychology constructs into the intervention’s practice philosophy and teaching methodology (Wood, & Tarrier, 2010). The expansion and reorientation of the Resilient Futures program (version 2.0) was underpinned by this growth-focused intentional practice methodology, as applied at both the program design and delivery levels; both of which will now be reviewed in turn.

Firstly, at the program design level, growth-focused intentional practice has been operationalised across several Australian therapeutic and wellbeing programs (Raymond, 2016a, in press; Raymond & Lappin, 2016, 2017). Within the reorientation of the Resilient Futures program, a program logic model was developed to articulate a hierarchy of short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, which were categorised against the domains of youth, agency and agency system. The logic model also articulates the key program components. This program logic model is depicted in Table 1 below and is the current implementation model of the Resilient Futures program[[1]](#footnote-1).

Table 1

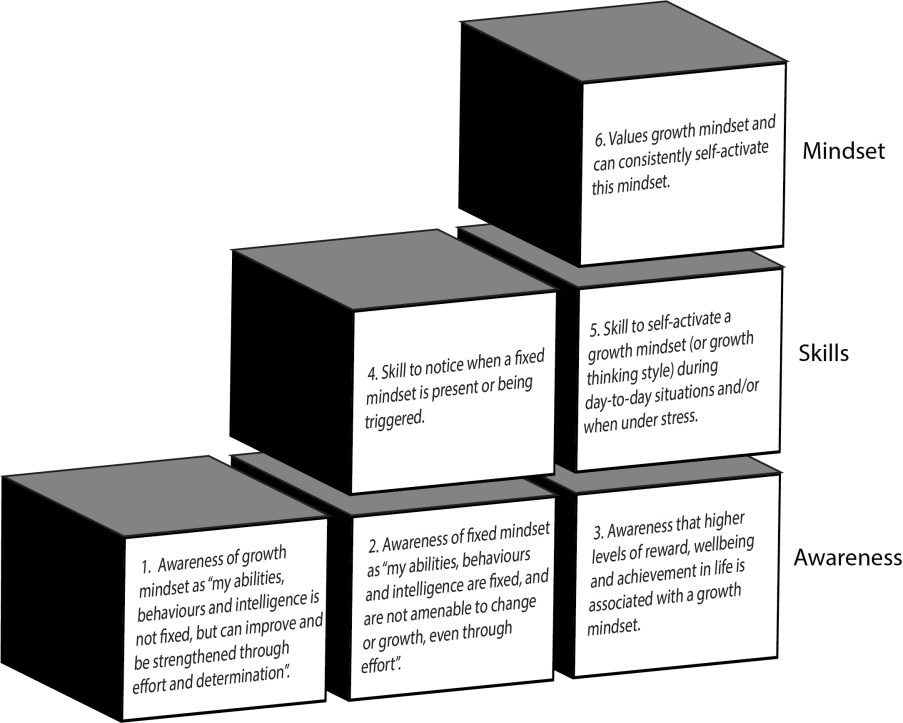
|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Hierarchy of Outcomes (‘What’) | | |
|  | | Short | Medium | Long |
| Program Componentse (‘How’) | | Youth | | |
| -Explicit learning of RF10 skills  -Implicit learning of RF10 skills  -Intentional adult mentoring and coaching  -Intentional goal exploration and actioning  -Wellbeing measurement and feedback  -Online Platform | Awarenessa | RF-10 skills, wellbeing, PERMA and how it can be strengthened | RF-10 skills are behaviourally expressed across multiple domains of life | RF-10 skills are valued and integrated into personal identity (mindset) |
| Skillsb | Expression of RF-10 skill anchor points (including through goal setting) with adult support |
| Accurate self-awareness of wellbeing and how to modify personal wellbeing | Improved wellbeing, resilience and mental health outcomes |
| Mindsetc | Positive value orientation to wellbeing, resilience and RF-10 skills |
| Improved engagement with agency staff and vocational-educational processes | Improved vocational and educational outcomes |
| Resourcesd | Engagement with adult support and self-accessing information on wellbeing and RF-10 skills |
|  | | Agency Staff | | |
| -TechWerks Resilience Skills Training  -Intentional Practice training  -Contextualisation workshop  -Community of reflective practice  -Side-by-side support and coaching from WRC  -Access to online resources | Awarenessa | RF-10 skills, intentional practice, trauma-informed practice, and how to apply RF-10 skills to context | RF-10 skills are behaviourally expressed across multiple domains of life | RF-10 skills are valued and integrated into personal and professional identity |
| Skillsb | To employ intentionally delivered implicit and explicit learning processes mapped to RF-10 skills |
| Employ intentionally delivered implicit and explicit learning across all support roles | Higher quality and impact practice outcomes |
| Mindsetc | Positive value orientation to wellbeing, resilience, RF-10 skills, intentional practice and program |
| Relationships with youth are strengthened through connection to program and content | Improved wellbeing, resilience and job satisfaction |
| Resourcesd | Engagement with WRC staff and self-accessing information on RF-10 skills and intentional practice |
|  | | Agency System | | |
| -Critical mass of trained staff  -Localised planning and embedding of RF-10 skills  -Systems-approach strategy to improve agency wellbeing culture  -Dynamic process and outcome evaluation | Awarenessa | How to intentionally embed wellbeing and resilience constructs across systems and culture | Agency implements programs/strategies to embed wellbeing and resilience constructs | Wellbeing and resilience are integrated into culture and strategic planning |
| Skillsb | To intentionally embed wellbeing and resilience constructs across systems |
| Staff and leadership roles integrate responsibilities for wellbeing | Agency leadership and staff report high satisfaction and confidence in program |
| Mindsetc | Positive value orientation to Resilient Futures program and the embedding of wellbeing content |
| System reviews occur with improved implementation of Resilient Futures content | Stakeholders and consumers identify agency as wellbeing focused |
| Resourcesd | Engagement with WRC staff and internal development of resources/systems for program |

*Resilient Futures Program Logic Model.*

*Note: aAwareness is knowledge, information, insight and self-awareness. bSkills represent the expression of the awareness or knowledge into observed actions or behaviours. cMindset are values, beliefs and thought processes. d Resources represent the people, information and systems that support the program’s outcomes.*

Secondly, at the facilitation and program delivery layer (the moment-to-moment service provision), the reorientation of the Resilient Futures program identified the need for a flexible teaching and facilitation method to teach resilience skills, which could be supported across multiple sites (e.g., education, mental health, youth justice) and be individually tailored and contextualised to a heterogeneous participant cohort. The teaching methodology had to be inclusive of explicit or classroom-based teaching, as well as more implicit based methods which include mentoring and coaching, case management and project-based learning. The reorientation sought to bring strong attention to program fidelity, but with a framework of high contextual adaptation and flexibility (Malti, Noam, Beelmann, & Sommer, 2016). Given that the learning content could not be manualised or prescriptively defined, the intentional practice method was applied to bring rigor and fidelity to the teaching methodology.

As noted by Malti et al. (2016), contextually robust programs clearly define both their fixed and flexible features. Through the re-orientation, the ten resilience skills were isolated as fixed outcomes. However, to enable these outcomes to be operationalised across all contexts, each of the ten skills were deconstructed and broken down into specific ‘anchor points’ or building blocks that could be brought to focus through explicit or implicit learning activities. These anchor points represent the immediate focus or ‘growth intent’ of the intervention that program facilitators, mentors, coaches and agency staff bring to awareness during their delivery and then map to specific learning activities. Figure 1 presents the six anchor points or building blocks for the adapted resilience skill of ‘growth mindset’.



*Figure 1.* Resilient Futures program anchor points (or building blocks) for the skill of growth mindset.

The anchor points, being categorised as 1) awareness, 2) skills, and 3) mindsets (Raymond, in press), collectively can be graphically represented as a building block staircase (Raymond, 2016b), which supports practitioners or facilitators to scaffold their teaching or learning content by bringing attention to each layer. The three layers are:

1. Awareness – the skill is broken down as knowledge, insight or cognitive learning components.
2. Skills – the behavioural expression of skill through cognitive or behavioural actions.
3. Mindsets – the thinking processes, values or beliefs that support skill use and expression.

Such anchor points provide youth workers and teachers with a flexible but stable structure which they can populate with additional wellbeing and resilience resources that can be tailored to the needs and interests of the target group. The Resilient Futures program management team and partner agencies have developed many of these resources, such as content, slide packs, activities and online resources.

The operationalization of intentional practice included the staff receiving competency-based training in intentional practice – which was named ‘IMPACT Training’. This training also brought a focus to trauma-informed practice, and was designed to build skills for Resilient Futures program staff to map specific growth outcomes (resilient skills anchor points) with implicit or explicit learning activities contextualised to their setting and specific youth needs (e.g., trauma, living situation). These were captured in brief ‘growth action plans’, which represent abbreviated one-page logic models to grow the ten specific TechWerks skills for individual or collective young people.

**Progress and Outcomes**

To date and with ethics approval, more than 50 youth workers, teachers mentors and case managers have undertaken the five-day TechWerks ‘train-the-trainer’ program, and an additional ten have attended the 2.5 day direct training. Each partner agency also participated in a one-day contextualisation workshop to ensure that the Resilient Futures program content was tailored to the unique context of each agency and the needs of the young people from that service. An additional 45 youth workers, educators and mentors have undertaken the competency-based training in intentional practice (IMPACT Training) as part of version 2.0 of the Resilient Futures program.

Youth workers and educators have been delivering the Resilient Futures program in a manner that is both creative and authentic to the core components of the program. Individual staff in partner agencies have developed significant practice innovations that are effective in building wellbeing and resilience amongst disengaged young people. In turn, these practice innovations have influenced agency practice and are leveraging systems change. What is emerging is a complex project ecosystem, characterized by practice innovation, new wellbeing policies and procedures, and positive systems changes amongst partner agencies.

In addition, ongoing attention to program implementation through quality monitoring processes has been critical to the prevention of “program drift” and the maintenance of positive program outcomes (Logan & Royse, 2010). For this reason, the Resilient Futures program has developed learning rubrics to support competency based assessments that requires that the Resilient Futures program youth workers and educators observe and report on behavioural changes and wellbeing outcomes. By simplifying measurement and data collection processes, these changes have increased the likelihood that young people and partner agencies will engage in measurement and evaluation processes.

The Resilient Futures team have also collected qualitative feedback from 18 interviews with facilitators of the Resilient Futures program. Such feedback suggests the program is having the intended impacts of increasing awareness, impacting wellbeing, cultivating the ability to self-regulate, providing a program that resonates with youth, improving staff and agency quality of practice, and reorienting agency systems towards wellbeing and resilience. For example, when asked about the Resilient Futures program, facilitators mentioned outcomes such as:

*I know that I’ve gone in one day and they don’t know what optimism is. The next day they know what it is, and in future programs, so they’re hanging on to some of the language…*

*…he now just has a few more things in his pocket to, to check in with himself, and to balance things out before letting his anger take over. That self-awareness is going to be crucial to him continuing on working on his anger.*

*…one of them went, “guys, it never turns out well when we argue. Let’s just get along. Let’s not talk about that, that’s done”. And I was just like, “my god, what happened?” I’ve got students who previously couldn’t talk, or even look at people and talk, speaking up in class, giving their opinions, discussing the material…*

Quotes such as these provide anecdotal evidence that the Resilient Futures program is increasing young people’s ability to self-regulate and increase their use of the psychological tools, language and techniques they have available when dealing with situations; such as growth mindsets and character strengths. However, key to knowledge translation, and perhaps the strongest evidence reported for young people was using the skills taught in the Resilient Futures training outside of their interactions with their providers. This suggests a level of embedding within the young person, in their own life, and an ability to remember and use the skills in the moment, for example:

*…one of the young men over there, he was really good with it and I’ve actually heard him coin the phrase “I’ll be your co-pilot”, and I thought oh wow, that’s interesting, that was really good, and that was in his relationship…*

Such feedback also informed how the program was working. For example, while all the facilitators reported positive outcomes for young people, they talked about specific individuals and not widespread change across all young people they taught. Two potential explanations were provided by facilitators as to why different levels of change may have occurred. The first was ‘readiness to change’ on behalf of the young person, that more emotionally mature young people were more receptive to the messages in the program. The second potential explanation was from a facilitator who both taught the program in a group setting and provided one-on-one mentoring for young people. This facilitator reported seeing more change for the young people with whom they worked individually and suggested that the intensity of interaction and time that could be spent with young people was greater during mentoring.

The other focus of the Resilient Futures program is on staff; youth workers and educators. Here we were specifically interested in if staff, 1) use the skills in their own life, 2) thought they had gained more tools for working with young people, and 3) enjoyed their work more. In this regard staff mentioned, respectively:

*…in my own family, I use a lot of the skills when I’m talking to my sister and my mum, and my partner, and it’s really interesting to see them kind of take hold of it… my level of anxiety is probably lowered, not dramatizing things, actually giving things an opportunity to be a positive outcome.*

*…it enabled me to bring a lot more of my own personal approach to it, I think it gave me a lot more language to be able to put into what I like to do in my job, and what tools I can use.*

*My god, if you could see what I was going through last year, I could actually say it was the Resilient Futures ten skills that got me through. Honestly, they were life changing…one of the best outcomes for me was actually job satisfaction.*

One common thread through multiple interviews was the importance of staff members both believing in the usefulness of the skills, and using them in their lives outside of work. These two factors were reported as improving their credibility with the young people they worked with and thereby increasing the willingness of young people to listen and engage with the teaching, for example:

*I really feel that when the kids get a sense that you know it, you live it, you feel passionately about it, then they definitely take it on board more. They go okay, well, this is obviously something that’s working reasonably well for someone, and there’s that genuine connection, you can kind of use the, like ‘small A personal examples’ to say I had this situation, it really helped me, do you think this could help in your situation, and that’s a really positive thing.*

In addition to positive outcomes for young people and facilitators there were positive outcomes for organisations. The most commonly reported outcome was staff having a common language to discuss the concepts, they had a shared knowledge of the skills provided by the training, for example:

*…what we’ve seen is there’s been a lot of value for those of us who’ve been in the same office, we’ve been able to reinforce the material. We’ve got a shared language around it. So that’s really helped.*

In addition to qualitative insight, our quantitative measurement approach includes assessment of subjective wellbeing and psychological distress before and after participation in the skills training. These outcome measures will be incorporated into a wider evaluation of the Resilient Futures program to indicate the impact of the project on young people’s mental health and for program improvement and iteration.

**The Future of The Resilient Futures Program**

The Resilient Futures program has been prototyped and iterated over two years. Because of this work, the project team has developed a revised program logic model (Table 1 above). This logic model is underpinned by a framework of intentionality, which seeks to uphold implementation quality and fidelity by bringing ongoing awareness to all program outcomes (short-, medium-, and long-term) and components. We are applying a co-design implementation strategy, where program components are being delivered in a staged manner in conjunction with partner needs, context and experience in the program. The project team continues to iterate and refine program components based on partner and stakeholder feedback. This work is driven by a desire to expand the reach of the Resilient Futures program, including to supporting relationships and participants families, to strengthen the delivery of a more integrated ‘ecological model’ that can target both proximal and distal factors of disadvantage and social inclusion in young people.

The project team have initiated a detailed mixed-methods evaluation of the Resilient Futures program to isolate the program components that are ‘core’ to delivering the stated outcomes, and which ones can be ‘adaptive’ to context. These terms are drawn from the work by Malti et al. (2016) and refer to the need of complex programs to clearly isolate and describe the components that are the ‘heavy lifters’ or ‘active ingredients’ in delivering program outcomes, such that future iterations have the greatest chance of being both effective and cost efficient. The Resilient Futures program aspires to develop a program model and implementation methodology that has external validity across multiple cohorts and contexts. We are optimistic that this outcome is achievable.

**Conclusion**

By the nature of its target cohort, its scale, and its innovation, the Resilient Futures program has encountered a range of challenges in its first two years. This article documents an account of the iterative development of the program that is being delivered across multiple education, mental health and youth justice sites, and the novel methodologies that the project team have developed to address the challenges associated with an individual- and system-level intervention targeted to a heterogeneous and disadvantaged youth cohort. The Resilient Futures program methodology, which combines wellbeing and resilience interventions with an intentional implementation approach based upon implementation science and positive psychology constructs and processes, serves as an innovative case study. It details how the science of wellbeing and resilience can be translated into practice, and can be taught and embedded at-scale across multiple sites. Preliminary evidence suggests that meaningful outcomes are being delivered.

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1. As Table 1 provides a summary of the program logic model, further and fuller operational definitions of all outcomes and program components are available on request from the first author. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)