



Growing2gether Evaluation Report (September 2024 - September 2025)

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Introduction

Growing2gether is a targeted youth intervention, which specifically selects young people facing disadvantaged circumstances who are at risk of exacerbating current psychosocial, behavioural and educational difficulties. It is the only early intervention programme in Scotland to target two sets of vulnerable children simultaneously, raising the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged areas by pairing them, as a mentor and role model, to children in a nursery/primary school who need support. Young people receive an accredited personal development qualification. Since January 2017, the charity has reached **2740** children and young people across the Highlands, Aberdeen, Dundee and Moray and helped them to improve their mental health and enhance their educational and community engagement. The intervention is underpinned by transpersonal psychology, which provides a holistic psychological approach and focuses on enabling individuals to access more of their potential. Growing2gether focuses on bringing out the unique potential of young people, rather than seeing them as a 'problem', empowering them with life skills, work experience, and a deeper understanding of who they are. There is increasing evidence that interventions based on positive psychology enhance well-being, educational attainment and long-term life chances, which have been recognised by The Scottish Government. This has further created many initiatives to address the significant challenges that children and young people in Scotland are facing today: Closing the Attainment Gap, Getting it Right for Every Child, the Curriculum for Excellence, and Developing Scotland's Young Work Force.



Growing2gether, Mental Well-being and Connectedness

Young people need a positive sense of self as this is closely related to feelings of belonging, a sense of agency and self-esteem (Dallas-Childs 2023). Unfortunately for some young people, such as care experienced individuals or young people who have experienced parental abandonment, their lives are unstable and these ongoing physiological, cognitive and social changes, consequently, result in self-identity development particularly challenging. This is further compounded by the disconnection from family and home. Individuals with an unhappy home life, therefore benefit from acquiring a sense of belonging and contentedness with others as this reinforces positive aspects of themselves, raising their self-esteem. Growing2gether offers the structure, consistency, stability and positive reinforcement that these young people require to provide a positive sense of self. Facilitators are trained to work with vulnerable individuals with compassion, sensitivity and kindness. The goal is to encourage relationships to develop and flourish, as the course progresses. Each week, young people form a stronger attachment with their assigned child as well as their peers and facilitators, creating an overall (positive) sense of self and connection to others.

Research places great importance of connectedness in relation to positive youth development programmes and claims to protect young people from sexual risk-taking as well as performance in school (Visser, 2017). Given that early life experiences can impact on long-term mental health problems as well as issues with relationships, well-being, educational attainment (Brännlund, Strandh & Nilssotn, 2017) and employment, (Sadler et al, 2018) the research would suggest that early intervention to address the mental health needs of young people can prevent lifelong problems. Policy in the UK emphasises the important role that schools have in promoting good mental health, despite there being little evidence on what aspects of schools influence mental health in pupils (Ford, et al 2021). Teaching staff are under increasing pressure to deliver the curriculum while managing children's well-being, hence, mental health-based programmes may offer a solution to fulfil the needs of young people with mental health issues. Growing2gether aims to reduce mental health inequalities by selecting "at risk" teenagers to enrol on the programme and provide them with an opportunity to build their confidence through helping them to establish positive connections and experiences. Growing2gether is multifaceted in that it includes many components such as positive psychology, transpersonal psychology and experiential learning to help promote well-being.

Child and Teenager Interaction

The child and teenager dyads are central to the intervention's success. This kind of mentoring is a unique form of peer mentoring that matches an older youth mentor with a younger youth mentee to promote positive outcomes on mental health. Growing2gether is novel in that it is the only early intervention programme in Scotland to target two sets of vulnerable children simultaneously, raising the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged areas by pairing them as a mentor and role model to a child in a nursery or primary school who require extra support. Growing2gether facilitators work closely with schools and nurseries to gain an understanding of the young person and child participating in the programmes. Consequently, they can successfully match and assign the young person with the child based on personality. Children act as an indirect and non-threatening tool to explore the young person's opinions and beliefs. Facilitators are trained to be flexible, non-judgemental and facilitate young people to flourish, by encouraging the young person to reflect on their own behaviours through asking specific questions about their assigned child's interactions and behaviours, enabling them to extrapolate what they learn and apply it to themselves. Facilitators are crucial to this process and are trained to have bifocal vision, an ability to hold a perception of the young person which includes what is, as well as what could be.

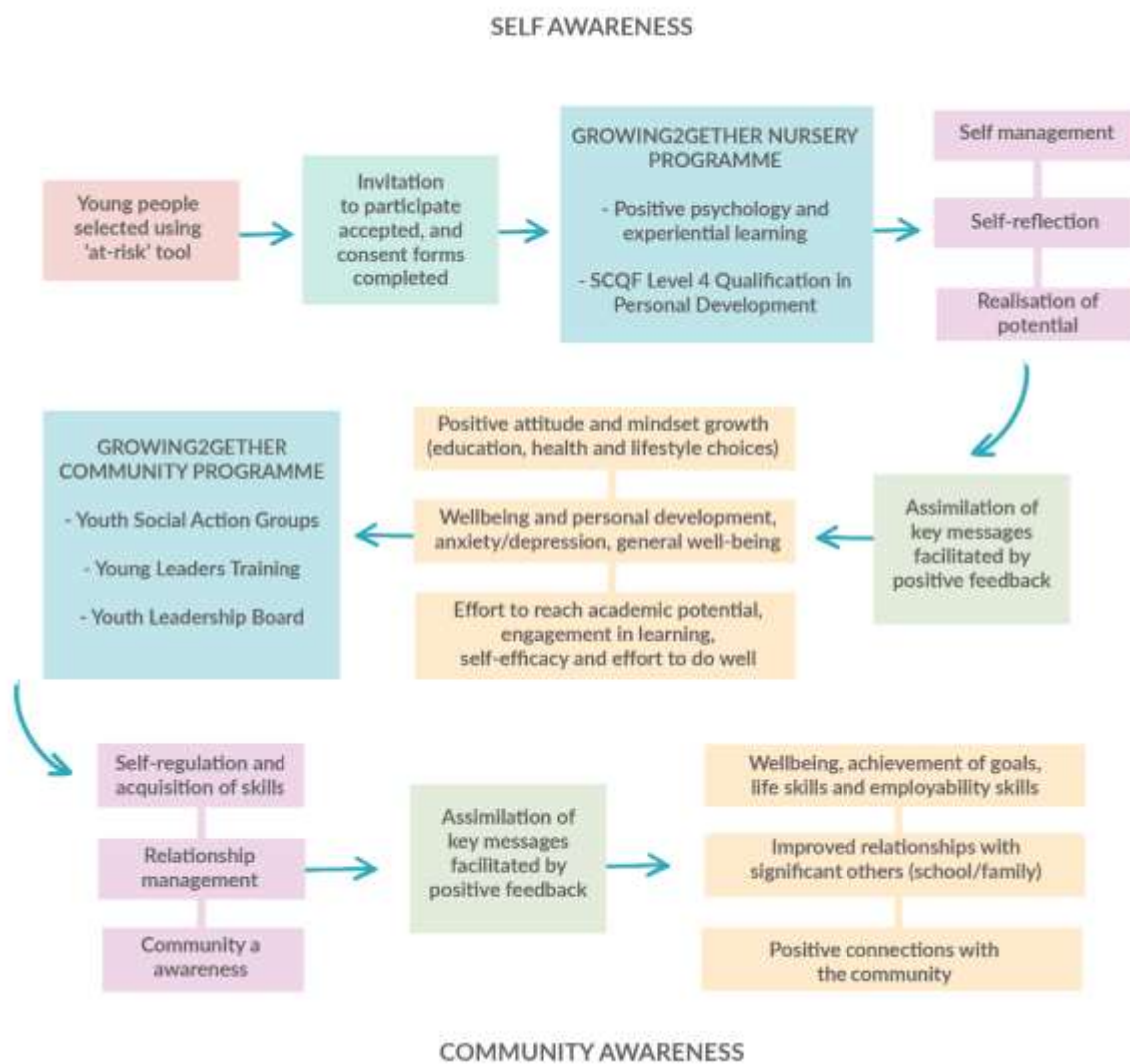
Growing2gether and Growth of Mindset

Some researchers suggest that individuals who believe intelligence is malleable (a growth mindset) are better able to bounce back from failures than those who believe intelligence is fixed, (Dweck, 1986). With regards to the latter, these people tend to feel helpless after encountering failures and this can have profound effect on learning achievement, skill acquisition, personal relationships, professional success, and many other dimensions of life (Dweck, 1986). Not only does mindset have implications for educational outcomes but recent research suggests that stressful life events, depression, substance use, and motivations for non-suicidal self-injury were weaker among those with more of a growth mindset relative to those with more of a fixed mindset (Schroder et al, 2017). These findings suggest that anxiety mindsets function in a similar way for mental health resilience as how mindsets of intelligence function for academic outcomes (Schroder et al, 2017). Throughout the curriculum, Growing2gether refers back to growth of mindset and encourages young people to perceive this as being malleable, hence realising their own potential to achieve goals.

Theory of Change

Our primary outcomes are positive mental health, (a reduction on anxiety and depression) self-esteem, positive mindset and academic potential. Emotional well-being is positively correlated with academic attainment (Jirdehi et al 2018). Through experiential learning and an approach/curriculum underpinned by positive psychology, young people are better able to self-reflect, self-manage and self-regulate, meanwhile enhancing relationships with others. Growing2gether work in partnership with Highland Council to achieve our long-term aim of young people reaching a positive destination, which include higher education, further education, employment, training, personal skills development and voluntary work. Growing2gether delivers a subsequent programme called, Youth Social Action, which forms a key part of a Growing2gether Community. The intervention is a supportive peer community which gives young people a voice, led by our Youth Leadership Board (12 young people with lived experience). Growing2gether Community also includes: Young Leader training to build skills to co-deliver our projects; regular communications and events at Findhorn eco-village, where we are based. See **Figure 1** for a summary of the programmes.

Figure 1 Theory of Change Process Model for Growing2gether Programmes



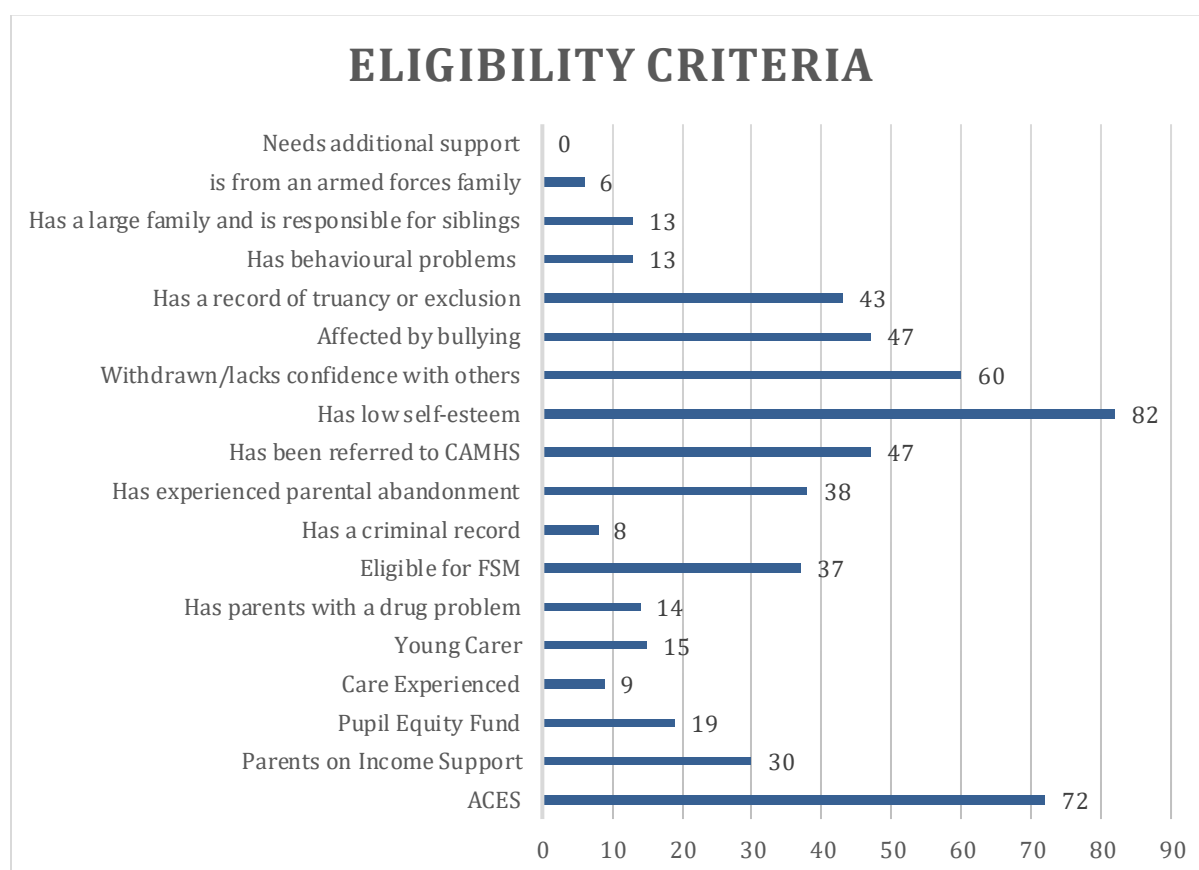
93% reach a positive destination (education/training/work)

Method

Participants

Young people are selected for the programme on the basis of psychosocial (including poverty) and behavioural disadvantage, via an eligibility tool which is completed by school contacts. Teachers must tick three of the criteria as a minimum, in order for the young person to be eligible. Missing values and “don’t know” answers were removed from the analysis. We typically see high levels of poor mental health/confidence, poverty and adverse childhood experiences (ACES), including parental abandonment, bereavement, divorce and parents on drugs/in prison. Eligible young people also attend a project presentation so they can make an informed choice to participate. Please see **Graph 1** for details regarding eligibility criteria.

Graph 1: Eligibility Profile of Participants reflected as a percentage



The following data is based on starting figures. The programme has reached 239 participants and 214 completed the programme (90% retention). From those who completed, 100% gained an accredited Level 4 SCQF interpersonal skills qualification (Self Awareness and Self in the Community). The sample were predominantly female, (66%) the remainder were male (34%). The age range was 13-17 years old, (Mean = 13.97, SD = .54). The majority of the sample were White Scottish, English or Welsh (92%) and the remaining sample were Asian (1%), Black (1%), Chinese (1%). White Polish (2%) or White Other (3%).

Figure 2 Participating Schools

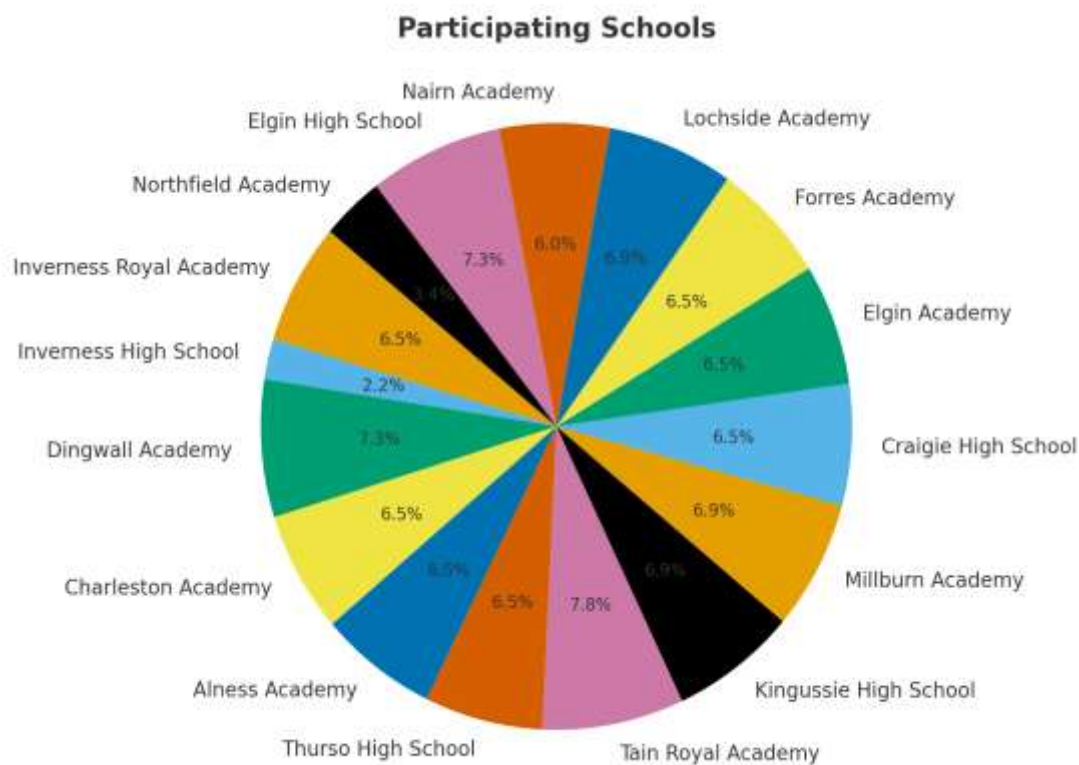
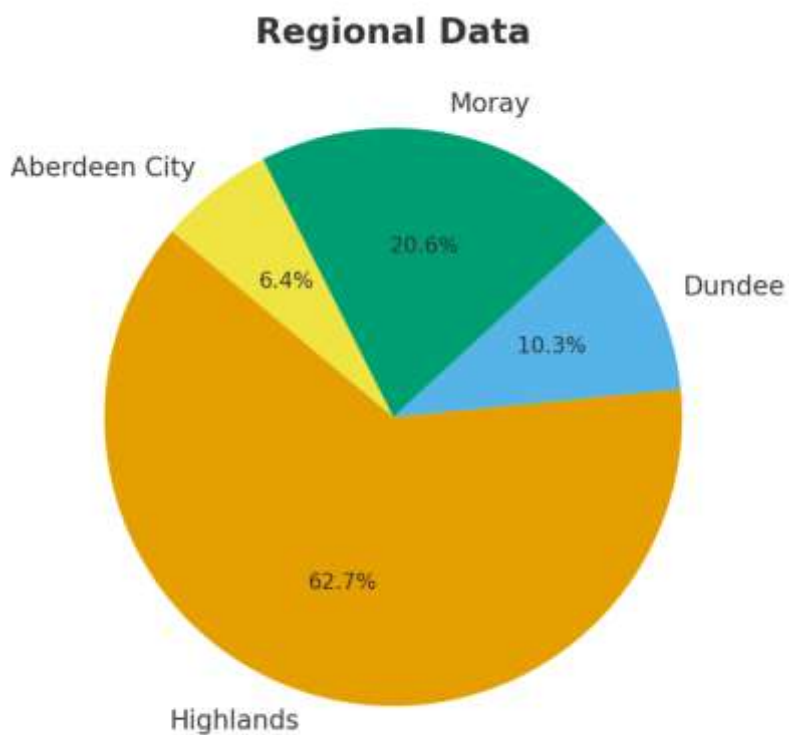


Figure 2: Regional data (Where schools were recruited)



Intervention

Growing2gether Programme

The programmes run for 16-18 weeks and each session is divided into 1.5 hours of mentoring, whereby the young person mentors their assigned toddler, and 1.5 hours of classroom time, where young people work towards gaining a Level 4 SCQF Qualification in "Personal Development: Self in Community" and "Self-Awareness" units.

Measures

Teacher's check-list eligibility questionnaire

Teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire prior to the programme's commencement in order to obtain basic information to assess eligibility.

Teacher's pre and post questionnaire

Teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire on the student's behaviours and attitudes prior to the programme's commencement and at the end of the programme. Pre and post test scores were then analysed to measure impact.

Programme Impact on well-being

The Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) is a shortened, validated version of the original 14-item WEMWBS designed to measure mental well-being. It includes 7 positively worded statements that reflect aspects of positive mental health such as optimism, clear thinking, energy, and feeling close to others. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 ("None of the time") to 5 ("All of the time"). The total raw scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating better mental well-being. Low mental well-being: scores below 20 may suggest risk of poor mental health and could indicate a need for support or intervention.

Programme Impact on mental health (Depression and Anxiety) The Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) is a 47-item self-report measure and consists of questions relating to emotional well-being such as "I feel worried when someone is angry with me" and "I feel sad or empty". Each question is scored on a 4-point scale (0=never, 1=sometimes, 2=often and 3=always). This measure is intended to assess children's symptoms corresponding to selected *DSM-IV* anxiety and major depressive disorders and is considered to be a suitable instrument to assess anxiety levels across adolescence (Mathyssek et al, 2013). Global scores were calculated before and after the programme. Low scores correlate to better mental health (i.e., lower depression and anxiety).

Programme's impact on growth of mindset is evaluated using one measured before and after the programme. The question is scored on a 1 (Strongly Disagree) -10 (Strongly Agree) scale. Higher scores represent greater growth of mindset.

Programme's impact on health This section asks young people to rate on a scale of 1-5 the extent to which the programme has helped them view their mental and physical well-being, for example encouraging them to think about the consequences of their actions and encouraging them to look after their health. Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (1=Not at all, 2=Not much, 3=Unsure, 4=A little, 5= A lot). These questions are measured at the end of the programme only.

Programme's impact on attitude relating to their community. This section consists of questions relating to the young people's attitudes regarding school, confidence and community. Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Unsure, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree). These questions are measured at the end of the programme only.

Satisfaction and feedback. This section asks for feedback on young people's experiences on the programme. (e.g., enjoyment, relationships, community, engagement with school, confidence in abilities). This section also allows for young people's comments. Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Unsure, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree).

Analysis

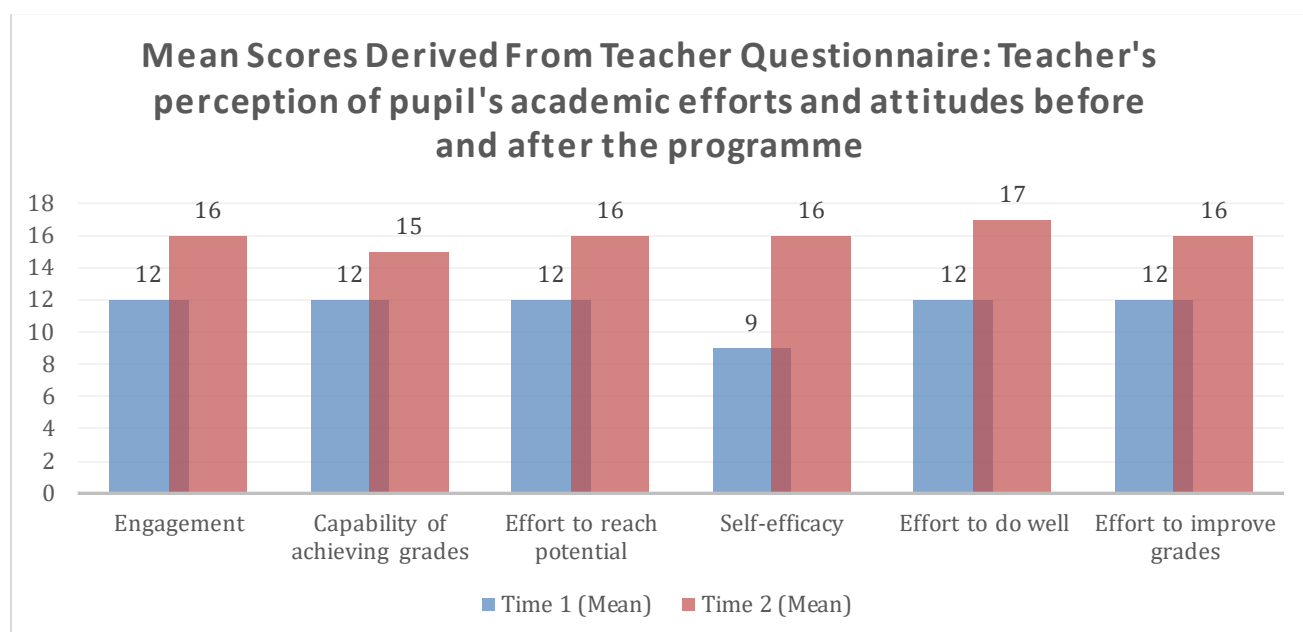
Standard descriptive analyses were performed to report the respondents' ratings on feedback questions using SPSS version 29. T-tests. Repeated Measures ANOVA's and Bivariate correlations were conducted to detect any differences in respondents' answers. Significance levels for all tests were 2-tailed.

Findings

Teacher's Questionnaire....

Table 1 displays Mean, sample, Standard deviation, t- value, significance and percentage change. Size effects were calculated for the sample. Cohen classified effect sizes as small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$), and large ($d \geq 0.8$). In this sample, a large effect (size $d \geq 0.8$) was found for each outcome. The table below reveals significant improvement in, engagement and interest in learning, (33%), grades they are capable of achieving, (25%), effort to reach their potential, (33%), effort to do well (78%), likelihood of achieving the grades they need to further their education, (42%), and self-efficacy, (33%).

Table 1: Teacher Questionnaire Outcomes						
Overall, the student is.	Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Percentage Change	t-vale	Sig
engaged and interested	12	161	4.480	33%	-8.58	p = <0.01
	16	161	4.861			
achieving grades, they are capable of	12	163	7.952	25%	-5.84	p = <0.01
	15	163	3.804			
making effort to achieve potential	12	163	5.474	33%	-9.60	p = <0.01
	16	163	3.590			
confident in attempting new tasks (self-efficacy)	9	163	4.506	78%	-5.93	p = <0.01
	16	163	5.209			
Is making a conscious effort to do as well as they can	12	157	4.789	42%	-3.91	p = <0.01
	17	157	3.198			
Trying hard to achieve the grades to progress to further education	12	160	4.542	33%	-3.65	p = <0.01
	16	160	3.484			

Graph 2: Teacher's perception of the young people's efforts and attitudes regarding education**Table 2: Teacher's questionnaire**

<i>Since completing the programme....</i>	N	% Agreement
the student appears to be more confident	167	92%
the student appears to be happier	167	87%
the experience has helped them emotionally	167	92%

The high percentages for teacher's perception of their student's confidence, happiness and emotional well-being were encouraging. At the end of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to make comments regarding the young person's behaviour. Below, is a selection of comments made by teachers.

"X has put herself out of her comfort zone, and has overcome some of her anxieties about trying new things, being around people who she isn't comfortable with, and communicating better."

"Pupil has matured, is more respectful and is gaining respect of staff and other pupils. His attitude to work has improved and is better in lessons/classes."

"X is much more confident in general. Clearer focus. Able to work well with others and is a team player now. They have better engagement in pupil voice and show more personal confidence."

"X has grown in confidence with talking in groups and with others who she wouldn't usually engage with."

"X has really enjoyed the course, and she has felt a great sense of achievement. She has grown in confidence, both with the children in the nursery and the grownups too."

Participant questionnaires

Impact on mental health and connectedness

Global scores were calculated before and after the programme. The table below displays Mean, sample, Standard deviation, t- value, significance and Cohen's d. Cohen classified effect sizes as small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$), and large ($d \geq 0.8$). For RCADS, low scores correlate to better mental health (i.e., lower depression and anxiety) and for SWEMWBS, higher scores indicate greater mental well-being. The results indicate that there was a significant improvement (**22%**) in young people's mental health, measured by RCADS ($t = 6.641$ (174), $p = <0.01$). There was a significant improvement (**25%**) in general well-being, ($t = -6.225$ (75), $p = <0.01$). Moderate effect sizes were achieved for both measures.

Table 5: Mental Health Outcomes						
Scale	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	T	P	Cohen's d
RCADS Score Time 1	60	175	29.15	6.641	>0.01	0.5
RCADS Score Time 2	47	175	25.84			
SWEMWBS Time 1	20	76	5.170	-6.225	>0.01	1.4
SWEMWBS Time 2	25	76	4.456			

Most young people felt that the programme was influential in relation to valuing the support received on the programme, reflecting on what is good in their lives and helping them to feel connected to others ($n = 197$).

- **83%** of young people agreed that the programme helped them to reflect on what they are good at and what is important in their lives
- **88%** of young people agreed that the programme is influential in helping young people make the right decisions (for example staying away from toxic substances, such as alcohol and drugs)
- **97%** of young people agreed that they valued the support they received on the sessions
- **91%** agreed that the programme made them more aware of themselves and the consequences of their actions
- **85%** felt that the experience has made them feel more connected to others
- **88%** agreed that the programme helped them to understand others better
- **87%** agreed that the programme helped them gain confidence in their abilities

- **85%** agreed that the programme helped them to see their potential to reach their goals
- **80%** of young people agreed that the programme has encouraged them to want to become more involved in their community and help others
- **99%** of young people agreed that the course improved their mental well-being

Growth of Mindset and Attitude to Education

Statistical analysis revealed an improvement of **16%** in Growth of Mindset.

Most young people felt that the programme was influential in relation to teaching them about the importance of education and having a positive mindset.

- **96%** agreed that education provides them with more opportunities in the future.

“It helped me to have more of a positive mindset.”

“I have a more positive attitude towards school”

“Thanks for the opportunity ...I now have new paths for the future and opportunities ...I know what I want to do in the future.”

Satisfaction and feedback

Young people were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about the programme (n = 197).

- **96%** found the sessions valuable and informative
- **94%** enjoyed building a relationship with their toddler
- **97%** enjoyed working with the group
- **96%** would recommend the programme to other young people

In the young people’s own words

“Being part of this group made me realise that most people don’t hate me, they just don’t know me. It has been great making new connections.”

“I felt really seen, heard and understood.”

“I am stronger than I thought I was and am more outgoing and am more aware of people’s emotions and body language.”

"I feel like doing Growing2gether has really helped me to become better with people and how to understand people."

"I just want to say thank you for letting me come to the primary/nursery it has been the highlight of my time. Every Thursday I am always excited to go as the kids are so sweet and kind but I will miss the kids because I loved playing football with one of the nursery boys called X. One of the staff that ran the nursery said that X was not very happy until I came and they said I put a smile on his face when he saw me. I just try to be nice to them and they should hopefully be nice back. I wanted to say to the kids and staff to have a good life and never give up and if you believe in yourself, you will do great in life full stop. I would like to visit them but obviously I can't because I don't think the school will let me in. But I felt so bad leaving them and I loved putting smiles on their faces even though times were tough. They were all so hyper especially little X like I was so happy when I saw his smile. I wanted to cry when saying goodbye but I didn't so yeah, I loved spending time with them, helping them etc yourself, it was an amazing experience and I will always remember that. I'm getting teary eyed just writing this long message. But thank you for everything like I wonder how long it would've taken to set this whole thing up. But yeah, without further ado I am so grateful that I got a chance to help out whenever I could. Yeah, even when I didn't feel well, I still put them first because I don't want to see them upset or angry. " (Text from participant)

Below are some comments made by the parents;

"Words cannot express the gratitude I have for this programme and its teachers. My daughter has become more confident and a lot happier having to become responsible and adaptable in her role at nursery. I can't thank you enough for all your support in making a huge difference to my daughter and us as a family."

"It has been a great experience to watch x engage and develop her confidence. She has obviously enjoyed this opportunity. She is more confident in social situations with a wider range of ages now."

"I feel proud that he managed to complete it. I think he is more considerate of little ones and I thought it was a really good experience for him."

Below are some comments made by the nursery;

"The young people formed positive relationships with the children and latterly were able to use their initiative to provide the support the children needed when they needed it. I think they have made a difference to the pupils they have been working with. The children loved them coming every Wednesday and would talk about them at other times in the week."

"In the mornings in the nursery, we try to keep the children relaxed and calm as this is their time for activities and quiet learning through play. The young people came to understand this and settled well into our routine becoming more relaxed as time went by. The staff and I were delighted how well they tuned into the children's needs and always encouraging them to try things out for themselves to develop their greater independence. By the end, they were asking us questions that would clarify what they could do to help certain children."

Case Study: Young Person's Journey

Facilitators were asked to provide a brief narrative of a young person's journey. Names were removed to protect the identity of the young person.

Background

Ella was selected by the Inclusion and Attendance Department as she was not attending any classes in school. She had recently moved from a nearby school to live with her mother. Ella explained that she had followed a staff member who had transferred to Inverness High, as they shared a close relationship.

Her attendance was poor, and on the occasions, she did come to school, she would only spend time in the staff member's room and never attend classes. Although there were often other pupils present, Ella would hide behind a book, as she is a voracious reader. At home, her mother was undergoing cancer treatment, and Ella, an only child, was dividing her time between her mother's and father's households.

Ella is very articulate and engaging in conversation with adults but is insecure when speaking to her peers, and she had not made any friends at her new school.

Initial Presentation

During the introductory session, Ella appeared nervous but was intelligent, articulate, and easy to talk to one-to-one. As part of the session, she took part in a paired activity where pupils asked and answered questions before introducing their partner to the group. When it was Ella's turn, she spoke clearly and without hesitation, masking her panic well. However, she left at break and missed the following session, later confiding to the staff member that she had experienced a panic attack and felt nervous in the group. Despite this shaky start, Ella made the brave decision to return and to keep pushing herself outside her comfort zone.

Engagement and Progress

In the nursery, Ella was naturally drawn to the shy children, whom she gently engaged with and read stories to. As the weeks progressed, she joined in with more activities as the children she had supported grew in confidence. Ella's attendance pattern was roughly every second week until week 12. For most sessions, she only came if the staff member could accompany her, but around the halfway point she began attending independently. She tentatively started talking to her peers in the nursery and gradually relaxed and engaged more.

In week 3, she befriended a shy peer who usually had another close friend; in that friend's absence, Ella and this pupil connected. Their friendship continued and grew stronger, and by week 8 Ella considered this peer, along with her family and her support staff member, part of her innermost circle of relationships.

By week 12, Ella pushed herself further socially, attending the eco-visit and joining in with the group activities. She even sat with her new friends on the train journey, later reflecting: ***"I also pushed myself to come to the eco-visit and be sociable."*** That same week she attended a school trip to Landmark and returned to nursery, her busiest and most social week since starting at the school.

After this turning point, she attended every session and grew very close with one particular friend. The pair bonded over humour, especially joking about their mothers' lack of fashion sense, and they often advised facilitators on their style choices. Their laughter frequently filled the room. They took the initiative to decorate for the celebration day, proudly hanging lanterns, creating a table of party food, and making party bags. They had even requested

bubbles and bouncy balls for the celebration, which they used to add fun to the day.

At the celebration, Ella also connected with the most socially confident group member through their shared love of reading. They spoke animatedly about falling in love with characters and the bittersweet feeling of finishing a beloved book series. They exchanged tips on accessing books from obscure authors, deepening their bond.

Next Steps

Looking ahead, Ella decided to give herself a fresh start in S4, reasoning that everyone would be starting new classes together and she would be in the same position as her peers. With new friendships to support her, she said: ***“I’m now going into most classes now I’m in S4. I’ll probably go to full classes after the summer.”***

Reflections from Ella

“I feel it was a big achievement to leave my house and go to the nursery, and to talk to the children.”

“I learnt that I can put myself out of my comfort zone sometimes.”

“It was nice for me to leave the house and socialise.”

“It helped me to get out of the house because I didn’t leave the house. And more confidence.”

Aspirations

Although Ella is not yet certain about her long-term aspirations, she is beginning to explore options that may connect with her love of reading.

Discussion and Conclusion

Anxiety and depression, measured by RCADS significantly improved (by 22%) by the end of the programme, suggesting that Growing2gether has made a positive impact on young people's mental health. The intervention aims to reduce mental health inequalities by selecting “at risk” teenagers to enrol on the programme and provide them with an opportunity to build their confidence through helping them to establish positive connections and experiences, therefore, it is encouraging that well-being, measured using The Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) significantly improved by the end of the programme (25%). Previous research indicates that individuals with higher well-being scores reported lower levels of anxiety, stress, and depression, and higher life satisfaction. High SWEMWBS is related to the fulfilment of interpersonal relationships and the ability to implement adaptive coping strategies hence leading to better mental health, therefore, it is not surprising that both measures were correlated and showed a significant improvement.

Growth of Mindset, a construct linked to academic resilience, improved (by 16%) by the end of the programme. Not only does mindset have implications for educational outcomes but recent research suggests that stressful life events depression, substance use, and motivations for non-suicidal self-injury were weaker among those with more of a growth mindset relative to those with more of a fixed mindset (Schroder et al, 2017). Throughout the curriculum, Growing2gether refers back to growth of mindset and encourages young people to perceive this as being malleable, hence realising their own potential to achieve goals. It is encouraging to observe that some of the young people’s comments reflect this growth.

When conducting research, it is more reliable to have multiple informants report on the young people’s progress which is why Growing2gether routinely ask teachers to complete a measure

for the students, especially as teachers are good informants of young people's behaviour. It was encouraging to observe that teachers felt that Growing2gether increased young people's confidence, appeared happier and the experience helped them emotionally. Teachers were asked a series of questions regarding the student's academic performance. Pre and post tests revealed significant improvements in all areas including improvement on engagement and interest in learning, achieving grades they are capable of, making the effort to reach their potential, making a conscious effort to do as well as they can, achieving the grades they need to further their education and self-efficacy. The results indicated a moderate -large effect size, $d \geq 0.8$ on all measures. A large effect size indicates that research finding has practical significance, while a small effect size indicates limited practical applications. The comments accompanying these scores were exceptionally pleasing to observe.

It was encouraging to observe positive comments from all involved, including the children assigned to the young person, to the nursery (primary) and teaching staff (secondary), parents as well as the young people themselves. The feedback ratings measured at the end of the programme only were extremely encouraging with regards to the programme's efficacy in encouraging self-reflection, helping people to empathise and understand others, increasing self-confidence, self-efficacy, connectedness and sense of community. Overall, it is clear from the high retention rate, feedback percentages, case study and comments made by the young people. Their parents, the nurseries and teachers, felt that the programme was well received.

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