



## Exploring the Efficacy of Growing2gether on Mental Health, Education and Behavioural Outcomes (2017 – 2023)

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### **Abstract**

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#### Background

Growing2gether is a targeted youth intervention, which specifically selects young people 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 require extra support. Young people receive an accredited personal development qualification. Since January 2017, the charity has reached 1748 children and young people across the Highlands and helped them to improve their mental health and enhance their educational/community engagement.

#### Methods and Objective

Statistical analysis was applied to data collected since 2017 to the present date. The aim of the current report is to evaluate the intervention's efficacy and to demonstrate the positive impact it has had on young people.

#### Results

The main findings revealed that anxiety and depression, measured by The Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) and self-esteem, measured by Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, (RSS) significantly improved (by 23%) by the end of the programme ( $t = 10.79$  (502),  $p = <0.01$ ) and ( $t = -3.41$  (31),  $p = <0.01$ ) respectively), indicating that Growing2gether made a positive impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Individuals with higher baseline depression and anxiety scores showed significant improvements (by 31%) by the end of the programme, ( $t = 13.38$  (229),  $p = <0.01$ ), suggesting that individuals with a poorer mental health show greater improvement with regards to anxiety and depression. There were significant differences between young people who had experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) where individuals at higher risk, benefitted more with regards to their mental health ( $F(1, 95) = 94.63$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) compared to those scoring less than the threshold. Self-esteem significantly increased (by 12%) by the end of the programme, ( $t = -3.41$  (31),  $p = <0.0$ ). Growth of Mindset, a construct linked to academic resilience, improved significantly ( $t = -8.15$  (205),  $p = <0.01$ ) by (by 24%) the end of the programme.

Results from the *teacher questionnaires* reveal a significant ( $p = <0.01$ ) improvement in engagement and interest in learning, students are achieving grades they are capable of, student's effort to reach their potential has improved, effort to do as well as they can has increased, perception of the student achieving the grades they need to further their education has increased and self-efficacy has increased. Feedback and case studies provide further evidence for the programme's efficacy.

#### Conclusion

Overall, the report demonstrates that this intervention is highly effective for increasing young people's self-esteem, mindset, sense of connectedness, engagement and wellbeing.

## Introduction

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Growing2gether is underpinned by transpersonal psychology, which provides a holistic psychological approach and focuses on enabling individuals to access more of their potential. Facilitators work closely with schools and nurseries to gain an understanding of the young person and child participating on 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 (their potential). From this perspective, a young person can receive challenge and nurturing in a way which engages rather than alienates them. Furthermore, it creates a wider field for them to grow and develop within and to know themselves, their strengths, and weaknesses.



### **Growing2gether, Mental Wellbeing and Connectedness**

The latest Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (YRBS) conducted in 2019 (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2020, in Vélez-Grau, M and Lindsey, 2022) suggested that, 19% of adolescents in secondary school think about suicide, and 9% of students had attempted suicide in the past. One of the prominent themes to emerge when studying young people who attempted suicide was their disconnection from others, as well as their perception of low self-competence (Choi et al, 2013). The study suggests that the young people's connection to others in their communities as well as their perception of self-competence are important in determining how a young person feels and subsequently, this determines their thoughts and feelings in relation to suicide and depression. Many other studies have echoed these findings, for instance one study examined the potential protective role of school connectedness in the relationship between cyberbullying and suicide risk behaviour. Findings indicated that being a victim of cyberbullying, was associated with increased risk of suicide and that connections to school

moderated this relationship in that, among victims of cyberbullying, those more connected to school were less likely to report suicidal behaviour (Walsh et al, 2019).

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.

### **Growing2gether and Self-esteem**

*"Self-esteem is an overall assessment of people's worthiness, expressed in a positive or negative orientation towards themselves"* (Rosenberg, 1995). While high self-esteem is characterised by strong confidence and belief in oneself, low self-esteem is characterised by lack of confidence and the tendency to feel badly about oneself. Adolescence is a critical period for changes in the development of self-esteem as during this transitional period, self-esteem typically diminishes (Winarsunu et al 2023). High self-esteem is related to the fulfilment of interpersonal relationships and the ability to implement adaptive coping strategies hence leading to better mental health and wellbeing (Birndorf et al, 2005). Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem can result in lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, poorer educational attainment, high risk sexual behaviour or even suicide (Jirdehi et al 2018). Recent research (Winarsunu, et ea 2023) suggested that by providing an intervention (lifestyles training) increased self-esteem through helping individuals to improve their communication, cognitive and skills training in a group setting. Similarly, Growing2gether offers an experience whereby, a young person can feel a sense of connectedness to others through being part of a group where they are equals and must learn to communicate effectively and openly with one another. Positive appraisal and unconditional positive regard, coupled with coaching and mentoring, are powerful elements in helping to reduce anxiety and depression in young people through raising their self-esteem.

### **Growing2gether and Social-emotional Learning**

On Growing2gether, there is a high component to social-emotional learning in the sessions. For example, helping young people to realise the skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others (though their child), establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions as well as setting goals. Promoting social problem solving, (for example, creating role play scenarios on how to best deal with a problem) and self-acceptance, encourages individuals to respond appropriately to various situations, such as avoiding drug use and having unsafe sex (health/risk). The programme aims to improve young people's decision-making ability through teaching how to consider consequences of their choices and encouraging them to make appropriate (and less risky) decisions. Positive appraisal (by child and facilitator) within a supportive environment enhances individual's self-esteem and self-efficacy. This, coupled with the strong emphasis

on choice, enhances the effect on their school behaviour as well as raising future aspirations. These effects are hypothesized to extend to their community and home life, whereby relationships are strengthened through positive communication, respect and understanding.

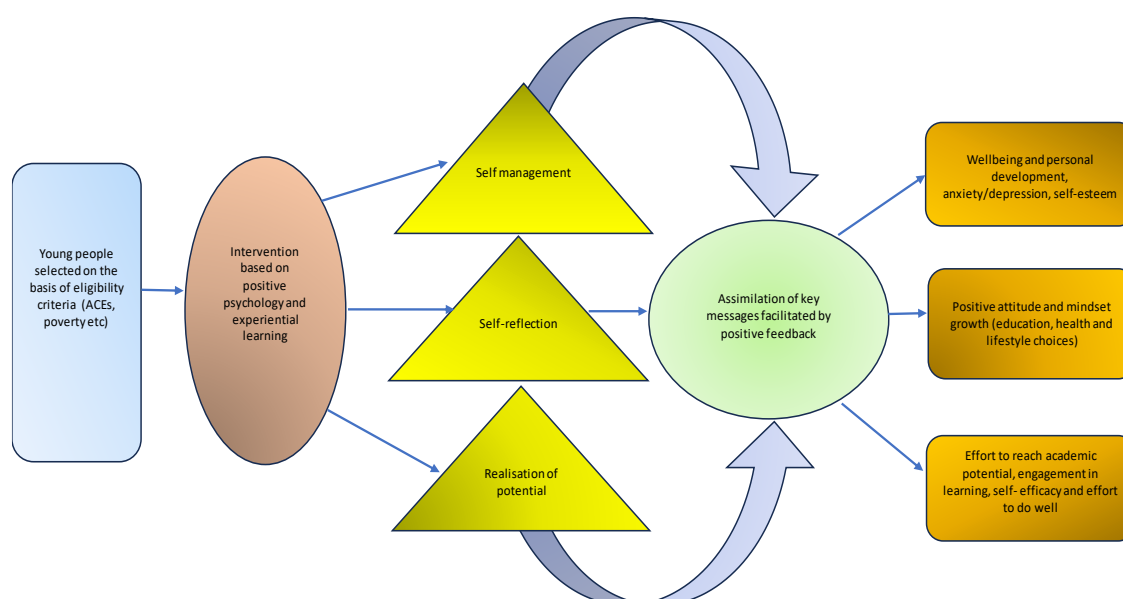
### Growing2gether and Growth of Mindset

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 refer back to growth of mindset and encourage young people to perceive this as being malleable, hence realising their own potential to achieve goals.

### Theory of Change

The model below illustrates Growing2gether's Theory of Change model. Our primary outcomes are positive mental health, (a reduction on anxiety and depression) self-esteem, positive mindset and academic potential. Emotional wellbeing is positively correlated with academic attainment (Jirdehi et al 2018). Through experiential learning and an approach/curriculum underpinned by positive psychology, young people are able to 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. Recent research on Growing2gether graduates (N233) undertaken by Highland Council, revealed that 92% of young people reached a positive destination. See **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1:** Summary of Growing2gether



## 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. Although the tool has been adapted over the years, some key indicators remain consistently high such as low self-esteem, (96%) being socially isolated or withdrawn, (64%) not having friends, (70%) being a recipient of psychological intervention, (53%) and had experienced parental abandonment through separation, divorce or death (55%). In total 60% of young people experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These are highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence.

The following data is based on starting figures. The programme has reached 874 participants with a retention rate of 82% and from those who complete, 100% gain an accredited Level 4 SCQF interpersonal skills qualification (Self Awareness and Self in the Community). The sample were predominantly female, (75%) the remainder were male (24%) and non-binary (1%). The age range was 12-15 years old, (Mean = 14.0, SD = .60) 6% had a disability and 6% were religious. See **Graph 1** for recruitment and completion figures, **Figure 2** for participating schools and **Figure 3** for ethnicity breakdown.

**Graph 1:** Recruitment and completion figure according to year

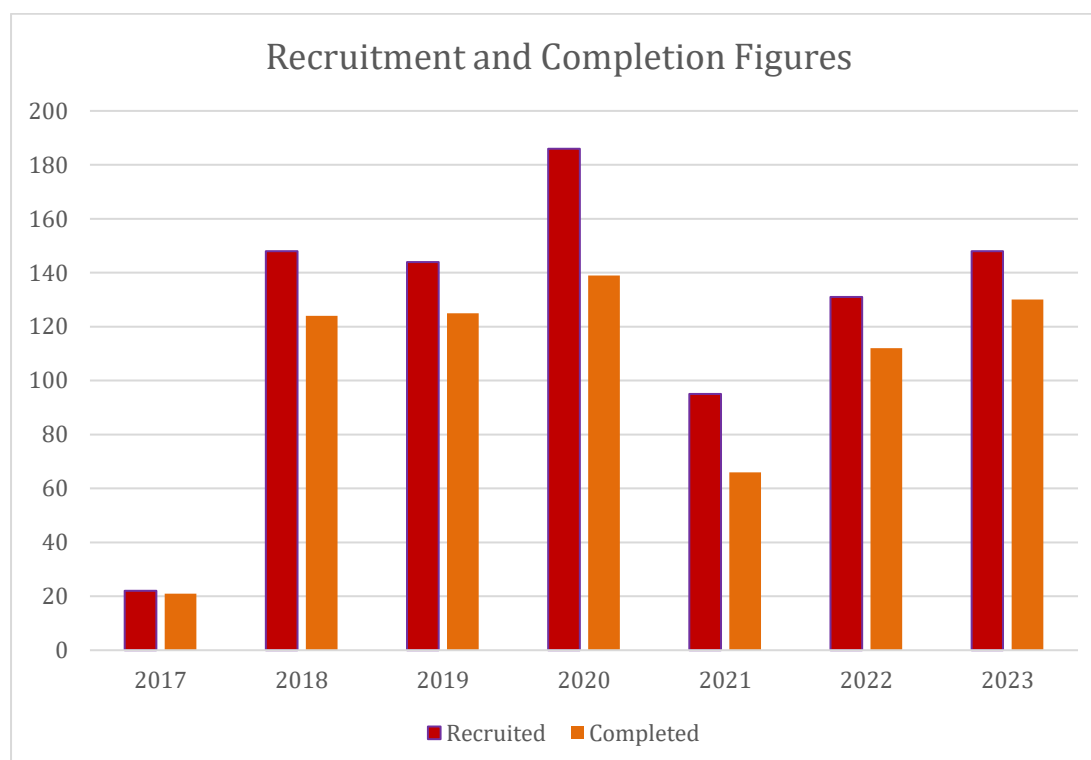


Figure 2 displays participating schools as a percentage

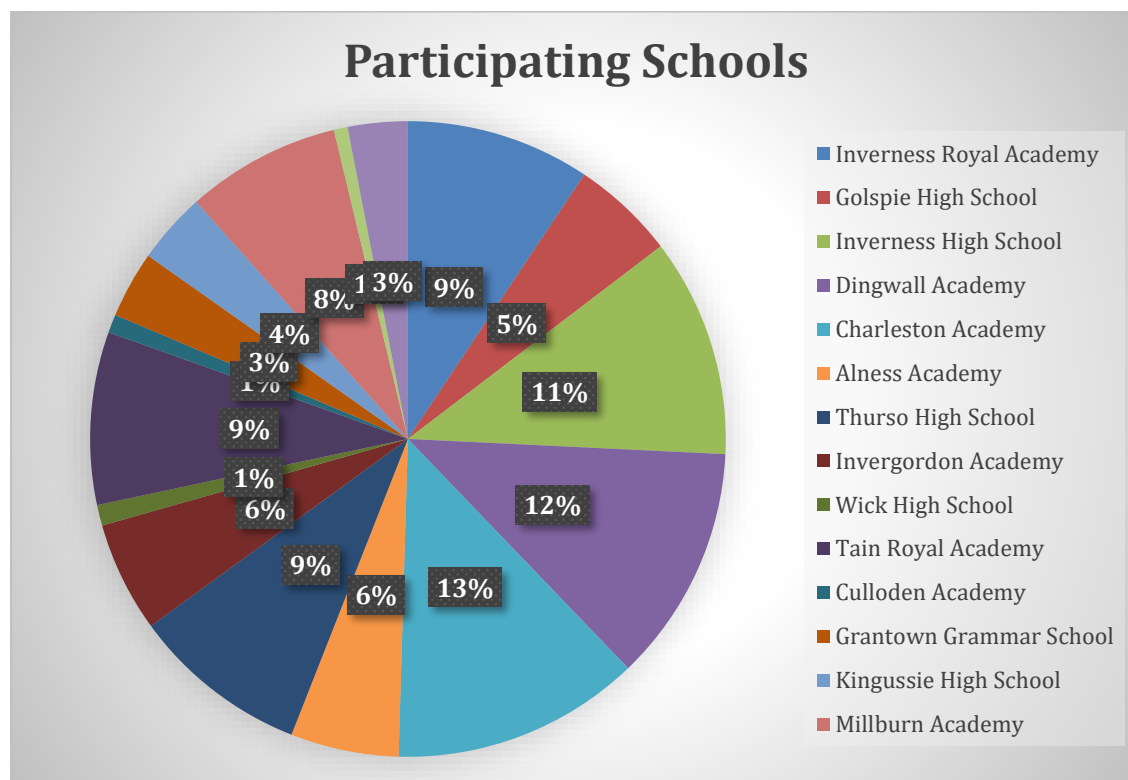
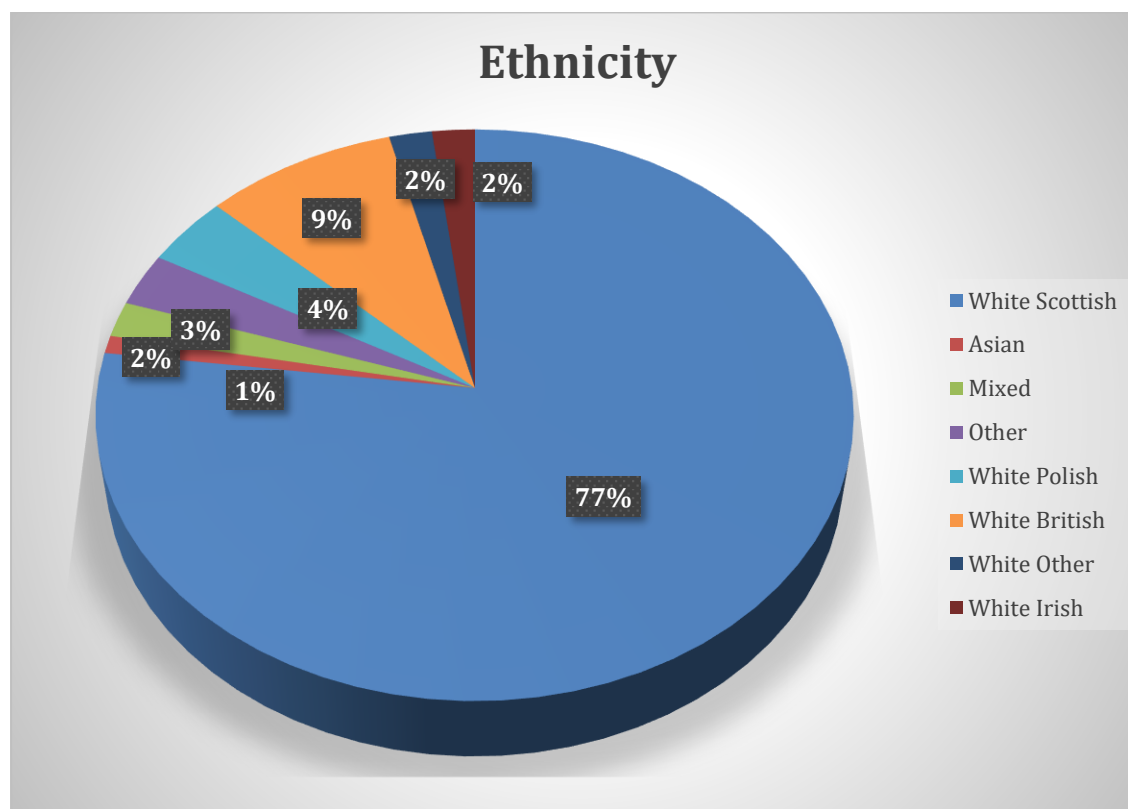


Figure 3 displays ethnicity profile as a percentage





## Intervention

### ***Growing2gether Programme***

The programmes run for 17-18 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 Self-esteem**

The Rosenberg self-esteem Scale (1965) is a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale is believed to be uni-dimensional. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

**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 wellbeing 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 wellbeing, 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

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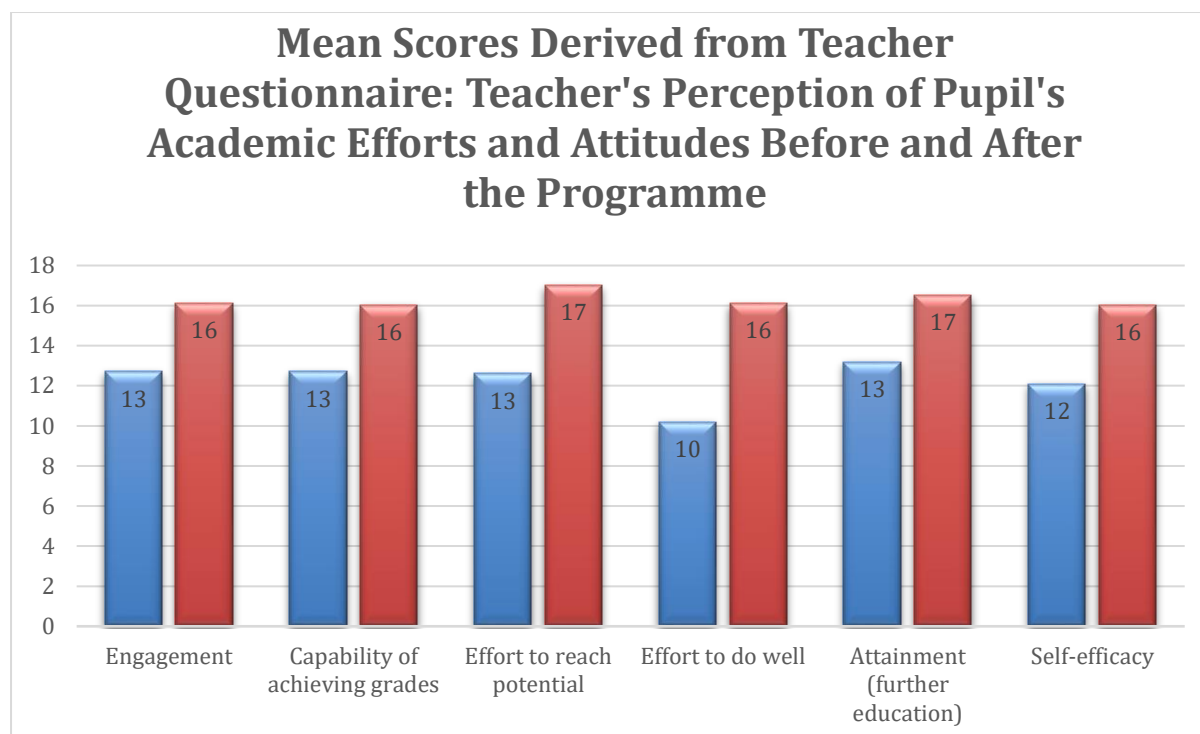
### Teacher's Questionnaire....

**Table 1** displays percentages which have been converted from mean values at Time 1 and Time 2, standard deviation, percentage change. t-value and significance value. **Table 2** displays the percentage agreement for statements relating to the programme.

Table 1: Teacher Questionnaire Outcomes						
Overall, the student is.	Mean	N	Standard Deviation	Percentage Change	t-vale	Sig
engaged and interested	12.7	371	4.09	<b>27%</b>	-13.25	p = <0.01
	16.1	371	3.98			
achieving grades, they are capable of	12.7	375	4.59	<b>26%</b>	-10.9	p = <0.01
	16.0	375	5.08			
making effort to achieve potential	12.6	374	4.02	<b>35%</b>	-9.78	p = <0.01
	17.0	374	8.48			
making an effort to do well	10.2	318	3.98	<b>58%</b>	-18.15	p = <0.01
	16.1	318	5.80			
achieving grades, they require for further education	13.2	371	3.98	<b>25%</b>	-14.78	p = <0.01
	16.5	371	3.39			
confident in attempting new tasks (self-efficacy)	12.1	371	3.79	<b>32%</b>	-15.20	p = <0.01
	16.0	371	4.45			

Results from the teacher questionnaires reveal a significant improvement in engagement and interest in learning (27%), students are achieving grades they are capable of (26%), student's effort to reach their potential has improved (35%), effort to do as well as they can has increased (58%), perception of the student achieving the grades they need to further their education has increased (25%) and self-efficacy has increased (32%).



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

\*Blue = Time 1 and Red = Time 2

**Table 2: Teacher's questionnaire**

<b>Since completing the programme....</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% Agreement</b>
the student appears to be more confident	424	<b>90%</b>
the student appears to be happier	424	<b>92%</b>
the experience has helped them emotionally	424	<b>94%</b>

The high percentages for teacher's perception of their student's confidence, happiness and emotional wellbeing were encouraging.

#### **Teacher's comments.....**

At the end of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to make comments regarding the young person's behaviour....

***"I feel X confidence has improved. He has often been the victim of inappropriate comments and it has impacted him. He is able to open up more about these difficult situations and thrive on being given opportunities."***

***"X has absolutely grown in confidence. She has shown a real commitment in attending the programme and seeing it through to the end. She is able to articulate her needs"***

***and emotions following the programme. Growing2gether has definitely helped her confidence.”***

***“He has really enjoyed the experience and it has made him re-think his future. His confidence in himself has grown and he is more aware of the communication and social skills that he has.”***

***“X’s attendance has considerably been above 90% since he started Growing2gether. His attitude to his learning has dramatically improved and he now has the confidence to stand up at a number of whole school events to speak in front of everyone.”***

## Participant questionnaires

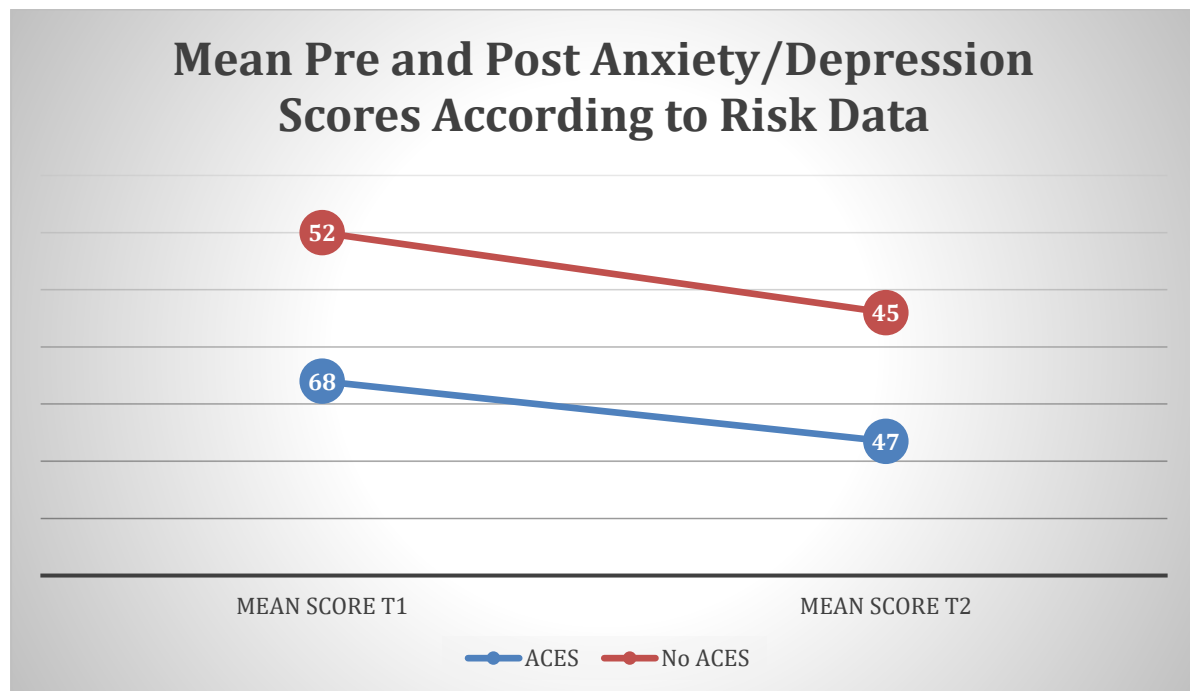
### Impact on mental health and connectedness

Global scores were calculated before and after the programme. For RCADS, low scores correlate to better mental health (i.e., lower depression and anxiety) and for self-esteem, higher scores indicate better mental health. The results indicate that there was a significant improvement (**23%**) in young people’s mental health, measured by RCADS ( $t = 10.79$  (502),  $p = <0.01$ ) and a significant improvement (**12%**) in self-esteem, measured by Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ( $t = -3.41$  (31),  $p = <0.0$ ). Please note that the sample size for self-esteem is lower as the scale had only been administered for the most recent cohort.

Table 3: Mental Health Outcomes						
Scale	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Percentage Change	t-vale	Sig
RCADS Score Time 1	62.7	503	29.1	<b>23%</b>	10.79	p = <0.01
RCADS Score Time 2	48.0	503	27.5			
Self Esteem Time 1	26.0	32	4.6	<b>12%</b>	-3.41	p = <0.01
Self Esteem Time 2	29.0	32	5.1			

With RCADS, a t-score (total score) of 65 indicates that the score is roughly in the top 7% of scores of un-referred young people (described as borderline clinical by the developer of the tool) and a score of 70 indicates that the score is roughly in the top 2% of scores of un-referred young people. We decided to concentrate on participants who were exhibiting higher anxiety/depression by selecting baseline score = <65. Individuals with higher baseline depression and anxiety scores showed significant improvements of **31%** by the end of the programme, ( $t = 13.38$  (229),  $p = <0.01$ ).

The comparability of the young people split into two groups on the basis of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and not experiencing ACEs was explored. There were significant differences between young people who had experienced ACES ( $F(1, 95) = 94.63$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). There was a **13%** improvement amongst individuals who had not experienced and adverse events and **31%** improvement in young people who had experienced adverse events. Baseline scores were significantly higher for the ACEs group, though both groups significantly improved with regards to their scores.

**Graph 3:** Young people's Mean Scores for Anxiety and Depression according to risk profile

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. *Please note that some questions have changed and therefore sample size will differ.*

- **87%** (n = 255) of young people agreed that the programme helped them to reflect on what they are good at and what is important in their lives
- **90%** (n = 259) of young people agreed that they valued the support they received on the sessions
- **91%** (n = 255) agreed that the programme made them more aware of themselves and the consequences of their actions
- **81%** (n = 514) felt that the experience has made them feel more connected to others
- **81%** (n = 115) agreed that the programme helped them to understand others better
- **81%** (n = 115) agreed that the programme helped them gain confidence in their abilities
- **87%** (n = 115) agreed that the programme helped them to see their potential to reach their goals
- **68%** (n = 115) of young people agreed that the programme has encouraged them to want to become more involved in their community and help others

Young people's comments reflected their wellbeing and sense of connectedness to others.

***"I enjoyed my time in the nursery and creating strong bonds with the children"***

***"I enjoyed making new connections with others"***

***"Growing2gether taught me to look after my mental health"***

***"I learnt how to empathise with people and to connect with the little ones"***

***"The programme has taught me to put myself in someone else's shoes"***

***"What I liked most, was the community we built here on the programme"***

#### Growth of Mindset and Attitude to Education

Statistical analysis revealed a significant improvement of **24%** in Growth of Mindset ( $t = -8.15$  (205),  $p = <0.01$ )

<b>Table 4: Mindset Outcomes</b>						
<b>Scale</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Percentage Change</b>	<b>t-vale</b>	<b>Sig</b>
Growth of Mindset Time 1	5.9	206	2.1	<b>24%</b>	-8.15	p = <0.01
Growth of Mindset Time 2	7.3	206	1.8			

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

- **95%** agreed that education provides them with more opportunities in the future.

Below, are some comments made by the young people on the programme in relation to growth of mindset and education.

***"I learned that I can achieve anything when I put my brain and thoughts into it."***

***"Being on Growing2gether has helped me because when I am in a difficult situation, I can think back to this and find a way to solve it."***

***"It helps socially and with education if you're not attending school. A good experience if you are struggling in the system"***

### Satisfaction and feedback

Young people were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about the programme (n = 524- 544).

- **90%** found the subjects that were covered informative
- **91%** enjoyed building a relationship with their toddler
- **91%** enjoyed working with others
- **93%** would recommend the programme to other young people

Below, are some comments made by the young people on the programme.

***"Overall, I feel as if I have grown as a person and I have become more confident...Thinking back over the last 14 weeks feels incredible"***

***"As the weeks went on my confidence kept on growing and I realised that being in the nursery would be the highlight of my week, every week"***

***"I enjoyed building stronger bonds with people that I worked with in my group. I also enjoyed seeing all the kids until we had to stop."***

***"I enjoyed communicating and engaging with the group and being open about our feelings. I also enjoyed the time we spent at the nursery and getting to know the children and learn more about nursery."***

***"I learnt how to be confident with myself when meeting people. I enjoyed helping the children"***

***"My confidence has gone up so much more! I feel like I can talk about how I am feeling and I just feel safe and if I have something to say, I can just say it."***

### 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.

**"Stuart"**

***"Stuart is severely dyslexic; he gets frustrated easily and lacks self confidence in the learning situation. Often in school he will use abusive language and vent his frustration when he feels that others are needling him. He is not always able to focus in class as he becomes very easily distracted when using his laptop in lessons because of his literacy challenges. Sometimes he acknowledges that he would 'zone out' and hear almost nothing.***

***Over the course, Stuart gained a huge amount of self-awareness regarding his tendency to zone out and negative behaviour in school. He says he can definitely help himself to concentrate more in class now that he has seen the young children in their learning environments. They responded very well to his gentle and caring manner. Stuart was mostly based in the nursery but helped a couple of times in the P1/2 class. He coped very well with the new situation and was able to work 1:1 and then used his initiative and re- issued one of the teacher's instructions to the whole class with a positive outcome. She was impressed.***

*Stuart has been a delight to have in the group: interested, committed, polite, considerate and able to participate fully in all of our discussions where he displayed confidence. He has a great ability to think in all directions and is not afraid to voice his ideas. Increasingly, he has been more in control of his need to lash out with his tongue and school report hearing a lot less inappropriate language from him. They feel the programme has helped him emotionally and improved his confidence. All the staff were most impressed by Stuart's willingness to step well out of his comfort zone with literacy matter and take his turn to read the story to the small group. He was mostly unfazed and now knows and appreciates (because I have checked) the difference between being able to read words from a page and be a successful storyteller. He is settled in school now, working hard in all of his subjects and aiming towards a potential next step."*

### Stuart's Comments

***"Passing on your knowledge and experience is very helpful as the children look up to you. I feel quite proud that I am helping the child I am paired with to get better at showing her feelings."***

### **"John"**

*"My first impression of John was that he was big in stature and not somebody others would push over, however despite appearance, he was quietly spoken. He only really spoke if he was addressed directly. I had little information about him and in the early sessions, I found out that English was his second language. He had moved to the U.K. when he was about 6 with very little English and he can remember the struggle he had in his Primary school classes to fit in as he did not really understand what was going on. Initially there was a certain passivity about him; very polite and just nodding occasionally. At school he has had patchy attendance and few friends. He was not really interested in school work or anything really. When he did speak, he said the minimum with little facial expression and there was no enthusiasm. I checked with him that he had chosen to come and he confirmed it was his choice."*

*At the start of the programme, one of the first worksheets, the WELCOME sheet provides them with an opportunity to say why they have chosen to come on Growing2gether and what they want to get out of it.*

*John wrote the following ....*

***"I want to help kids and really, I want to be happier. I want to be a better person and to be able to improve my understanding and then my communication between people"***

*A lot of young people respond with one-word answers but John seemed to have a clear idea of what he wanted from Growing2gether. Initially he sat back in the group and did not contribute other than giving his agreement or answering minimally. He held a steady gaze on whoever was talking and smiled only occasionally. This group of 4 boys and 3 girls did not really know or mix with each other prior to Growing2gether, so in the early weeks, it was relatively quiet with a definite reluctance to share anything much. The nursery is large and there are 2 rooms plus a large outdoor space and children can go from place to place as they please. On the first day, John was approached by a little boy almost instantly and was taken by the hand to the cars. This child has many challenges and special needs and did not relate well to other children or the staff so everyone was a bit surprised when he went to John and held out his hand.*

*In the check-in after our first visit, John was beaming. He did not say much but it was clear that he had enjoyed himself. Every session, this boy would find him and together they would 'huddle' and enjoy lots of different activities together with the child leading the way. The staff*



were delighted as the boy would remain calm and involved in all sorts of play when John was there, with no sign of the frequent shouts, screams and tantrums. It was in the 5th session after nursery that John's enthusiasm bubbled over and he took up about 10 minutes of the check-in talking about what he had been doing, his observations and lots of energetic communication. It was like something had been lit. Soon his enthusiasm was there at the start of the session too and he became participatory and clearly happy to be in the group. Everyone responded well and I noticed how interested the group were and how focused they were as they listened to him without interruption. He no longer mumbled. He spoke in short clear sentences with confidence. I think that the change in his energy was this amazing catalyst for everyone else and all of them began to really communicate with each other without looking at me or the other facilitator but with each other. John continued to work with the same boy and as friendships in our group were established, other group members would approach John and his child in the nursery accompanied by other children.

There was a gradual transition where this little boy tentatively began watching others and just every now and then ventured towards them. There was a lot of snatching toys but John remained by his side and gently and repeatedly explained about sharing and turn taking. This little boy's social and emotional development benefited from this excellent 1:1 mentoring that John gave so willingly and wholeheartedly. It was a joy to see this transformation in John's motivation, enthusiasm and ability to communicate. There is this point in the programme when we invite the young people to say what qualities, strengths and skills they have witnessed in their peers when they are with the children. It is important that the feedback is specific and that they can relate it to what they have seen. It became a very moving process and John was able to give and receive acknowledgements in equal measures. John had grown so much and he had become confident in all aspects of the work both in nursery and in our group time.

I was touched by how John expressed his gratitude on the last day,

***"This has changed my life ...it was the best thing I have done"***

***"I got to help children in nursery and it helped me to find skills and qualities I never really knew I had. I am so happy I got this opportunity because I would never have got the chance to improve myself to become who I am now. I have enjoyed this group and I may join another one.... I have become more mature and confident, especially speaking."***

This underlines the capacity that John has to learn from his own experiences and to seek to provide more positive experiences for other children. The ability to transform his own painful challenges is built on John becoming more aware of his own experiences and being willing to talk about them and share his experiences with other young people. With this increased self-awareness, John has greater choice in how he can use the skills he has been learning and his own unique strengths and qualities to achieve what he wants in his future.

John may be moving and he really wants to get into a particular college in Edinburgh. He knows that he needs to get the grades to do this. He is not sure yet what he wants to do in his life, but he is certain that he wants to get to university and he is happy knowing that he will be able to make friends in the future."

## Discussion and Conclusion

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Results revealed a significance level of less than 0.01, which is highly statistically significant, therefore indicating only a 1% risk of concluding that a difference exists due to chance. Anxiety and depression, measured by RCADS significantly improved (by **23%**) by the end of the programme, suggesting that Growing2gether has made a positive impact on young people's mental health. Individuals with higher baseline depression and anxiety scores showed significant improvements of **31%** by the end of the programme, suggesting that individuals with a poorer mental health at baseline show greater improvement with regards to anxiety and depression. There were significant differences between young people who had experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) where individuals at higher risk (had experiences ACEs) benefitted more with regards to their mental health. Interestingly, these participants had higher baseline scores, which supports the robustness of the tool as it would be expected that higher risk participants would score highly (in anxiety and depression) on this test initially. Emotional wellbeing is positively correlated with academic attainment, for example, low self-esteem is correlated with decreased motivation and a lack of self-efficacy, leading to poorer outcomes (Jirdehi et al 2018). Young people experiencing anxiety in particular can make it difficult for students to study or attend classes.

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 self-esteem, measured using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, (RSS) significantly improved by the end of the programme (**12%**). High self-esteem is related to the fulfilment of interpersonal relationships and the ability to implement adaptive coping strategies hence leading to better mental health and wellbeing; therefore, it is not surprising that both RCADS and RSS showed a significant improvement.

Growth of Mindset, a construct linked to academic resilience, improved significantly (**24%**) 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 comments accompanying these scores was exceptionally pleasing to observe.

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 and teachers, that the programme was well received.

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