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Promoting university student wellbeing: Exploring the feasibility of soft skills and the First Nations-developed Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program

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Statement on the Use of Generative AI

Generative AI technology was not used in the preparation of any part of this thesis.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis represents my original intellectual contribution and has not previously been presented for academic qualification at any educational institution. I confirm that, except for properly attributed citations and references clearly indicated throughout the document, the research, analysis, and conclusions contained herein are entirely my own.

I understand and agree that a digital version of this thesis will be submitted to the University's Library collection and, in compliance with the General Award Rules of James Cook University and Australian copyright legislation *(Copyright Act 1968)*, will be made accessible for scholarly examination and research purposes.

Abstract

Wellbeing promotion has become a critical priority for universities due to escalating student mental health challenges, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. This thesis investigates how universities can integrate wellbeing promotion within curricula, moving beyond optional initiatives towards holistic approaches. Through a four-part inquiry, the research explores the role of heart-centred pedagogy and the feasibility of integrating the First Nations-developed Family Wellbeing (FWB) program into higher education.

Part One establishes a theoretical foundation by examining love in pedagogy, framing education as an act of *willing the good of the other*. This perspective informs the exploration of the FWB program as a heart-centred approach to student wellbeing. Part Two systematically reviews soft skills interventions across educational contexts, finding that soft skills can be taught and assessed like any other educational competency. The review also identifies the FWB program as a strong example of a structured initiative that effectively cultivates soft skills, reinforcing its potential role in higher education.

Part Three employs grounded theory to examine educators' experiences integrating the FWB program in university settings. The study develops the theoretical model "Getting people to experience it," identifying key themes – challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes – that shape successful integration. Part Four synthesises findings through the lens of the cultural interface, making key contributions by (a) reinforcing the intrinsic connection between love and education, (b) demonstrating the teachability of soft skills, (c) offering a model for integrating First Nations Knowledge into mainstream curricula, and (d) advancing understanding of knowledge translation between First Nations and Western educational paradigms.

The thesis concludes that universities can enhance student wellbeing, engagement, and academic success by integrating soft skills and First Nations-led initiatives within curricula. It provides a roadmap for creating inclusive, holistic learning environments that honour First Nations Knowledge while fostering a balanced development of technical/hard and soft skills competencies. These insights have significant implications for higher education policy, curriculum design, and pedagogical practice.

Keywords

Wellbeing, Soft skills, University curricula, Family Wellbeing (FWB) Program, First Nations Knowledge, Indigenous, Grounded theory, Aboriginal Torres Striate Islander people, Indigenous studies, Cultural interface, Mental health, Knowledge translation, Love in education, Heart-centred pedagogy, Holistic learning, Pedagogical practice, Purpose of education, Education for life's complexities, Socratic Way, Pedagogy, Interventions, Curriculum, University students, Students, Higher education.

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Part One
Foundations and Context

Overview

Part One of this thesis lays the groundwork through two chapters (1 and 2), exploring the intersection of soft skills and wellbeing in higher education pedagogy. Chapter 1 presents the research rationale, illuminating the pressing mental health challenges facing university students while critically examining and analysing the nature and purpose of education in contemporary society. The analysis is deepened in Chapter 2, which traces my personal journey as an educator and researcher in developing a heart-centred pedagogical approach grounded in the philosophy of love. The philosophical exploration of love in pedagogy provides the theoretical underpinning for investigating heart-centred approaches, particularly the First Nations-developed Family Wellbeing (FWB) program, as a means of developing soft skills and addressing student mental health challenges. Together, these chapters weave a compelling narrative that bridges theoretical understanding with personal insight that sets the stage for a deep dive into how universities can better serve both the academic and personal development needs of their students, particularly in an era marked by increasing mental health challenges and rapidly evolving educational demands.

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter provides an overview of the research context, beginning with a discussion of the research rationale. The rationale explores the mental health challenges university students face and the efforts to promote student wellbeing by enhancing soft skills. The rationale lends credence to the importance of soft skills in complementing the acquisition of hard skills against the backdrop of the purpose of education. The ambiguity surrounding the definition and teachability of soft skills is discussed. The Family Wellbeing (FWB) program is discussed as an example of explicit soft skills teaching that promotes wellbeing. Finally, the chapter delineates the stylistic and structural aspects of the thesis, and thereafter, gives an overview of the research questions.

1.2 Research Rationale

Research involves systematically acquiring and analysing data to expand knowledge on a particular subject of interest (Rojon & Saunders, 2012). When conducting research, the aim is to answer a question or resolve a problem, which is often referred to as meeting the research aims or addressing the research objectives (Rojon & Saunders, 2012). However, research problems, questions, aims, or objectives must be clearly stated and justified to overcome questions such as ‘so what?’ or ‘why bother?’ (Rojon & Saunders, 2012). In essence, the research purpose must be clearly stated, and the rationale must be provided to showcase its importance in relation to existing knowledge and practical implications (Rojon & Saunders, 2012). For this project, the rationale revolves around the mental health challenges encountered by university students and initiatives aimed at bolstering student wellbeing. Additionally, the rationale highlights the purpose of education in the current educational climate, juxtaposing soft skills with hard skill acquisition and probing the teachability of these soft skills. The research explores this through a discussion of the FWB program.

1.2.1 The Challenges of Mental Ill-health Among University Students

Mental ill-health has been a chronic issue for the wellbeing of university students. According to Partridge et al. (2018), young adulthood, broadly between the ages of 18 and 35, is characterised by uncertainty and instability due to the transition from secondary education to work, further education, or even both. Often, this transition from secondary to higher education is fraught with financial instability and unhealthy mental and physical states (Partridge et al., 2018). Statistics confirm these significant detrimental effects mental illness has on the wellbeing of young people. Around the world, Orygen (2020) affirms that millions of young people are diagnosed daily with a form of mental illness, with three-quarters of these people under 25 years old. In Australia, data shows that around 4 million Australians were reported to be suffering from a form of mental illness in 2014–15 (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2020). Australia's 2020–2022 National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that 42.9% of people aged 16–85 had experienced a mental disorder in their lifetime, with 21.5% having a 12-month mental disorder. Anxiety was the most prevalent, affecting 17.2% of individuals, while young adults aged 16–24 showed the highest rate, with 38.8% experiencing a 12-month mental disorder (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health (McGorry et al., 2024) reveals a critical global mental health crisis, highlighting an alarming 50% increase in mental illness rates among youth in less than two decades and underscoring that the crisis has "entered a dangerous phase" (p. 731). The peak age of onset is now 15 years old, with 63–75% of mental health onsets occurring before age 25, driven by complex factors including social media, climate change anxieties, and the COVID-19 pandemic's psychological impact (McGorry et al., 2024). Despite mental ill-health accounting for 45% of diseases in the 10–24 age group, only 2% of global health budgets are allocated to addressing it (McGorry et al., 2024). The commission, led by Orygen and involving over 50 leading experts across five continents, is calling for a paradigm shift, emphasising that without effective treatment, mental illnesses represent a major cause of premature death, disability, and lost human potential (McGorry et al., 2024). The study serves as the first definitive global guide to youth mental health, urging greater investment in research, care models, and healthcare access to address what is now recognised as the primary threat to young people's health, wellbeing, and productivity (McGorry et al., 2024).

The challenges of mental health decline among young adult can affect their educational outcome. A study conducted by the National Union of Students in partnership with Headspace discloses that many Australian tertiary students suffer from high levels of psychological distress caused by financial pressure and difficulty balancing life, work and study commitments, which adversely impacts their academic progress and consequently intensifies their mental ill-health (Rickwood et al., 2016). These stressors are considered risk factors that contribute to poor mental health among university students (Browne et al., 2017). Evidence shows that mental ill-health decline among youth can affect their educational outcome by resulting in them failing to complete their studies, which in turn can cause low self-esteem, alter the trajectory of their career, place them in higher levels of debt, and consequently, increase their stress levels and feelings of disappointment (Andrews & Chong, 2011; Orygen, 2020; Rickwood et al., 2016; Waghorn et al., 2010; Whiteside et al., 2017). Consequently, Australian university students are more likely to experience some form of mental illness compared to the general population (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Orygen, 2017b; Stallman, 2010). This subsequently impacts health and human connections, resulting in the disruption of social engagement, living standards, and educational and employment outcomes (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2020; Orygen, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, as indicated by the Lancet study (McGorry et al., 2024), has significantly worsened students' mental health challenges worldwide. Ihm et al. (2021) state that, "[t]he mental health of the student population has been a major concern for several years and the pandemic has certainly exacerbated this problem" (p. 622). Research across multiple countries demonstrates widespread deterioration in student wellbeing during this period, with increased rates of psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Chi et al., 2020; Ihm et al., 2021; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2020; Walters et al., 2022). In the United Kingdom, statistics revealed a marked decline in student mental health in 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020), while Australian studies documented decreased motivation and increased psychological distress among university students (Dingle & Han, 2021; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021). This global pandemic affected student populations across diverse geographical and cultural contexts, from the Middle East to South America (Al-Tammemi et al., 2020; Alfawaz et al., 2021; Amaral-Prado et al., 2021; Aristovnik et al., 2021; Horita et al., 2022; Ihm et al., 2021; Wathelet et al., 2020).

The escalating mental health crisis among students highlights how the pandemic intensified existing wellbeing challenges in higher education (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021). This situation has serious implications, as research shows that poor mental health contributes to higher university attrition rates, ultimately affecting economic outcomes (Douglass & Islam, 2009; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Stallman, 2010). Global research consistently show that students with pre-existing mental health conditions are at substantially higher risk of attrition. For example, in the United States, studies report odds ratios ranging from 1.4 (anxiety disorders) to 2.9 (mood disorders) (Kessler et al., 1995; Zając et al., 2023), with similar trends found in Denmark and across 16 countries in the World Mental Health Survey Initiative (Zając et al., 2023). In Australia, data covering over 650,000 domestic undergraduate students show a first-year attrition rate of approximately 15%, with those receiving mental health treatment being 4.3 to 8.3 percentage points more likely to withdraw (Zając et al., 2023). These factors inform current university responses to mental health and student wellbeing.

1.2.2 Universities' Response to Mental Ill-health Among Students

Given the rising impact of mental ill-health among university students, the importance of promoting wellbeing for these cohorts of students cannot be overemphasised. Consequently, universities are striving to address the issues that impact student wellbeing and improve the overall student experience (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). A report from Orygen (2017b) indicates that there are significant gaps in the research and data on the prevalence and nature of mental ill-health among university students in Australia. It is, therefore, necessary to develop a global roadmap for research that addresses current challenges in youth mental health to respond to neglected areas and maximise the potential for significant impact and growth in the field (Orygen, 2017a). Acknowledging the importance of student wellbeing, Partridge et al. (2018) assert that "tertiary education providers have recognised the need to optimise student experience and improve student outcome through the promotion of wellbeing" (p. 2). Providing wellbeing support to students in tertiary institutions can help them take up their roles as adults, improve their lifestyle habits, and positively impact their future progeny and that of society (Partridge et al., 2018).

Many initiatives are taken by universities to enhance students' wellbeing because of the impact wellbeing plays on the overall success and flourishing of students (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). Some of these initiatives include counselling

services, dietary interventions, academic skills training and support, multifaith chaplaincies, meditation and massage sessions, free yoga, social events, multicultural celebrations, physical activity, live music, sport, exercise and recreation interventions, mental health awareness and suicide prevention initiatives (for instance, 'RU OK' Days), student mentor programs, and mental health training for staff (Eva, 2019; James Cook University, n.d.; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021). Notwithstanding these initiatives, the level of university students' mental distress is increasing rather than declining (Eva, 2019; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021).

Reasons abound as to why responses to date are not curbing the rising tide of mental ill-health. Often, these wellbeing initiatives are seen by students as add-ons and not a required part of the curriculum (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Whiteside et al., 2017). Subsequently, most students do not take them seriously, and the programs risk failing to reach the people who need them the most. Therefore, for programs to contribute towards improving student wellbeing, they need to be a core part of the curriculum rather than optional add-ons (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Ritter et al., 2018). It is essential to integrate wellbeing into existing university curriculum in ways that do not result in increased workload for students and educators but operate in ways that will complement learning objectives in the curriculum.

The concept of 'integration' within educational curricula transcends mere subject combinations to embody a fundamental pedagogical approach. While 'integration' encompasses various meanings – from personal experiences and social connections to knowledge systems and curriculum design (Beane, 1997) – this project employs the term to describe the systematic embedding of wellbeing approaches as core curricular elements rather than supplementary add-ons. Powell and Graham (2017) advance this perspective by asserting that supporting student wellbeing is no longer viewed as a separate endeavour disconnected from other educational aspects but as an essential component of their educational process. When interventions are *integrated* into the general curriculum and standard educational activities, implementation quality significantly improves (Barry et al., 2017).

To fully comprehend the concept of 'integration' within this project, this research draws upon Lister and Allman's (2024) framework of 'embeddedness'. In their research aimed at clarifying definitions related to mental wellbeing for students, Lister and Allman (2024) characterise 'embeddedness' as (a) both modelled and situated in practice, meaning wellbeing is inherent in pedagogy and learning design, not just curriculum content; (b) customised to address

students' specific needs; (c) fundamental to institutional values, ethos, and culture, while being pervasive throughout; (d) a comprehensive, collaborative endeavour; and (e) explicitly represented in strategic planning, adequately resourced, and maintained as ongoing practice.

The conceptualisation of wellbeing 'integration' across these definitions signals a fundamental shift in approaching wellbeing within education. Rather than positioning wellbeing as an auxiliary component, genuine integration entails:

a. Systematic embedding – Wellbeing concepts should be interwoven throughout existing academic content and learning experiences (Collaborative for Academic, 2021; Rowe et al., 2007; Wyn et al., 2000).

b. Synergistic relationship – Wellbeing and academic objectives should mutually reinforce rather than compete with each other (Rowe et al., 2007).

c. Multi-level implementation – Integration should permeate curriculum design, teaching practices, assessment methods, school policies, and institutional culture (Barry et al., 2017; Powell & Graham, 2017).

d. Holistic approach – Integration should simultaneously address cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Lewallen et al., 2015).

e. Infusion versus separation – Wellbeing principles should suffuse regular academic subjects rather than being confined to dedicated wellbeing lessons as piecemeal approaches (Collaborative for Academic, 2021; Stirling & Emery, 2016).

Collectively, these interpretations reflect a transition from treating wellbeing as peripheral to recognising it as essential to education itself – a shift from wellbeing programs being *in* but not *of* the curriculum to becoming an intrinsic part of educational conceptualisation and delivery. This understanding emphasises the importance of seamless wellbeing integration within curricula rather than supplementary approaches. The challenge lies in the scarcity of published frameworks or tools to support or guide busy educators and researchers in collaboratively integrating research evidence into existing subjects. These challenges inevitably contribute to declining mental health among university students, underscoring the priority for integrating student wellbeing promotion within curricula.

1.2.3 Promoting Wellbeing Among University Students

Wellbeing has been associated with the capacity to have a happy and fulfilling educational experience (Fraillon, 2004). According to Partridge et al. (2018), optimising the wellbeing of

all young adults, including both domestic and international students, enrolled in tertiary institutions is highly important for the thriving of society. This reflects why the promotion of wellbeing has been pronounced among education providers, policymakers and educators (Partridge et al., 2018; Whatman et al., 2019). However, the term 'wellbeing' is a contested one. While some define it in terms of Aristotle's idea of *eudaimonia* – happiness, others define it in terms of what is good in relation to a good society (Dodge et al., 2012; White, 2010; Whiteside et al., 2017). The central idea of 'wellbeing' underlining this project is that of equilibrium and the fluctuating pull of challenges and resources. This notion maintains that wellbeing is "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced," suggesting that stable wellbeing is when students possess sufficient psychological, social, and physical resources to cope with the corresponding challenges they face in these domains (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230). This definition situates wellbeing at that 'place of balance' where one has the necessary resources to deal with the challenges one faces in life.

Wellbeing, in this sense, aligns with the capabilities approach of Nussbaum (2001), which Heyeres et al. (2021) outline as embodying core human capabilities such as standard of living, bodily health and integrity, education, social interaction, emotional agility, mutual coexistence, participation in politics and recreational activities. This understanding of wellbeing is reflected by Whiteside's et al. (2017) definition, which state that "wellbeing is…the subjective self-assessment of an individual's satisfaction with his or her health, personal relationships, sense of safety, standard of living, sense of achievement, connection to community, and future security…" (p. 325). According to Whiteside et al. (2017), this definition represents the dimensions that are measured within the Australian Unity Personal Wellbeing Index (Australian Unity, 2022).

There is a prevailing understanding that wellbeing promotion can be operationalised within curricula through the implementation of social and emotional programs, with the objective of enhancing students' educational outcomes (Hassed et al., 2009; Hoare et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2017). According to Whatman et al. (2019), social and emotional programs are increasingly considered effective approaches to improving the wellbeing of students both nationally and internationally. This is consistent with some scholars who argue that promoting students' wellbeing goes beyond the avoidance of mental illness; it includes tapping into those competencies known as soft skills that would help students deal with the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty of the changing world (Douglass & Islam, 2009; Grant & Kinman, 2012; Whiteside

et al., 2017). Hence, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) maintains that learning institutions are best placed to help students develop the emotional and social skills essential to become resilient and thrive in an increasingly complex and challenging world. As a result, universities are striving to equip their graduates with specific 'soft' skills to complement traditional 'hard' skills so they can function in a rapidly changing and dynamic world (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Kaittyn et al., 2018; Macqual et al., 2021; Taylor, 2016; Yan et al., 2019). Given this context, examining the perceived importance of soft skills alongside the development of hard skills in the current educational landscape is crucial.

1.2.4 The Purpose of Education and the Notion of Soft Skills and Hard Skills in the Current Education Landscape

Education in the current landscape is very complex and heavily contested based on the nature of the goal of education (Waite, 2016). The pertinent questions rumbling at the base note of this discourse, as Waite (2016) expresses, include: "Why do we as a society, as any society, educate? Why do I get educated? Why do you? Why does anyone? The why question is relevant for the person, for each and every person, regardless of whether that person is part of a more collectivist or a more individualistic group or society" (p. 104). The reason for getting an education is far more encompassing than the current paradigm of the educational system, which prioritises acquiring technical skills. According to Biesta (2015), the overemphasis on technical skills is often linked to rather narrow perspectives on what education should 'produce.' This is influenced by large-scale assessment systems like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which continue to concentrate on academic performance in a small number of select domains and subject areas (Biesta, 2015). Such excessive focus on academic achievement, characteristic of many educational systems, can lead to significant stress and anxiety among students, undermining their overall wellbeing and personal development (Biesta, 2015). Moreover, it could also likely relegate crucial social, personal, and emotional aspects of education to the sidelines within educational policy (Savage, 2017). In extrapolation, this reflects the influence of neoliberalism in current educational systems.

Neoliberal ideology feeds an ethos of profit maximisation within the current educational systems and drives an overemphasis on easily measurable quantifiable technical skills. Schools and universities – which used to be bastions of intellectual pursuit and promote education that influences holistically the grand citizenship of the human person – now operate within the

wavelength of neoliberal corporate ethics that values profit, control, and efficiency (Giroux, 2002; Savage, 2017). In the crests and troughs of this wavelength, large sums of corporate money are directed towards universities, particularly areas that yield substantial financial returns (Giroux, 2002). As a result, areas that do not generate profits are often marginalised, underfunded, or even eliminated (Giroux, 2002). Consequently, subjects in humanities are being scaled back, and universities are increasingly declining to fund research in fields that serve a largely unpaid clientele (Giroux, 2002). In Australian schools, for instance, if young people do not complete their education, do not participate in education, or underperform on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) or PISA tests, this is deemed a policy issue because it has economic ramifications (Savage, 2017). In essence, since education is perceived primarily from an economic standpoint, the failure of young people to effectively engage with and succeed in schooling is largely viewed as an economic problem (Savage, 2017).

The market-driven values prevalent in education systems, resulting from neoliberal ideologies, have led to academic disciplines in higher education gaining prestige primarily through their market value (Giroux, 2002). As a result, students are now eager to enrol in courses and acquire professional credentials that offer them the social cachet and credentials they need to secure lucrative job opportunities (Giroux, 2002). In the age of neoliberalism, characterised by deregulation and the dominance of the market, many students and their families no longer perceive higher education as an avenue for intellectual growth but rather as a means to gain an advantage in the job market (Giroux, 2002). In Australia, the neoliberal ideology is reflected in various schooling policies, including significant agreements such as the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which portrays education as an economic investment geared towards the nation's global competitiveness and the development of students suited for the competitive twenty-first-century workforce (Savage, 2017).

Neoliberalism is also entrenched in the 2020 Australian Job-Ready Policy report, which aimed to enhance Australian higher education by increasing funding allocation to teaching, nursing, and STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) deemed crucial to the Australian economy (Department of Education & Employment, 2020). This Job-Ready Policy initiative by the Australian Government is primarily motivated by economic considerations, and some have criticised it as a misguided arrow that is bound to miss its target (Daly & Lewis, 2020). While the intent of these policies is laudable, they inadvertently reduce education to

standardised test achievement. They also devalue and/or underfund other disciplines that are not considered vital in the economy but are essential for personal growth and wellbeing. They place schools and universities to be perceived, as Giroux (2002) terms, "training grounds for corporate berths" (p. 435) or, as Savage (2017) articulates, "…a site for building human capital and contributing to economic productivity, from the early childhood years, right through to the tertiary level" (p. 150).

In extrapolation, the Job-Ready Policy places emphasis on economically valuable disciplines. It raises a fundamental question among graduating high schoolers about the necessity of pursuing a university degree, given the current notion that university education primarily focuses on securing a well-paid job. John Hewson (2024), a professor at the Australian National University's Crawford School of Public Policy and former leader of the Liberal Party in Australia, voiced concerns over this dilemma when he opined that many high school graduates grapple with the prospect of university education, contemplating whether a university degree will indeed lead to a desirable and sustainable career path, while also considering the burden of potential debt, particularly amidst growing anxieties about the future cost of living. Hewson (2024) laments the apparent loss of sight among these graduating high schoolers regarding the true essence of education, particularly at the university level. He emphasises that university education offers more than just vocational training; it provides a platform for cultivating disciplined thinking, critical analysis, and exploring personal interests and passions (Hewson, 2024). This type of education empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully to their chosen fields and society as a whole, aligning with the aspirations of many young people eager to make a positive difference (Hewson, 2024).

The heavy emphasis within educational systems on gaining technical skills for job employment underscores a disregard for the importance of non-technical skills deemed crucial for navigating life's complexities. Alain de Botton addressed this omission of non-technical skills in contemporary education during his talk on 'Reintroducing wisdom in everyday life,' as recorded by the Korean Terrestrial Broadcasting Network SBS D FORUM (SDF, 2013) on *YouTube.* De Botton highlights the pervasive silence surrounding these vital competencies:

> All of us in the modern world are very concerned with education. …And what does a good education mean? In the modern world it primarily means an education in technical capacities – accountancy, science, and biological engineering, something that will lead you to a job. And then we discover something very surprising that you

> could have the most brilliant education, but your life goes wrong; and why does your life go wrong? Because your education did not prepare you for all the challenges that a life can throw in its way. To be a properly educated person does not mean only a technically able person, it means someone who knows how to face the challenges of daily life. And there are so many; I'm thinking here in terms of the challenges of private life, of managing a relationship, of dealing with one's children, with one's parents, of managing one's own ambitions and anxieties, of confronting mortality and the duties that one has towards one's society. All of these things there is a total silence about in most of the world's education system. If you showed up at Harvard University or Cambridge University, or any university… and you said, I've come to study, not engineering, not accountancy, not law, but I want to learn how to live. They would look at you in a very strange way and would probably call the ambulance or the insane asylum. We don't expect that our educators should help us to live. …So, we have a gap, we have a gap in the direction of the greatest questions that humans face often in the middle of the night, often at some moment of crisis. (0:22–2:40)

De Botton's view highlights the silence regarding those skills essential for dealing with the challenges of life, which stems from the narrow understanding that education is meant to equip students with technical skills that will guarantee a job. This understanding relegates the importance of non-technical skills essential for navigating life challenges, known as soft skills, to the background. If, as De Botton contends, one could have the most brilliant education and yet one's life falls apart, then it is imperative to note that education is more than acquiring technical skills. Education involves the holistic complementarity of both technical/hard skills and non-technical/soft skills to empower students to flourish in their personal and professional lives.

Biesta (2015) illuminates this by expounding on the goal of education with his tripartite functions of education. For education to fulfil its core purpose, Biesta (2015) maintains that it must align with three key domains: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Qualification involves the transmission of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for vocational or general educational pursuits (Biesta, 2015). This aspect is often equated with the acquisition of hard skills. However, education extends beyond mere hard skills acquisition; it also encompasses socialisation (Biesta, 2015). Socialisation involves instilling cultural values, traditions, and practices in students (Biesta, 2015). Furthermore, education plays a crucial role

in shaping students' identities and capacities for agency, a concept referred to as subjectification by Biesta (2015). Subjectification pertains to how students develop into autonomous and responsible individuals, capable of initiating action and engaging meaningfully with the world (Biesta, 2015). Both socialisation and subjectification enhance soft skills, complementing the development of hard skills.

While one may delineate the three domains of educational purpose – qualification, socialisation, and subjectification – Biesta (2015) argues that they are inherently intertwined and cannot be easily separated. Even when the primary goal appears to be imparting knowledge, educators inevitably shape students' identities and values, thus influencing their personal development (Biesta, 2015). This interconnection stems from the fact that acquiring knowledge can empower individuals and transmit particular cultural traditions (Biesta, 2015). In essence, the holistic development of students involves both the acquisition of hard skills and the enhancement of soft skills involving the three domains of education. Viewing education through this lens offers a comprehensive understanding of its purpose, emphasising engagement not only with academic content and tradition but also with the nurturing of the human person (Biesta, 2015).

The shortcomings of one-sided conceptions of education overlook the interconnected nature of the three domains of education and also risk detrimental effects on the neglected aspects (Biesta, 2015). Hence, when hard skills are emphasised to the detriment of soft skills, or vice versa, it affects the grounded development of a student. A balanced approach to education, one that recognises and integrates hard and soft skills, involving the interconnectedness of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification, is essential for fostering students' holistic development and wellbeing (Biesta, 2015). This reveals the ultimate goal of education, which is to cultivate individuals who can navigate the complexities of the world in a mature and responsible manner (Biesta, 2020; SDF, 2013). Living in a 'grown-up' way, according to Biesta (2015, 2020), involves recognising one's place in the broader human community and exercising freedom in a shared context. Educational institutions ought to serve as spaces for nurturing this sense of mature citizenship by fostering the holistic development of students, encompassing both hard and soft skills (Biesta, 2015, 2020). The transformative potential of education positions it as a gateway to open 'existential possibilities' for students to fully inhabit and contribute meaningfully to the world around them (Biesta, 2015, 2020, 2021). Education should not be confined to the transmission of knowledge and technical skills alone; rather, it

should empower students to engage critically with the world and explore diverse ways of being (Biesta, 2015). The importance of hard skills such as those in STEM subjects, which in many parts of the world are urgently needed, like in some countries in Africa (Akon-Yamga et al., 2024), should not be undermined. However, incorporating soft skills with hard skills promotion is the bedrock of a balanced education. Exploring the practical implication of this holistic essence of education paves the way for understanding soft skills and their teachability. This becomes the point of departure for the subsequent section of this research rationale.

1.2.5 What are Soft Skills, and Can They Be Taught?

Soft skills generally encompass the qualities that enhance one's emotional intelligence and inter/intrapersonal abilities, enabling one to navigate both personal and professional situations effectively (Orih et al., 2024). Although the term 'soft skills' is catchy, the definition's ambiguity is what Matteson et al. (2016) underscore as the basis for why authors use it extensively without agreement on its meaning. Consequently, there is no agreed set of universal soft skills (Cinque, 2021; Matteson et al., 2016; McIlvenny, 2019a). In exploring soft skills, people have defined it based on three ways, *to wit*: explicit definition of soft skills; definition by listing examples of soft skills; and definition based on comparison to hard skills (Matturro et al., 2019).

For instance, Carblis (2000) explicitly defines soft skills as a range of capabilities that comprises simple skills like interaction and listening, as well as complex skills like conflict resolution and leadership, which are necessary for success in life and work. Based on listing examples of soft skills as a definition, Macqual et al. (2021) define soft skills as lifelong competencies such as learning, creativity, communication, conscientiousness, and teamwork that are crucial for personal and professional growth. Tsey et al. (2018) differentiate soft skills from hard skills, describing them as a mindset that is supported by essential human qualities such as intuition, creativity, passion, responsibility, kindness, courage, and self-awareness; in contrast, hard skills are tailored to "…the technical specifications of a particular job" (p. 3). Notwithstanding the varied ways of defining soft skills (see Orih et al., 2024), the importance of soft skills cannot be overemphasised. Rego (2017) insightfully points out that while hard or technical skills are crucial for success in any profession and may help one secure a job, soft skills, also known as transferable or professional skills, are intangible and non-technical, and are the personal character traits or qualities that are necessary for achieving success in any

profession. The allure of soft skills has warranted debate about their teachability within educational settings, and Rego (2017) astutely highlights this in a rather flamboyant manner by posing the question, “Soft Skills: Who says they can’t be taught?” (p. 11).

Debates abound whether soft skills can be effectively taught in a formal educational setting and incorporated into curricula, based on the ambiguity surrounding their definition (Kyllonen, 2013; McIlvenny, 2019b; Rego, 2017; Touloumakos, 2020; Yan et al., 2019). Touloumakos (2020) argues that the definitions of soft skills have become so stretched that their boundaries have blurred, leading to uncertainty about their development and inclusion in education curricula. Some authors suggest abandoning the term ‘soft skills’ altogether and focusing instead on ‘core competencies’ or ‘critical skills’, which should give the same level of training emphasis tantamount to technical skills (Galloway, 2022). Regardless of these debates, literature shows that there have been attempts to integrate soft skills within curricula (see Orih et al., 2024). I will now turn to the FWB as an example of a program that teaches soft skills.

1.2.6 The Family Wellbeing Approach to Soft Skills Teaching

The Family Wellbeing is an evidence-based empowerment group intervention program that was developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (hereafter, First Nations Australians) in a bid to curb the rising social and emotional distress experienced in their communities (McCalman, 2009; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022; Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Whiteside et al., 2017). In the words of McCalman (2009),

> [the FWB] program is a nationally recognised program, originally developed in Adelaide in 1993, which aims to empower participants and their families to assume greater control and responsibility over the conditions which influence their lives. It attempts to explicitly address the emotional effects of colonisation among [First Nations] Australians by helping people explore the important issues affecting their daily lives, recognise their own strengths and resources, develop knowledge and take action to improve their situation (p. 1).

The program aims to enhance the social competencies essential in navigating the challenges people experience as they take control of their lives and become responsible for their emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental wellbeing (Perera et al., 2022; Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2005; Whiteside et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2014). It is based on the understanding that all individuals have their basic emotional, physical, spiritual and mental

needs, and when these needs are not met, people may have difficulty dealing with the challenges of life and even suffer personal or relationship problems (McCalman, 2009; Tsey et al., 2018). According to Whiteside et al. (2017), "the creators of FWB sought to give people skills that would empower them to self-reflect, problem-solve, and take greater control of their situation, no matter how difficult or challenging this was" (p. 326). Topics covered in the program include group agreement, leadership qualities and values, human qualities, basic human needs, life journey, beliefs and attitude, relationships, crisis and emotions, conflict resolutions, grief and loss, caring for ourselves, and prioritising our goals (Tsey et al., 2019). While the FWB program was initially developed to address the specific needs of First Nation Australians, its framework is adaptable to diverse cultural and social contexts (Tsey et al., 2019).

The FWB program employs a participatory social learning model where facilitators and participants engage in mutual dialogue and knowledge exchange within a safe and supportive environment (Yan et al., 2019). Each topic begins with a brief brainstorming session where participants share their immediate thoughts about subjects such as human qualities, basic needs, relationships, or conflict (Yan et al., 2019). This initial exercise validates participants' life experiences and knowledge. Participants then spend a few minutes privately reflecting on how the topic connects to their personal experiences, recording their thoughts in journals to deepen their understanding (Yan et al., 2019). The process then moves to paired or small group discussions, where participants take turns sharing their insights. This format ensures that even reserved individuals can meaningfully participate by exchanging ideas with at least one other person (Yan et al., 2019). These smaller group settings create a comfortable space for participants to refine their thoughts before deciding what to share with the larger group. Finally, participants voluntarily share their reflections with everyone, leading to collective learning through shared stories and perspectives (Yan et al., 2019). This process often helps participants realise they are not alone in their struggles and fosters empathy and mutual support among group members (Yan et al., 2019). While the complete program consists of five stages, each requiring 30 hours of group learning (see Table 1), it can be adapted into shorter formats, including half-day workshops.

The positive impact of the FWB program extends beyond the group to the individual participants themselves, thereby improving their ability to work with like-minded people in order to create change in organisations and communities (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022;

Monson-Wilbraham, 2014; Nolan et al., 2024; Tsey, 2015; Tsey et al., 2018). The FWB program has subsequently drawn attention across Australia and beyond to the extent that demand for the program has increased exponentially (Monson-Wilbraham, 2014; Tsey, 2015).

Table 1
The Five Stages of the Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program

FWB stages	Content
Stage 1: Human Qualities	Introduction to core FWB concepts including human qualities, basic physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of life, exploring traditions and values, analytic tools for self-reflection and skills for self-care and providing counselling and support to others
Stage 2: The Process of Change	How change affects people, how it can be experienced as an opportunity to grow and develop by recognising and building on inner qualities and strengths, and the importance of framing difficulties as challenges for which there are always solutions rather than as problems
Stage 3: Changing the Patterns	Applying FWB approach to issues of family violence and abuse and other social dysfunction
Stage 4: Opening the Heart	Reinforcing FWB messages of self-development, healing and healthy relationships
Stage 5: FWB Facilitation	Practice-based training for FWB facilitation

Source. Adapted from "Empowerment and Indigenous Australian health: A synthesis of findings from Family Wellbeing formative research," by K. Tsey, M. Whiteside, M. Haswell-Elkins, R. Bainbridge, Y. Cadet-James, & A. Wilson, 2010, *Health & Social Care in the Community, 18*(2), p. 171 (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2524.2009.00885.x). Copyright 2009 by the Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Reported FWB outcomes resonate strongly with the notion of teaching or cultivating soft skills and related concepts of wellbeing, resiliency, emotional intelligence, and the Aristotelian concept of phronesis or practical wisdom, which universities increasingly recognise as important but often struggle to operationalise in teaching (Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2005). In a world where social and political discourses are increasingly divisive, toxic and acrimonious with little regard for truth and where people on opposite sides of debates treat each other as enemies, the FWB places emphasis on cultivating and routinely practising

qualities such as respect, empathy, self-awareness, unconditional love, having meaning and purpose, spiritual connection, win-win rather than win-lose mindsets, and capacity to agree to disagree without resorting to violence and intimidation. This reminds people that no matter who they are or the differences they might have, they have a common shared humanity (Perera et al., 2022; Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2005).

Evidence shows that the First Nations-developed FWB is a good example of explicit soft skills teaching that university sectors are demanding (Tsey et al., 2018; Whiteside et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2016; Whiteside et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2019). FWB participants, including those whose prior experiences with mainstream education had been marred by negativity, have generally found the process of engaging with the program empowering and have recommended introducing the FWB program to professionals to better prepare them for working with First Nations people (Whiteside et al., 2017). This recommendation to introduce FWB core values, principles and competencies by the First Nations participants to the non-First Nations professionals, aligns with the broader call to embed First Nations Knowledges in mainstream Australian educational curricula (James Cook University [JCU], 2022; The University of Melbourne, 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017). Hence, this project involves the exploration of the challenges and opportunities of teaching the First Nations-developed FWB program as part of core university curricula.

1.3 Thesis Style

From the outset, it is paramount to note that this is a thesis with publications. Therefore, it includes published material in some chapters, traditional thesis writing for others, and additional published work from this research in the appendix. Chapter Two of this thesis is an example of a chapter incorporating a published peer-reviewed paper in which I position myself within the project. All published works within the body of the thesis are introduced with a brief outline and concluded with a summary.

In keeping with the stylistic approach of this thesis, I use first-person pronouns to position myself and reflect my subjectivity in this thesis. According to Cheer (2019), acknowledging one's subjectivity is crucial within grounded theory methodology, as it fosters reflexivity and theoretical sensitivity during the interpretative process inherent in conducting such research. Throughout this study, I employed memoing to acknowledge and document my subjective

perspectives. These memos captured my thought processes as I employed grounded theory methodology. Excerpts from these memos, denoted by italicised text and accompanied by their respective entry dates, are included in this thesis.

I also use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my participants. This is in line with my ethics approval stipulation, emphasising that no identifying details of my participants will be disclosed in the publication of their contributions to the research study. Throughout the thesis, I referred to them as 'educators' and their pupils as 'students'. Their words have been indented and italicised. Despite the participants being seasoned educators proficient in English (even those from non-English speaking backgrounds with extensive study and research experience in Australia), their verbatim responses often contained repetitions, fillers, and stutters like 'umm', 'you know,' and 'well'. These filler words have been removed while retaining the authentic meaning of their responses. This aligns with the denaturalised approach to transcription used in this thesis, which involves removing non-essential elements like stutters and fillers that will not undermine the authenticity of participants' responses (Oliver et al., 2005). These practices underscore the respect and consideration accorded to the participants throughout this research endeavour.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured into four different parts, with ten chapters in total. Part One (chapters 1 and 2) delineates the research 'Foundations and Context'. Part Two (chapters 3 and 4) focuses on the 'Conceptual Evolution and Soft Skills Teachability'. Part Three (chapters 5 to 8) delves into the core aspect of the project – 'Grounded Theory Study'. Finally, Part Four (chapters 9 and 10) involves 'Synthesis and Future Directions'.

Part One began with this chapter, Chapter 1, providing the contextual underpinnings of this research, highlighting the rationale for the research as addressing the 'so what?' question. This rationale then leads to exploring the structural and stylistic organisation of the thesis, as well as giving an overview of the research questions. Chapter 2 continues the exploration of the contextual underpinnings of the research by outlining my positionality within this research project. This is achieved through the introduction of my reflective paper on orienting a heart-centred pedagogy to teaching.

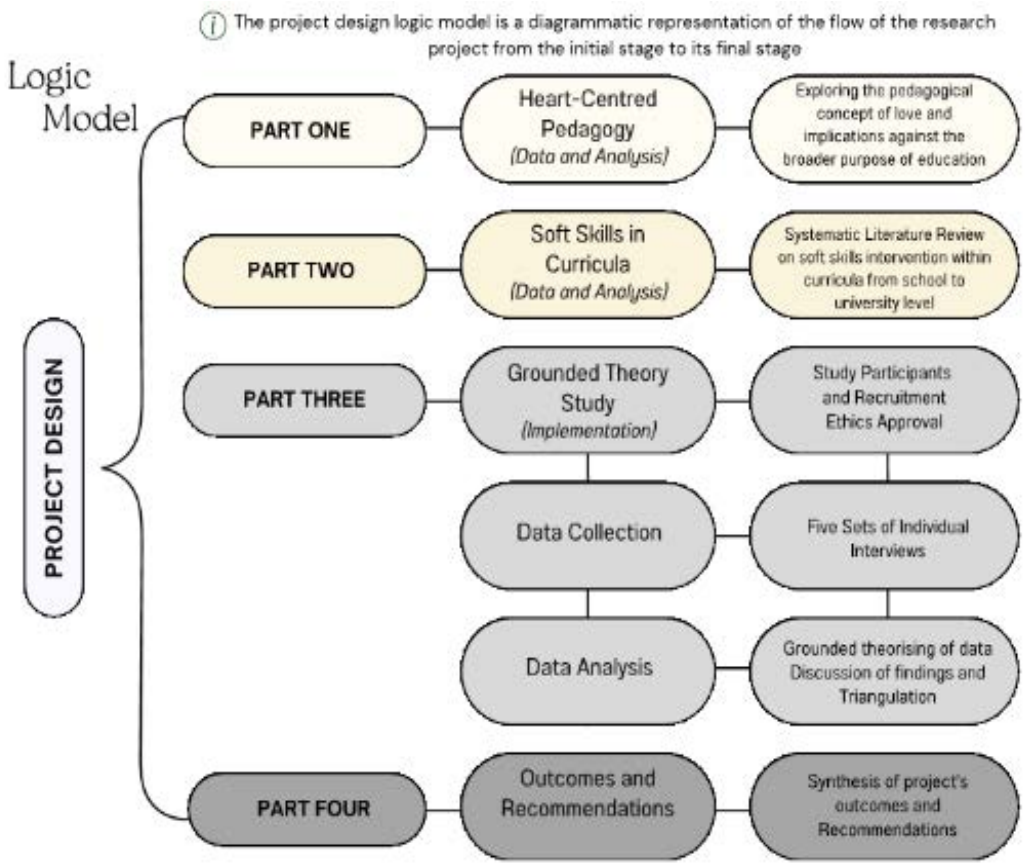
In Part Two, Chapter 3 delves into the background preparations and planning of the project, highlighting the conceptual evolution of the project. The chapter subsequently provides the project aims. Chapter 4 investigates the nature of soft skills interventions integrated into curricula across primary, secondary, and university educational levels. This is presented as a published systematic literature review, with an introduction of the paper at the beginning of the chapter.

In Part Three, Chapter 5 delineates the methodological journey that guided my chosen methodology for this research. It commences by detailing how I identified my philosophical research stance and how it informed my research design. Chapter 6 delves into my research method. It examines how I connected my research methodology to my data collection and analysis, including the details of the study population, recruitment process, ethics approval, data storage and management, as well as the strategy employed for data collection and analysis. Chapter 7 concentrates on analysing my findings using grounded theory methodology. The chapter begins by providing the context from which the model emerged, which involves investigating the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating the FWB program into university curricula. It then delves into the theoretical model by enumerating the strategies and outcomes of integrating the FWB program within university curricula. This became the foundation of the core category, which is 'Getting people to experience it', orienting the theoretical model as a framework for educators to integrate the FWB seamlessly within their curricula. Chapter 8 discusses the findings in relation to research impact, emphasising the significance of this research in addressing two related gaps in the literature. One gap is the need to integrate student wellbeing promotion as part of the learning curricula rather than as an add-on that often fails to reach those who need it most. The other gap is the need for researchers to demonstrate the impact of their research on real-world situations. By filling these gaps, this research contributes to the field of knowledge. I then assessed the quality of the research against established criteria and addressed the study's limitations.

Part Four begins with Chapter 9, which synthesises the outcomes of the three studies involved in the project through the lens of the cultural interface while emphasising the need for a balanced promotion of hard skills and soft skills to prepare students for the complexities of life. Chapter 10, the final chapter, summarises the overall project findings and makes recommendations for future practice and research while concluding the entire body of work.

Figure 1 illustrates the project logic model, depicting the flow from its initial stage to the final stage.

Figure 1
Project Design Logic Model



1.5 Research Questions

This thesis comprises three interconnected studies that collectively address the overarching research aims detailed in Chapter 3. The research questions are summarised here to provide a clear overview:

- RQ1: Can there be a recourse to a philosophy of love in education?
- RQ2: (a) What are the characteristics of soft skills interventions across educational levels? (b) What are the reported outcomes? (c) What is the design quality of the interventions?

- RQ3: What are the challenges and opportunities in integrating an Australian First Nations wellbeing program into university curricula?

These questions collectively explore pathways toward more holistic, culturally responsive, and humanistic educational practices that promote both academic success and student wellbeing.

1.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- given the rationale for the study, which includes discussing the mental health challenges faced by university students and the initiatives aimed at bolstering student wellbeing; the purpose of education in the current climate against the backdrop of hard skills and soft skills acquisition; the teachability of soft skills; and the FWB program as an example of a soft skills approach within university curriculum that promotes wellbeing
- highlighted the stylistic and structural organisation of the entire thesis
- provided the three research questions underpinning this project.

In the next chapter, I will:

situate myself in undertaking the research project by presenting my published paper on orienting a heart-centred approach to pedagogy, therein answering the first research question.

Chapter 2
Contextualisation of My Positioning

2.1 Chapter Outline

Researcher positionality encompasses the researcher's background, motivations for undertaking the study, and the intricate dynamics that underpin their interpretations and viewpoints in relation to their participants. Recognising and admitting one's viewpoint and limitations is tantamount to recognising one's own biases. As Rohr (2024b) states, "[e]very viewpoint is a view from a point. Unless we recognise and admit our own personal and cultural viewpoints, we will never know how to decentralise our own perspective" (para. 1). Rohr (2025) further emphasises that: "[t]here is no such thing as an entirely unbiased position. The best we can do is own and be honest about our own filters" (para. 1). From this standpoint, positionality can be understood as the process by which researchers discursively construct personal narratives, enabling them to adopt positions in relation to one another, thereby rendering participants' actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). In this chapter, my positionality provides the context for my interest in exploring a heart-centred pedagogy to promote wellbeing.

In the published paper *Can there be a recourse to a philosophy of love? A confronting question at the heart of a poor pedagogy*, I explore the implications of this heart-centred pedagogy grounded in the philosophy of love. Drawing from my personal teaching experience that highlighted the need for a transformative pedagogy, I anchor the discussion of love and pedagogy on the ancient Greek understanding of love, which involves two individuals undertaking a journey of mutually improving each other's lives as they pursue the highest good. In writing this paper, I reflected on the essence of a good pedagogy within the broader context of what it means to be human. This experience prompted me to consider how educators could cultivate the requisite soft skills and integrate their pedagogy holistically with their teaching philosophy, ultimately fostering an empowering learning environment that enables students to navigate the world in a grown-up way. Consequently, this interest guided my research into soft skills and led to my involvement with the Family Wellbeing research network. This collaboration eventually developed into the research project detailed in Chapter 3. However, the current chapter presents my published work on the subject of love in pedagogy and its catalytic role in this project.

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Can There Be a Recourse to a Philosophy of Love? A Confronting Question at the Heart of a Poor Pedagogy

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Abstract

The question of love and its place in pedagogy has brought diverging views and disagreement. It would appear to be creating more problems than it solves. On one hand, the contention lies on the discussion of love as something extraneous to our being by using an *either-or approach.* On the other hand, it lies on the understanding of love as something bereft in our shared human experience especially in moments of suffering. These problematic approaches have led to disagreements among those who subscribe to the place of love in pedagogy and those who propose that love does not have any place in education. I hereby propose an alternative approach; one that encourages *willing* the good of the other for the *other*. If all educational endeavours and all the opposing positions on love and its place in pedagogy is done based on promoting *the good of the other,* then love is essentially and existentially integral in education because love *is* for the good of the other. This became apparent to me through a 'poor pedagogy' that opened the door for a transformative learning curve. I explored this insight philosophically through a discussion of the Socratic way that shaped the ancient Greeks' understanding of love and education. I relate this understanding to my personal teaching experience and then examine the implication of love for education as something that influences positively the educational experience of both teachers and students in their pursuit of the highest good, manifesting in the reward of love as *love*.

Keywords Philosophy of love · Poor pedagogy · Love and education · Socratic way · The good of the other · Pedagogy

What, do you wish to know…?
Know it well, love was [its] meaning.

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Who reveals [this] to you? Love.
What [was revealed] to you? Love.
Why [was] it [revealed] to you? For Love.
Remain in this, and you will know more of the same.
Julian of Norwich, Showings, (1978, p. 342).

Introduction

If Julian of Norwich was right about the centrality of love and the reward of love as *love*, then the very existence of humanity is characterised by love. As a woman who survived the Black Death and had witnessed its horror, she understood the kind of love that is borne out of suffering (Fulloon, 2021). This love is part of the very definition of our being, notwithstanding our best efforts to deny it. No wonder Teilhard de Chardin (1962) understood love as the very structure of our universe. He knew that everything about the universe and our place in it, is characterised by the very existence of love. Now, this is not the kind of love that gives you a warm cosy feeling, this is the love that is steeped in the very nature of all humanity. We feel it, we breathe it, and we recognize it whenever we encounter it. As human beings living in a human world, we have been plunged into moments of suffering and difficulty in our lives, and yet somehow, we find ourselves pulled by the attraction of love even in those moments. Love has the capacity to enable us to grow in every moment of our lives, even in those moments of suffering and uncertainty.

Over the years, the radically privileged academics, in their quibbles and rhetoric about love, especially regarding its place in education, seem to negate and separate love from the core of our existence. Steeped in their academic hubris, they treat love as though it were something extraneous to our being (see Aldridge & Lewin, 2019).[1] This dualist way of understanding love would appear to overlook our shared human experience which reveals that we are forever plunged into the very aura of love in our daily encounter with people and situations in life, and that love is essentially and existentially integral to the human life. This essay challenges this dualistic, arid and reductionist approach to love and proposes, as a solution, the nondual, encompassing, dynamically rhythmic dimension of love that evokes our wisdom, emotion, compassion, intelligence and the core value of what it means to be a human being, living in a human world with human problems and challenges. This position aligns with the heart-centred approach to pedagogy propagated by some academics and institutions of learning (see Carrington, 2019; Chadwick, 2021; Tsey, 2018).[2] The

[1] See the 2019 special issue on love and desire in education in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* for some of the arguments *for* and *against* love in education. Aldridge and Lewin (2019) acknowledge in the introductory pages of the issue that many authors acknowledge the invocation of love and desire in education as a risky adventure and proposes an emphasis on the erotic in education as a counter to an over-emphasis on love.

[2] For instance, academics like Jody Carrington (2019) maintains that building positive relationship optimizes the learning experience of both the teacher and the student. And Joy Chadwick (2021) encourages teachers to embrace the complexities of their day-to-day encounter with students because it will provide the opportunity to build their pedagogical relationship with them. In institutions of learning like James Cook University (JCU), Australia, a heart-centred approach to relationships and learning is at the core of

essay further argues that love will always help us move outside of ourselves for the good of the *other* even when things go wrong. It intends to offer an intersubjective reflection on an experience of a poor pedagogy in a teaching adventure that evoked a philosophy of love. So too, the essay argues that through encountering with an open heart the kind of love that is borne out of suffering, one could move beyond the narrow, static, either-or mentality of love in education, to an expansive view of love that extends us outwardly; a movement that will always be a threat to the ego, "because it means giving up… superiority, separation and control" (Rohr, 2019, p. 70). In the face of obstacles where people will tend to close their heart to love, love will always find a way to overcome the obstacles. Like water, love flows downwards around any obstacle, constantly seeking for ways to make things better (Rohr, 2019). It is on this view of creating future possibilities that I now turn to the experience that taught me about embracing a philosophy of love as a way of life and as a pedagogy in my educational endeavours.

The Genesis…

After my studies in Queensland Australia, I found myself teaching in a remote village in Southeast Nigeria back in 2015. As someone who had spent several years studying and working in Australia, going back to Nigeria and teaching young people who were from very poor families, was quite an eye-opening experience. I was faced with the difficult task of helping to transform the lives of young high school students, whose very basic need was not *to flourish* but *to survive*.

On my first day of school, I was excited to meet my students. I had spent the last couple of days preparing for my first class and was delighted to be offered the opportunity to influence the lives of these young people entrusted to me. As a teacher, your aim will always be to have a positive influence on your students, but this goal is not always guaranteed. As I watched the students arrive at school, especially some who had walked quite a few kilometres to get there, I saw sweat dripping down their faces, their school uniforms soaked in sweat as it created marks on the armpit corners of their shirts. Their feet were covered with dust, and their socks and sandals looking rather decolourized. I heard a teacher shouting at them to run to the school gate, and those who were unable to make it to the gate early enough were given lashes of the cane for coming late to school. To my amazement, the students involved, got up, dusted themselves, shook off the pain of the lashes and went into their respective classrooms. This was a normal

Footnote 2 (continued)
the qualities of the Family Wellbeing program (Tsey, 2018) which has been operational in the university. This program centres on building relationship founded on love, respect and willing the good of the other for the *other*. Exploring the feasibility of this program in the JCU curriculum has been the focus of my PhD study. Also, in the University of Calgary (2022), Canada, a Master's program entitled "Leading with Heart" is being offered to students. This program prepares students for future school leadership to connect with a person's heart in order to make a lasting change. All these instances align with the notion of pedagogical love as an essential part of the learning experience of both the teacher and the student.

routine, to which the students were accustomed. As I watched, I was filled with discomfort as to how the students were yelled at by some of the teachers, with words filled with implications of stupidity and irresponsibility. It felt like the screaming and caning had no effect on the students; they were desensitised to it.

A few days later, thanks to the daily and seemingly casual conversation among teachers in the staff room, I began to make sense of what would eventually lead to my epiphany. It became clear to me that a handful of students in the entire school were treated differently because they were considered smart and responsible. The rest of the students were seen as lacking the capacity to grow and denied the prospect of growing. Therefore, they were not worthy of receiving love from the teachers. One teacher noted with dismay that some of the students were so dumb that it was impossible to teach them anything, implying that trying to educate them would be a total waste of time. Another teacher remarked that the students only understood the language of punishment, hence the constant use of cane to teach them. I once asked the teachers why my students do not listen to me when I try to engage them in a discussion without waving a big stick and speaking in a loud voice. They all laughed at me, and then responded that it was a waste of time to speak to the kids without a cane in hand. It felt frustrating that no pedagogical solution was offered by the teachers, and that the only solution was to join the bandwagon in the unruly display of authoritarianism. I was able to notice as Kalisha (2015) would say, the hidden frustration in the system that blinds us to the fact that children are unique and different, thereby hindering any intersubjective reflection on how to make a difference in the lives of the students as unique individuals.

The school that I taught in was a very poor school located in a poor community with limited resources. Most of the students struggled to pay their school fees, and there were no external funds, either from the government or any other external body. Ninety-nine percent of the school's main source of income was the students' school fees. And since many of the students were struggling to do so, it meant that the school could not afford good teachers. Obviously, this was the main reason for the poor infrastructures within the school; exemplified in poor classrooms condition, with no constant electric power supply. Students studied in inadequate conditions; and this affected the general classroom orientation. The pedagogical orientation of the school was the traditionally didactic method of teaching in which the teacher is the knower and the expert who 'pours' knowledge upon the students, and they in turn passively receive and accept whatever the teacher says as truth. This method of teaching is centred around the teacher while the students sit and listen; in doing so, they memorise the important points the teacher makes without offering their own personal interpretation and analysis of what they are taught. With this kind of orientation, the teachers have unquestioned authority, which they exercise, sometimes unsupervised, while teaching. For them, education is what the teacher gives the student and what the student must have to accept.

It is worthy to note that this orientation of teaching was an offshoot of the colonial system of education imposed in most African countries. According to Garba (2012), the advent of Christian missionaries and the British colonial masters saw the introduction of 'essentialism' in Nigerian educational system. This meant that

education was seen as 'transmitting' essential knowledge to all those who came to school (Garba, 2012). She argues:

> With this type of education, Nigerian teacher was expected to be strict and well behaved to the extent that he was a model of emulation. In imparting knowledge to the learner, he could use lecture, play way or Socratic teaching strategy, while the learner was expected to learn what the teacher taught him by memorization and reproduction of the same on the examination day (Garba, 2012, p. 53).

In effect, students' quietness and compliance to a teacher's 'strictness' became a sign of being a good student. A quiet classroom is a sign of good behaviour; and not solely because one is accentuated on the learning process, but probably because one is afraid of 'disrupting' the status-quo that has been set in place. Waving a big stick became a sign of having control and authority that teachers sometimes display. Even though this didactic mode of teaching is outdated in Nigeria, sadly, it is still operative in some of the schools in remote parts of Nigeria. One could say, this is the impact of colonisation as something that still lingers even in the educational system of Nigeria till date (Garba, 2012). Maybe if I had not had the opportunity to study overseas and experience other cultures, my pedagogical orientation would have been the same heavy-handedness of didactic teaching. As I reflect on the privilege I had, I return now to how it triggered a change in my pedagogical approach.

One day as I was teaching, filled with the frustration that had built up over the weeks, I noticed that my students always said 'yes' to my 'is that clear?' when in fact, they did not understood what I was saying. This became apparent to me when one of my students asked me the exact question I had been explaining in my lesson. In an utter blip of frustration, I retorted to the students' question as thus: *how can you ask me that question when it is all I have been explaining for the past 45 min? Are you so absent minded that you forgot that you are in a classroom? You might as well go home instead of wasting your parents' school fees*. In sheer shamefulness, the student folded like a cheap tent. He regretted asking a question in the classroom. I could see and hear other students quietly laughing and muttering words that suggested he should have kept quiet like others and simply say 'yes' to everything I said in the classroom. At that moment, I realised that I had humiliated the student, and the resulting taunts from other students will haunt him even outside the classroom.

Perhaps, the student was just trying to be courageous to ask a question that will make his teacher see him as smart and therefore deserving of support and love as the system had conditioned? Perhaps, the student could not ask the question at the right time because he was afraid of speaking up, and now he looked unintelligent having asked the question late? Perhaps, he was afraid that the very thing that resulted in him asking a question in a classroom eventually happened, and he felt so small, so unintelligent and hence in the 'black books' of *no-do-gooders*? Perhaps, all these things have contributed to the conditioning of the 'so-called' problematic and unintelligent population of students that they had grown numb to the yelling, caning and subjugation that the teachers and those in positions of authority have contributed? And here I am, with my prospects of making a difference, inadvertently subjecting my students to the same matrix of domination

that had objectified them for so long and that had failed to see their unique gifts and talents as people deserving of every love and support to grow and flourish in society.

Biesta (2020) notes that the school is a place for fuelling the desire to live in a grown-up way; and one must consider how to heighten the consciousness of students to grow-up as *subjects* who can exist *in* and *with* the world. The task of education therefore is to provide *a range of existential possibilities* for students to exist in and with the world (Biesta, 2021). Yet, it seemed that I had failed to fuel this desire for my students; I had failed to help 'open up' *existential possibilities* for these students to exist in the classroom. I had resorted to doing what I saw other teachers do when I first arrived, and it seemed abhorrent to me. Was this my *shadow self* or was I protecting a *persona* that the system had conditioned me to promote in the school? I had to be humbled in my capacity to see that I too can hurt others or treat them in a way that was hitherto repugnant to me. I was beset with the kind of questions that confronted Kalisha (2015) in his own experience:

> What kind of world was I creating for these particular students? I planned for lessons, adapted materials for use, developed courses, taught and evaluated students in an unreflective and naïve manner. Did I have the time to think and reflect on my actions? Did I understand why I was teaching what I was teaching? I thought I did until slowly, and hesitantly I started coming to moments of seeing – catching glimpses of how the child should be seen. I began to wonder – had I begun attaching myself to my students in search of a way that I wanted to know them, to understand them, in order to make the situation better (p. 56)?

In a rather unsurprising way, these questions brought me face to face with my shadow self, to a point of critical reflection of what it means to be a teacher. An intersubjective reflection that led to an epiphany of what that moment summons me to: love. It was the kind of love that was ushered in by great suffering. I was undergoing suffering at that moment, the kind of suffering that opened my eyes to the suffering of my student. I was able to see that he was experiencing a sense of diminished self-worth. As was later revealed to me by the student, he was deeply hurt because I treated him like the other teachers who had not honoured his learning potentials. Upon reflection with my teacher mentor, it seemed that I had subjected the students to the same fate as others did. This became the starting point of what informed a critical pedagogy anchored on a philosophy of love; one that was triggered by a 'poor pedagogy'.

Masschelein (2010) underscores that academics experience real transformation in their academic adventure when they encounter what he calls a 'poor pedagogy'. This refers to practices that "allows us to expose ourselves, practices which bring us onto the street, displaces us" (p. 44). A poor pedagogy leaves the position of the teacher and the student rather empty with no comfort. It helps one to be attentive to an exercise of ethos and attitudes, not subjecting one to methods or codes or rules of an institution or profession (Masschelein, 2010). For Masschelein (2010), a poor pedagogy.

> …invites one to go outside into the world, to expose oneself, i.e. to put oneself in an uncomfortable, weak position, and it offers the means and the support to do so. …[I]t offers means for experience (instead of explanations, interpretations, justifications, representations, stories, criteria, etc.), means to become attentive. These are poor means, means, which are insufficient, defective, which lack signification, do not refer to a goal or an end. They are pure means, tracks leading nowhere and which therefore can lead everywhere (p. 49).

In essence, a poor pedagogy is when you are face-to-face with the realness of an experience. When all the tools, preparation and theorizing have failed you. You find yourself face-to-face, exposed, vulnerable and naked with the rawness of an experience that makes you fall flat on your face with no trump card to play. Instead of running or avoiding the experience, you submit yourself to the rawness of the experience and what it has to teach you. When you submit yourself to the experience, *you are walking the track that is leading nowhere, which has the potential to lead everywhere*. Openness to this walk is what leads to transformation. Liston (2008) highlights this when he said: "…it is only when radical academics experience the pain and despair of frustrated and seemingly doomed educational struggles that critical theory can guide pedagogy. Only when struggled heartache delivers seasoned wisdom, will critical theory inform meaningful practice" (pp. 387–388). For me, embracing the rawness of my experience was what started a journey of transformation in me, one that led to a place that was not initially intended, but a place that was altogether rewarding. It spurred in me a pedagogical reflection on what it means to be with and to teach children.

How can I see my students differently as *subjects* who are worthy of being seen from the perspective of love? How can I teach them to recognise their inherent goodness even when it is hard to do so? How can I encourage them to courageously be their unique self without being swayed by the authoritarian positions of teachers, who sometimes relegate them to the background of non-existence in the classroom? How can I model to them a different philosophy of life, one that does not make them *see* less of themselves, but one that encourages them to believe that they are inherently good, deserving of love and support? I now turn to these questions and, in doing so, propose what could be seen as a philosophy of love regarding education.

Love…, the Not-So-Subtle Word

In the educational world, love has received incredible milage to the point that to talk about love seems like opening a can of worms, like Pandora's box that causes all sorts of problems than it solves. Aldridge and Lewin (2019) observe that the discussion on love have heightened the tension in the educational world; and this makes love in educational practice almost unthinkable and unspeakable. They reflected on the possibility of re-establishing meaningful discussions on love in the general educational discourse. The concern lies deeply on the need to confine love in an *either-or* box of definition and yet love is like a gem that keeps giving us new perspective whenever we turn it around.

Love proves to be greater than its parts, and therefore exposes the inadequacy of words to really capture it (Clough, 2006).

Cho (2005) highlights three main positions about love and pedagogy: those who hold to the erotic dimension of love and encourages it even when it slips into sexual domain; those who hold to the caring dimension of love and supports it so far as it does not lead to sexual desires; and those who ultimately deny the role of love as inappropriate in the domain of education. In all these, there seems to be claims that justify the positions of each group in that *either-or* approach to love and education. What if love is part of what it means to be human? What if love includes all and enlarges our hearts to move externally to include others "…even, and especially, when things go wrong[?]" (Rohr, 2019, p. 71) What if love is the physical energy that binds us and defines all of us, and attracts all things to all things? What if love is the very language that we all can speak because it is steeped into the fabric of our being and the universe? Rohr (2019) believes that love is the undergirding energy in all things, and a universal language that everyone speaks. If we speak this universal language, then it is safe to say that "we know a positive flow when we see it, and we… know… coldness [of heart] when we [encounter] it" (Rohr, 2019, p. 70). So, when we meet people who challenge us to be better from a place of love, something within us understands that positive flow, something in us begins to expand, to grow, to speak that language of love. Concomitantly, we constrict and fold when such energy is coming from a coldness of heart. When we go deeper to examine how we act and move in the world, something within us knows when we are acting from a place of love and when we are being indifferent or cold. This innate knowledge is something we cannot deny especially when our action is inspired by the intention to do good for the other. In this regard, we can see that in all the arguments *for* and *against* love, there is a common thread that underlines all of them, and that is, *for the good of the other*.

All the arguments employing the importance of love and care in pedagogy stands on the premise that it is done *for the good of the other*, normally, for the students' benefit to learn and grow. Equally, all those who subscribe to the position that love does not have any place in education because education is about knowledge and hard work and love could lead to bias (Cho, 2005, highlights these arguments), do so on the basis that it is *for the good of the other,* normally for the student. The good of the other becomes the prime basis for including or excluding love in pedagogy. In this regard, Chalwell (2016) observes: "While many researchers may not use the word 'love' to describe teaching, they allude to love as they discuss the importance of teachers' positive caring relationships with their students" (p. 121). This therefore raises the question: what *is* love for the good of the other? This is where I would like to employ an understanding of love that has changed my perspective about love and its place in pedagogy.

Love…, for the Good of the Other

Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* speaks of love as *willing* the good of the other for the other (see Thomas Aquinas, STh I-II, 26 4). To *will* the good of the *other* for the *other* is to simply *will* the *other's* good for their benefit and *not for*

yourself. There is a tendency to speak of love as willing the good of the other while at the same time it is willing the good of the other for *yourself*. Once we start willing the good of the other for our own benefit and not for the *other*, it becomes manipulation. Many evils have been done in the name of love. People who do so believe that they were acting out of love while in actual sense, they were simply manipulating others into their subjugation in the name of love. This is where many people have become sceptical about love, especially concerning its place in education. It seems that this sceptic orientation has become the pitting hole that drowns any conversation about love and pedagogy into a reductionist quagmire, thereby resulting in not having any conversation at all. Even in that situation, love enables our hearts to be open and expansive. A heart open to love always expands, enlarges and goes through obstacles like water flowing downwards (Rohr, 2019). Being open to love is when we start willing the good of the other *for the other* which has its own reward as *love*. We do this because we are pursuing something greater – the highest good. Being drawn to the highest good is influenced by an innate attraction within us. Love therefore becomes that attraction to the highest good.

Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* (see 206), say that Socrates believes that the human person is pregnant with the yearning to pursue the highest good. This pursuit is to preserve the human immortality (see *Symposium* 207). It is the search for the absolute beauty which begins with the beauties of the earth as one is being drawn by love. Thus: "The true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upward, for the sake of …other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going to two, …to all forms, …until [one] arrives at the notion of absolute beauty" (*Symposium* 211, quoted in Caranfa, 2010, p. 561). Caranfa (2010) underscores this in his synthesis of love as the centre of instruction in the *Symposium*: "Th[e] spiritual wisdom that contemplates the harmonious unity of all things is nothing but the love of beauty. To love beautiful things is essentially a desire for happiness that comes from the possession of true beauty…which is the good" (p. 566). Simone Weil, quoted by Liston (2016), argues: "At the center of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and never appeased by an object in this world" (p. 226). Liston (2016) comments that this yearning "for something greater than ourselves" is what Weil discovers as "the exploration of love" (p. 226), because love always urges us to engage in something beyond our ourselves. This love is understood as that which propels Socrates in pursuit of the good. He constantly pursued knowledge while simultaneously acknowledging the fact that he does not know. By the acknowledgement of his ignorance even when his contemporaries would call him a wise man, Socrates was 'being open' to know, 'being open' to the callings of wisdom. He bemoans those who claim that they know, without knowing that they know *not*. He believes that for one to live a good life, one must pursue the highest good. In pursuing the highest good, one is responding to the call of wisdom. This means one has to *love* wisdom by constantly 'being open' to know, to be wise. Thus, the person who is in love with *beauty* is known as a lover since such a person is taking part in love

(*Phaedrus* 249).[3] In beholding the beauty of love, one is participating in the goal of love known as generation in beauty (see *Symposium* 206). This is the reason a philosopher is believed to be a lover of wisdom; one who beholds the beauty of love.

Dissecting the word philosophy – *philosophia,* from its Greek root – *philos* – love, and *sophia* – wisdom, philosophy therefore means love of wisdom (Mautner, 2000). To understand this means that there is an innate attraction of embracing wisdom in one's life if one is open to it. Wisdom is a way of ordering one's life according to the values of pursuing the highest good – the beautiful. This is the reason Socrates would consider himself a *gadfly* who uses wisdom to sting his contemporaries in order to bring about good conduct in the society, and this became the crux of his definition of what is means to be *noble* and *good* which leads to a *good life* (Kolakowski, 2008). The human person who is living a good life is one who is in love with wisdom by being *open* to the attraction of the highest good with oneself and with one another. This is what is known as the Socratic way. It means being drawn to the highest good as you strive to live a good life with the help of the people you encounter in your life. It goes both ways. As you are striving to help others in their pursuit of the highest good, they are inadvertently doing the same for you.

Love…, What the Ancient Greeks Mean

Alain de Botton, in his 2016 talk on love at the Sydney Opera House (2020), argued that ancient Greeks developed an understanding of love that is based on the "… admiration of the perfect sides of another human being" which includes the virtues, the accomplishments, the character and the qualities of a person (34:13). He states that for the ancient Greeks,

> …the word love is reserved for admiration of what is virtuous and accomplished in another person. And for the ancient Greeks, the whole notion of love is that love should be a process of mutual education in which two people under the auspices of love undertake to educate one another to become better versions of themselves. And they do this not to be cruel, not as a way of bringing each other down, but because they have the sincerest best interests of the other at their heart. And therefore, love is a process whereby a teacher and a pupil are constantly rotating roles. Everyone is the teacher, and everyone is the pupil at certain points and has lots of things to take on board. This is not a sign that love has been abandoned, it is the proof that love is in action (Sydney Opera House, 2020, 34:32).

Kenklies (2019) captured this well when he described the relationship between Socrates and his student Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*. He maintains that the relationship was not based on the attraction of Alcibiades to the wisdom of Socrates for he did not consider himself to be wise; nor the looks of Socrates, he

[3] See Plato (1892). *The Dialogues of Plato*, volume 1, translated by B. Jowett. London: Oxford University Press, for references of *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

was considered odd and strange. Rather, the relationship was based on the *incomparableness* of Socrates (atopos), of not being able to be identified by Alcibiades with all the known categories common among teachers of his time. It was the *Otherness* of the *Other* that caused the relationship (Kenklies, 2019). So, there was this state of being in *ec-stasis* – being in a higher degree of awareness whenever Alcibiades was in the presence of Socrates his teacher (Kenklies, 2019). In this state, something was happening, both the teacher and the student were being drawn to the highest good as they encounter one another in their pursuit of good life. In the words of Kenklies (2019):

> The teacher is attracted to the emptiness of the student and the infinite potentiality of the future; the student is attracted to the completeness of the teacher and the infinite actuality of the past; and it is the moment that is the present in which past and future meet and the new future begins to unfold on the foundations of the past – a process of meeting and unfolding that is called *education*… (pp. 554-555).

Therefore, the goal of education in Plato's *Symposium* is "the comprehension of the idea of the good, that is the idea of ideas – something that not even the teacher has actually achieved when entering the relationship" (Kenklies, 2019 p. 555). This goal is not always understood by both the teacher and the student at the beginning, and yet the attraction draws them to the idea of the good. Kenklies (2019) explains:

> [The] teacher and [the] student are attracted to each other as *atopoi* for each other, and together they are drawn to the great *atopos* of the idea of the good, connected in their desire to relate to the seemingly incomprehensible, to something that can only be vaguely prefigured at the beginning of the pedagogical adventure. Or, in yet other words, what constitutes the pedagogical triangle in the first place is the state of being an *atopos* for each other – the teacher for the student, the student for the teacher, and the idea of the good for both, the student and teacher; and it is a pedagogical relationship because the person recognised and acting as teacher (Socrates) engages with the student's (Alcibiades') relation to the *atopos* (Idea of the Good) in order to support changing it for the better, i.e. improving it (p. 555).

In the relationship of Socrates and Alcibiades as described by Kenklies (2019), we can see that the *atopos* acts as what could be called a magnetic attraction that engages them to pursue the idea of the good. This magnetic attraction is love. Love was the very force that was attracting them to the idea of the good and as such acting as *atopoi* for each of them. Love is the energy attracting *all things* to *all things*; it is the physical energy and structure of the Universe (see, Teilhard de Chardin, 1962; Rohr, 2019). Therefore, in Socrates and Alcibiades, their desire to pursue the idea of the good was love attracting them to *will* the good of the other for the *other* without knowing that in *willing* this good for the other, they are being rewarded with a life that is constantly being changed for their own benefit. In other words, love was its

reward, because it implies living in this state where love constantly pushes you as *atopos* to keep improving while pursuing the idea of the good.

When I came to understand this Socratic way, it changed my pedagogical approach and my philosophy of life. It became the springboard for embracing a philosophy of love in my teaching approach. As Harðarson (2019) concurs, teachers have the opportunity to develop practical wisdom through their work if they work towards the flourishing of their students. I now know that I must engage passionately in my pedagogy with the idea of the good. This involves recognising the inherent goodness in every student. It opened my eyes to the mutual process of engaging with my students in a way that they too are teaching me something that I need to learn. Assiter (2013) puts it well while commenting on Kierkegaard's approach to teaching. She says, "Kierkegaard…encouraged teachers … to be passionate about the subject matter and about the process of learning, but also, …to recognize that they are learners as well. Teaching, … ought to be 'a genuinely Socratic approach' where the teacher is learning as well" (p. 262). The role of a teacher through this lens of "Socratic fashion" guarantees "a mutual process of development" (Assiter, 2013, p. 263). The understanding of a mutual process of development opened my eyes to the immense potentialities that are at the heart of this Socratic approach. It improved my pedagogy on how I could teach my students whose worldviews were totally different from the worldview of teaching that I was trained in, and it helped to enhance my relationship with them.

Coming Full Circle…

In the days that followed my outburst with my student, I began to reflect on how to engage better with him and the rest of my students. *Can there be a recourse to a philosophy of love in the face of a poor pedagogy even after the feeling of hurt by the student and possibly others in my class?* At first, it was a feeling of shame on my part and on the part of the student that engulfed the classroom. Shame that I had failed my student, and the shame of intellectual weakness that my student experienced. This shame caused a great suffering for both of us and for the rest of the students. It was hard teaching the students in the conditions that caused my frustration at the beginning, but it felt more difficult having to teach them when none of them were courageous to ask or answer any questions in the classroom for fear they might get it wrong.

In one of our lessons, I had to stop the lesson to speak to their hearts. Recognising now that I was in a time and space of 'poor pedagogy', I had to submit myself to the experience. "A poor pedagogy does not promise profits. There is nothing to win (no return), no lessons to be learned. However, such a pedagogy is generous: it gives time and space, the time and space of experience and of thought" (Masschelein, 2010, p. 49). The generous nature of the space and time of a poor pedagogy meant that I saw an opportunity to connect to the soul level of my students. I had to get out of my head and let the soul (self) be commanded by the experience, an experience that a poor pedagogy offers (Masschelien, 2010). It gave me the grace to be humble because a poor pedagogy offers the means to take the vulnerable position, to be

uncomfortable and to being exposed (Masschelien, 2010). In that vein, I apologised for the way I talked to the student and the hurt I may have caused him and the rest of the students. It was a simple and humbling gesture, but I never realised how much it meant for the student and the rest of his classmates. Given the distinguished power and authority that teachers possess in the school, it was uncommon to see a teacher, acknowledge that he had done something wrong.

It was a novel experience for the students, but one that opened the door for a whole new level of engagement and commitment to be better students. For me, it was initially a period of suffering that later opened the door to a philosophy of love. As though ignited, my students sparked to life as they began to communicate during lessons and engage in a passionate discussion about their own growth and development. It was a reverberating energy that assured them that they were good, and that their journey of education was going somewhere *good* and *thrilling*. Now, as I reflect on my time in the school, I realise that love was taking us to someplace new and thrilling in our pursuit of the beautiful, the highest good; and as their teacher, I was acting as *atopoi* for them, while they were doing the same for me as my students. When my time at the school came to an end, it was emotional to say goodbye, but the reassurance was the knowledge that we have transformed each other, and that the legacy created would have impacted their life in a deeper and meaningful way as it did mine.

Who could have thought that the very thing that caused great pain was the necessary suffering that opened the door to renewed love for my students? Who could have thought that a humbling experience was the very *Socratic way* that helped me to learn how to be a better teacher? Who could have imagined that the atmosphere that caused some resistance gave the right amount of friction that moved my students to open their hearts to the inherent goodness in them, and thus, helped them to begin to enjoy the journey of their pursuit of the highest good? Who could have sensed that a poor pedagogy would give the opportunity to be *in* the experience that would offer growth and transformation for my students and for myself?

Rohr (2019) highlighted what is at the heart of every human experience when he argued that there are only two normal and primary paths of transformation strong enough to cause a lasting change in us: namely, great suffering and great love. He maintains that love and suffering interplay in creating a deep experience of life by helping us to be in touch with what it means to be human; for "those who love deeply are committing themselves to eventual suffering, [and] those who suffer often become the greatest lovers" (Rohr, 2013, para. 3). Suffering has a way of breaking down our defence mechanism and opening our eyes to the reality that we too can make mistakes and we too can learn from it. Love has a way of expanding our hearts that we too can act from our deepest and innate capacity of willing the good of the other for the *other*. Once we learn this, then we ought not to be afraid of our shadow self, because it is teaching us something that we do not know yet about ourselves since it is hidden in our blind spots. When we have gone through the crucible of suffering and love, then we can in turn offer love to others. In this regard, Rohr (2021) explains:

> We can only transform people to the degree that we have been transformed. We can only lead others as far as we ourselves have gone. We have no ability to affirm or to communicate to another person that they are good or special until we know it strongly ourselves. Once we get our own 'narcissistic fix,' as I call it, then we can stop worrying about being center stage. We then have plenty of time and energy to promote other people's empowerment and specialness. Only beloved people can pass on belovedness (para. 5).

This principle buttresses the famous saying that you cannot give what you do not have. As teachers, we ought to see our students in their unique self and capabilities. We must open the eyes within to be able to see them. Liston (2016) argues:

> It is not unusual for any of us to overlook the actual and potential 'good' that exists within others. And, it is not unusual for teachers to mistakenly perceive the struggles and qualities of their students. As teachers we frequently see the world and students through our own anxieties and fears. When teaching is construed (for us or by us) as controlling and directing others, discerning this good is not a priority or a need. When teaching is defined solely as drilling and skilling kids to achieve higher standardized test scores, we do not honour students. But, when teaching is viewed as a way to help others take part in the challenges and pleasures of understanding our political, cultural, and natural worlds, and become more capable in the transforming these worlds, then we frequently need to affirm and understand (as much as we can) our students' goodness (p. 226).

By being mindful of our issues and negative projections, we can begin to *see* our students as inherently good. Liston (2008) affirms this as he proposes *attentive love* as a pedagogical ancillary. He asserts:

> In the attempt to connect student and the world, attentive love entails the following: the presumption that good exists within each student; the attempt to discern and see our students more clearly and justly; and the understanding that in order to see more clearly we need to reduce the noise of our selves. Attentive love in teaching is frequently a struggle and a sacrifice. It is a struggle and a sacrifice to see beyond our egoistic selves so as to see our students more clearly (p. 389).

This is the step we need to take to reach out to our students and to reinforce our belief to that which is good. It is a desire that will conflict with other desires, but "a yearning that defines, in part, what it means to be human" (Liston, 2016, p. 226). Liston (2008) therefore affirms that,

> [c]ritical pedagogy with its intellectual and emotional interrogation of the world, – when pursued with depth, vigor, and pleasure – can engage and refine students' attentive qualities. And in order to enable this engagement, teachers need to assume, honour, and pursue the good that lies within each student (p. 389-390).

Seeking the good in our students is a struggle and a challenge, it is a burden we carry as teachers, but it could also be a privilege that we get to help our students take part in the challenges and pleasures of transforming our world.

As I reflected on my experience with my students in the school, I realised that what my students needed was not someone who would subject them as objects of an educational outcome. They did not need someone who would prioritize standardized tests and grades over honouring them as human beings, they needed someone who could *see* them as human beings capable of growing, capable of becoming better, and capable of being loved and seen in all their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and in all their gifts and uniqueness. In truth, there needs to be a 'stepping out' of our self-centredness in order to see the otherness of a child, and thus, help such a child. On this, Saevi and Husevaag (2009) explain:

> Without the possibility of stepping outside of social conventions or to permanently overcome our self-centred striving for sameness and synchronization of views and wills, our challenge as adults and pedagogues is to become more attentive to the experience of the child and to acknowledge the child's utter otherness as the basic precondition for pedagogical practice (p. 40).

Moving out of my self-centredness in my inadvertent ways of conforming my students to the matrix of domination in the school was something that confronted my inability to *see* the *otherness* of my students. It helped me to be mindful of how I could be blind to the *otherness* of the child.

Kalisha (2015), in reflecting about his own experience says that students yearn "for an adult who could see them for who they really are – human beings, incomplete, ambiguous and on the road to self-discovery. They needed someone they could talk with and someone who could listen to them. One who cared for them, one they could rely on" (p. 67). He further argues that there is a certain sense of vulnerability that this awakens in both the teacher and the students, a vulnerability that "sees the other as, like oneself, incomplete, ambivalent, ambiguous and in need of help," but it is one that shows "the true meaning of encountering human beings" (p. 67). When the *other* encounters you in your vulnerabilities, your story begins to connect with their story, and in a moment of suffering and vulnerability, great love emerges. The emergence of this love is what brought me to that place of awakening where I came to see that love "engages the one loving. This engagement is created through the love for the other and it means that it is not my willingness to love but rather by my willingness to be engaged by love, which is the forming structure" (Hoveid & Finne, 2014, p. 255). My willingness to be *engaged by love* is what helped me to be vulnerable, to face my fears of letting down my defence mechanism and to be able to walk with love through *willing* the good of my students. Walking with love meant a passionate engagement with my students in what it means to be human. Part of being human is learning how to act with justice and love which is difficult and uncertain, but one that breeds joy because it springs from love (Griffiths & Murray, 2017). As Assiter (2013) observes, "[u]nderlying [a] passionate engagement with the process of learning is a deep commitment to justice and equality and to promoting a philosophy of love" (p. 261). This is the dynamism of love, one that

is liberating. It is a dynamism of love that sets one free to triumph. Merrill (2007, p. 112) summarises this well in her poem:

> Who will enter the Heart of Love?
> Who will open their hearts and
> know the Beloved?
> Who dares to face their fears, to
> break down the prison walls,
> to walk with Love?
> O grant us help to answer the call,
> strengthen us with pure resolve!
> With the Beloved we shall triumph;
> With Love we shall be free!

The freedom that love offers is one that is transformative. But this transformative power can only be experienced when one is willing to *will* the good of the other for the *other*. This is the way we are meant to be, this is the dynamic nature of our universe, and hence, this is the way we can create the world we all like to live in.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that love is integral to our being because it is the physical energy of the universe. It implies therefore that love is central to our educational experience since we are human beings living in a human world with human problems. Love is at the core of what makes us human, and it expands our heart and enables us to grow, especially in difficult times, because love is like water that flows downwards through obstacles. One way the current debate about love and its place in education has taken is to toe the line of *either-or* approach. This approach sees love from a dualistic lens and as something that is extraneous to our being. Another way is the shallow approach that overlooks love as part of our shared human experience in moments of difficulty and thus, forgets that love will always find a way to create future possibilities in moments of suffering. These approaches have serious implications for education because they create the atmosphere that love is too dangerous to talk about in education. For those who do talk about love in education, it creates the atmosphere that they are being too 'mushy' with their approach to love in education. I beg to differ in these approaches. Why? Because love includes all and involves all the parts of what makes us human and therefore cannot be relegated to the background in education. *If education is done for the good of the other, then love is essentially and existentially integral in education because love is for the good of the other*. This is what differentiates love from manipulation which has been the cause of all the harms done in the name of love, hence its contention in education.

In this paper, I have tried to explore what love means in *willing* the good of the other for the *other*, and how this understanding is central to the Socratic way that shaped the ancient Greeks understanding of love. I have done this by suggesting that the dynamically rhythmic nature of love as the physical energy of the universe

pulls one and another in pursuit of the highest good while improving their lives. This pursuit is rewarded with love because it is a state of life that love acts as *atopoi* for those involved. I have demonstrated this through an intersubjective reflection of a personal teaching experience that offered a time and space of a 'poor pedagogy' which became central to my teaching endeavour that is transformative. The ideas presented in this paper articulates an understanding that hints at *an openness to love* and its place in our educational endeavours, because love influences our actions and human condition as people who are *in* and *with* the world. Nonetheless, the practical steps in this direction require further work, I have therefore embarked on exploring these further through my PhD research. My task will be to look for better ways to inculcate a philosophy of love in curriculums and to encourage and promote student's wellbeing and empowerment. I do this by looking at the feasibility of embedding the Family Wellbeing (FWB) soft skills approach in the curriculum of a university access course. The FWB Program has been used to empower and inculcate love, self-awareness, resilience, responsibility and positive mindset among people in the past (Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018). Its' core principles focus on a heart-centred approach to relationships and learning, whereby qualities such as speaking from the heart, right use of will and power, unconditional love, wisdom, compassion, understanding, joy, acceptance, goodwill, humility, freedom, humour, focusing on the positive in others and oneself, seeing the deeper meaning and deeper needs involved in conflict, trusting of intuition, desiring to do what is right for all in the pursuit of the highest good, looking at the bigger picture, promoting balance, harmony, creativity, healing and unity, are fostered (see Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018). This implies that all situations are avenues for learning (Tsey, 2019; Tsey, 2018). My desire would be that these qualities help both teachers and students in navigating their professional and personal lives. I do hope that this serves as a starting point in the conversation about love and education that touches the deeper level of our soul as educators, and what it means to be human.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the content of this article.

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2.2 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- highlighted the context to the background and motivations that prompted my undertaking of this research
- discussed the ancient Greek's understanding of love as two individuals mutually improving each other's lives while pursuing the highest good
- discussed how this understanding is essential for a heart-centred approach to teaching relevant to today's educational climate.

In the next chapter, I will:

- give background preparations and planning surrounding this project and how circumstances changed the focus of the research, thus informing the three aims of the research project.

Part Two
Conceptual Evolution and Soft Skills Teachability

Overview

Part Two of the thesis builds upon the foundational framework established in Part One, which examined the relationship between love in pedagogy and education's fundamental purpose. This part chronicles the project's evolution, tracing its development from initial conception to final implementation through two distinct but interconnected chapters. Chapter 3 provides a detailed narrative of the research journey, documenting the critical decision points and choices that shaped the project's trajectory. This chronicle illuminates how theoretical insights informed practical research decisions, lending deeper credence to the project's aims and objectives. Chapter 4 is a published systematic literature review examining soft skills interventions across all educational levels. This review addresses a fundamental question raised in Part One about the teachability of soft skills, making a significant contribution by demonstrating that, despite their inherent complexity, soft skills can be effectively integrated into core curricula through structured interventions. The review's findings serve a crucial bridging function in the thesis, providing empirical validation for the teachability of soft skills while establishing practical feasibility for examining how educators integrated the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program into their teaching practice. This acts as a foundation for Part Three's grounded theory study.

Chapter 3
Research Journey and Planning

3.1 Chapter Outline

Research plans are essential for conducting sound research. However, research plans do not always unfold as intended, necessitating flexibility and the ability to adapt initial plans when circumstances require it. According to McArdle (2022), undertaking qualitative research demands flexibility because researching people's life-worlds is an inherently messy process – the lived realities of those being studied can be convoluted and ever-changing. Academics develop structured research designs with the implicit understanding that the research will not proceed linearly (McArdle, 2022). Acquiring this knowledge takes time and experience and, therefore, demands flexibility, which involves the researchers' adaptability in terms of their methods, techniques, positionalities, roles, and changes in the research plan (McArdle, 2022). This chapter shows flexibility in how I adapted my research project based on the evolving needs that emerged outside my control, set against the backdrop of my initial research focus.

I describe my interest in undertaking research that encompasses a heart-centred pedagogy to promote wellbeing and how that interest aligned with the opportunity to work with the National Centre for Family Wellbeing (NCFWB) and the James Cook University (JCU) Pathways program. The Pathways program provides access to university for a significant number of students, especially First Nations and culturally diverse populations, thus contributing to the growth of universities and student enrolment across Australia (Davis et al., 2023; May & Bunn, 2015). With the convergence of these interests, a partnership was formed to engage in research about promoting students' wellbeing within curricula. I also describe how this original focus changed due to the lack of space within curricula to introduce something new and a dearth of examples in literature on how to systematically integrate wellbeing programs into a university curriculum, notwithstanding the implementation of the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program across many universities. This led to adapting the study to involve seasoned educators who have integrated the FWB program within their subjects at different universities, and the application for an ethics variation for the study. Finally, based on the refined focus of the project, I provide translucent clarity on the three project aims of the research.

3.2 Conceptualisation of the Project as a Three-Way Partnership

The journey that led to the conceptualisation of this research project was arduous and filled with circuitous paths that ultimately culminated in a three-way partnership. Following my experience teaching in a remote community school, as detailed in my published paper in Chapter 2, I began reflecting on what that experience taught me and how I could leverage the lessons to impact change in educational settings. Initially, I was beset with the idea that there was nothing new here and nothing to pursue. It was the jaded constriction of the heart that numbs our experiences and prevents us from finding out what each experience is meant to teach us. As a philosopher, I have always been inclined to approach life with curiosity and eagerness for exploration. That curiosity has been the wings that have enabled me to fly into new uncharted territories that I would rather not dare to go into owing to a limiting belief that we sometimes tell ourselves. However, on this occasion, I was spurred to dig deeper. I began to reflect on whether I could leverage the experience to inculcate a holistic approach to teaching, one that transforms the lives of both educators and students as it did mine and my students. At that moment, I realised that I was in a whole new territory with that teaching experience. In the words of Bell and Bell (2014), "It's here that you become aware of a subterranean shift, a tectonic slide in your heart, one that alters the course of your life: your centre of gravity expands" (p. 3). If my time working in that remote community school taught me about the transformative power of teaching grounded in a philosophy of love that is borne out of a poor pedagogy, which ultimately had a positive impact on the lives of my students at that time, then it is reasonable to conclude that this is worth pursuing further. This was my 'Aha moment', the eureka effect that led me to philosophise the implications of that experience for pedagogy as discussed in Chapter 2, and to subsequently embark on further research to systematically explore its application within educational settings.

The pressing questions at that time became: How do I go about it? How can I connect with like-minded people to bring my aspirations and interests to fruition? This was the pivotal moment that led to the formation of a three-way partnership. I began inquiring about the possibility of working with the right advisory team that would be a good fit for my research endeavour. This was when I encountered the work of my primary advisor, who was involved in the FWB program. After contact was made with my primary advisor and the necessary checks to undertake a PhD degree ascertained, an advisory team was assembled under the tutelage of my primary advisor. Consequently, on 28th October 2021, I convened with my

advisory team to discuss how my research interests aligned with the tenets of the FWB program. My aim was to carve out a unique research niche focused on promoting wellbeing with a First Nations-developed wellbeing program within mainstream university curricula. After examining the literature on the FWB program, I realised that it aligned with my personal and professional views and values. This fuelled my interest in utilising the FWB program to explore a heart-centred pedagogical approach in the educational endeavours of both students and educators. While the literature provided insights into program benefits, I needed to seek first-hand experience with the FWB program to assess its potential impacts and values in my own life. Ergo, on 17th November 2021, I conducted an in-depth interview with my primary advisor, a seasoned FWB program practitioner. The insightful discussion, spanning one hour and twenty-two minutes, unveiled nuances of the FWB program's inception, its development, and the profound impact of the program on thousands of participants. Hearing these first-hand accounts reinforced my conviction that the program was relevant within mainstream curricula, aligning with my research objectives.

In a profound way, it resonated with the words of de Botton espoused in the first chapter of this thesis, which emphasises that to possess a well-rounded education is not solely about possessing technical skills; it also involves the ability to navigate the challenges of everyday life. These challenges encompass a wide range of personal experiences, such as maintaining relationships, raising children, managing one's own ambitions and anxieties, confronting mortality, and fulfilling one's societal obligations (SDF, 2013). The FWB program appears to encompass everything about the soft skills of navigating life's challenges. As a First Nations-developed program, the FWB attempts to explicitly address the emotional effects of colonisation on First Nations Australians by guiding them to explore the crucial aspects of their everyday lives, identify their inherent strengths and resources, acquire knowledge, and initiate steps to improve their circumstances (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022; McCalman, 2009; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022; Tsey et al., 2018). The outcomes of the FWB program demonstrate a diverse array of positive developments, including heightened participation in educational and occupational pursuits, enhanced resilience, active involvement in community-driven initiatives aimed at bringing about change, and improved problem-solving and interpersonal abilities (Tsey et al., 2018; Whiteside et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2016; Whiteside et al., 2014). These outcomes appear to coincide with the principles of teaching soft skills and related ideas, such as wellbeing, resilience, and practical wisdom, which universities increasingly recognise as crucial in the present educational dynamics (Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al.,

2018; Tsey et al., 2005). Although initially tailored for First Nations Australians, its universal applicability renders the FWB adaptable across diverse cultural and social contexts (Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022). This universal applicability of the program under different settings and cultures, including non-First Nations people, made it more attractive to me and fostered a sense of synergy between me and the other parties involved in the partnership. After my interview with my primary advisor and hearing about the principles of the FWB program and how it seemed to align with the words of de Botton of what today's education should be about, my interest in aligning my research with the NCFWB sparked.

At the convergence of my interests with those of the FWB researchers, the coordinators of the JCU Pathways program expressed interest in promoting students' wellbeing within their curricula. Consequently, an agreement was reached with the coordinators to engage with the FWB workshop and experience the program first-hand, assessing its relevance to the needs of the Pathways students. In other words, (a) my interest in pursuing a study in orienting a heart-centred pedagogy, (b) the interest of the NCFWB in translating research into praxis, and (c) the interest of the JCU Pathways program in promoting wellbeing among students, aligned to form the three-way partnership. Subsequently, on 4th February, 2022, I attended a half-day FWB workshop alongside other educators from the JCU Pathways program. I immersed myself in the FWB program as a participant to personally witness its potential impact. As a participant, the experience allowed me to engage in introspective reflections, share my reflections with other participants, and foster a sense of community. The positive reception among participants affirmed the program's efficacy, leading to an agreement to pilot the FWB program within the JCU Pathways program for two semesters. This partnership reflected the participatory action of learning from one another, inherent in the FWB program, which, as discussed in Chapter 5, is foundational to one of the theoretical frameworks underpinning this project – the Socratic Way.

3.3 Original plan

My original plan was to work with students in the JCU Pathways program. The student cohort in the Pathway program at JCU predominantly comprises students aged 17 to 24, with a notable representation of First Nations students and those with disabilities (James Cook University [JCU], 2024; Morgan, 2018). In 2022, the program supported a diverse student body, with 101 First Nations students and 678 non-First Nations students, reflecting a mix of English and non-

English speaking backgrounds, along with varying socio-economic statuses (JCU, 2024). The Pathways program includes the Diploma of Higher Education, Tertiary Access Course (TAC) program, Certificate of Higher Education, and JCU Prep, each tailored to meet specific academic needs and prerequisites for entry into bachelor's degree programs at JCU (2024). As per my original plan to implement FWB soft skills training within the Pathways program and evaluate the impacts, I had to ensure that the research was both feasible and potentially impactful. The exigency to conduct feasible research and evaluate the impact meant undertaking two broad planning and development activities, namely: (a) conducting literature and systematic reviews, and (b) piloting the FWB soft skills training within the JCU Pathways program. These activities underpinned how my study evolved from the Pathways program students to its present focus on university educators as participants, exploring the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating the FWB program within university curricula.

3.4. The Unfolding Nature of the Research Based on Two Broad Planning Activities

3.4.1 Activity 1 – Literature and Systematic Reviews

To ascertain the feasibility of my research, I began broadly with my literature and systematic literature reviews. Through the literature review, I positioned myself to undertake this research by narrating my experience as outlined in Chapter 2. Secondly, as a requirement for undertaking PhD research, I commenced a systematic literature review to learn about the nature and characteristics of soft skills training and their impacts on students globally. In this systematic review, I became informed on approaches educators across various levels of education, from early childhood to university, have taken to incorporate soft skills teaching into their teaching curricula to positively impact their students' lives and prepare them for the challenges of daily life. For example, in early childhood education, Whyte (2019) examines the impact of soft skills on a child's reading abilities at home and in early childhood centres in New Zealand. Through collaborative reading, Whyte (2019) contends that parents and teachers can foster the development of a child's literacy skills and cultivate soft skills such as curiosity, imagination, creativity, resilience, and metacognitive skills. These skills then become essential building blocks for a child's school readiness (Whyte, 2019). In schools, such as in Australia, McIlvenny (2019b) observes that soft skills are incorporated into curricula through general capabilities, as espoused by the statement of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that transversal competencies are included in every

educational activity of the Australian Curriculum. This suggests that soft skills are deeply ingrained in the Australian Curriculum, even if they are not explicitly stated (McIlvenny, 2019b).

In universities, soft skills have been operationalised in disciplines. For instance, in law degrees, Rogers (2021) suggests that soft skills can be effectively taught by integrating them into the early stages of courses through an abstract and intellectual approach that employs critical thinking with an emotional, practical, and personal touch. In nursing, Bajjaly and Saunders (2021) report how a top-ranked United States nursing faculty prioritised the preparation of their students for success by integrating soft skills training throughout their courses. In teacher education, Macqual et al. (2021) integrated soft skills into a curriculum and instruction course designed for aspiring teachers. They subsequently evaluated the extent to which student teachers were influenced by the incorporation of these soft skills into their educational program. In engineering, Matturro et al. (2019) conducted a systematic mapping study to identify existing research on soft skills and their relevance in software engineering. Their findings informed the development of a curriculum tailored for software engineering and development. My synthesis of these approaches, as well as the reported outcome and design quality of the methods used, are covered in their entirety in Chapter 4 as a published paper.

With the insights gleaned from this synthesis, it was a pleasant surprise to discover relatively large numbers of impact evaluations of soft skills interventions across various levels of the education system; at the same time, my original plan to implement and evaluate FWB program as soft skills within existing Pathways curricula was running into difficulties (as shall be discussed in Activity 2 below). Upon assessing the implications of this finding for my initial research plan, it became evident that proceeding with the intervention research would merely add another evaluation of soft skills training to the existing body of research. My piloting exercise had shown a gap in the literature involving the implementation process that needed to be addressed. In other words, while numerous intervention studies explore the integration of soft skills and their impacts within curricula on a global scale, there is a paucity of investigations delving into the inherent challenges and opportunities such endeavours entail. This trend is emblematic of the FWB program, where research efforts to date have focused on evaluating interventions and the transfer of FWB from one community setting to another, but not the actual processes involved in educational settings. While the FWB soft skills innovation has been implemented and evaluated across multiple universities in Australia, China, and

Papua New Guinea (PNG) over the past five years, assessments have primarily focused on wellbeing outcomes. The evaluation of these innovations has neglected to investigate the processes and best practices involved in integrating the FWB program into teaching, hindering the development of an evidence-informed research area. This lacuna underscores the exigency of holistic inquiries that elucidate the practical realities and contextual factors influencing the seamless adoption of soft skills initiatives across diverse educational settings. It played a huge role in changing the focus of the project because such insights are pivotal for informing effective strategies and best practices that optimise the successful integration of these transformative programs within the broader academic landscape.

3.4.2 Activity 2 – Piloting of the FWB within the James Cook University Pathways Program

The second broad area of focus in the unfolding nature of my research was the piloting of the FWB program as an intervention with the JCU Pathways students. This approach presented several challenges. Initially, the plan was to have students complete pre-test and post-test assessments to evaluate the impact of the FWB program based on the pilot sessions. However, after a one-hour pilot session, and introducing the FWB as part of a research project, it became evident that obtaining consent from students, particularly younger ones in their late teens, was difficult. This hesitancy to participate from the younger students was particularly attributed to the burdensome perception that being part of the study would accrue on their course undertakings. Compounding the issue was a misunderstanding surrounding the consent process, where some participants consented to interviews but not to audio recording or note-taking. This led to a limited number of participants consenting to be part of the study. The second workshop was not encouraging as none of the students attended the scheduled workshop, partly due to its timing during the recess week. This signified a serious disconnect from the students and showcased that they perceived the FWB program as an optional addition rather than a core part of their curriculum in their educational journey. As a researcher, I felt that this defeated the purpose of the study because our intention as a research team was for students to embrace wellbeing initiatives like the FWB program as an integral part of their educational endeavour, not merely as an optional add-on.

What was clear from the first pilot session was the extent to which both students and educators recognised the value of the program. Most students, especially the older ones, provided positive

feedback at the end of the first workshop, stating that the program made them think about what truly mattered in their lives, such as relationships, dealing with children, and balancing work, studies, and family responsibilities. The session encouraged meaningful conversations among participating students from diverse backgrounds, prompting them to apply key terms related to human needs and qualities to real-life scenarios, thereby enhancing their awareness of personal wellbeing. For educators, the experience was rewarding, as it encouraged their students to reflect on issues in their lives that could improve their wellbeing and impact their studies. Personally, the 'Human Qualities' session triggered a profound shift in my perspective on personal growth and influence. Through structured activities and subsequent reflection, I gained a deeper appreciation for how family members, community figures, and friends have shaped my development. This newfound awareness extended to my understanding of role models in society and their impact on individual development. The 'Basic Human Needs' session proved equally transformative, prompting a structured examination of my wellbeing journey – from current circumstances to aspirational goals, and the strategic steps needed to bridge this gap. These insights resonated deeply with my published paper on the philosophy of love and pedagogy, reinforcing my conviction that education's true purpose extends beyond technical competency to nurturing essential life skills that address fundamental human challenges. From a professional standpoint, observing both students and educators engage with the program validated its alignment with my research objectives. The program effectively demonstrates what Alain de Botton critiques as missing in contemporary higher education, which is the development of practical wisdom to navigate quotidian life challenges. This experience confirmed that the program offers a viable framework for integrating crucial life skills into academic settings, addressing the gap between traditional education and real-world competency needs.

Overall, the pilot session of the FWB in the Pathways program revealed the extent to which educators and students, and myself as a researcher, all found FWB content relevant to the notion of soft skills and student wellbeing. Although the second session did not take place as planned, which caused some disappointment and uncertainty about the future, I was reminded in that moment of the words of Paulo Coelho's (2014) protagonist in his masterpiece 'The Alchemist': "people need not fear the unknown if they are capable of achieving what they need and want" (p. 79). Coelho's protagonist also advises, "when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (p. 43). The positive feedback from the first pilot session strengthened my resolve that the research is worth undertaking in the current

educational climate in spite of the difficulties that ensued. I knew right away that I had to move forward with the research, but this time, something needed to change. As the famous words of Albert Einstein go, "… no problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused the problem in the first place" (quoted in Rohr, 2011, p. 74). Adopting a new approach to overcome the challenges and proceed with the research became essential.

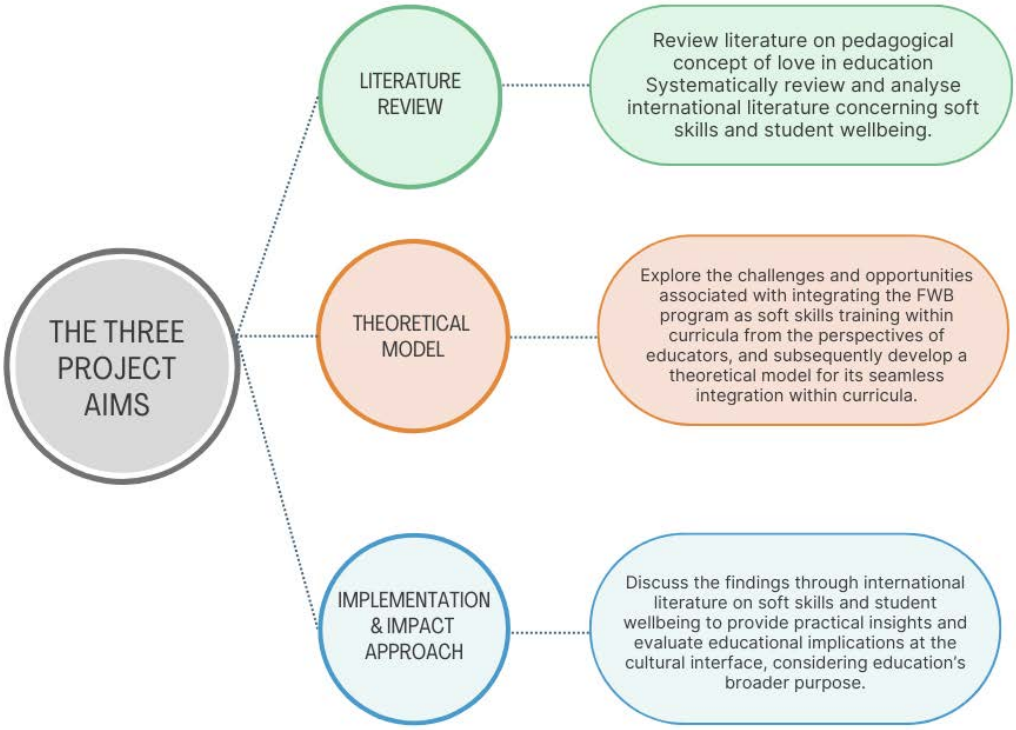
Taking into account the aforementioned considerations, the advisory team convened to brainstorm strategies to adjust our research approach with a fresh mindset. Based on the outcome of the two broad activities resulting in a notable lack of research on the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating wellbeing research innovations into demanding teaching curricula, and the need to make soft skills teaching a core part of learning curricula, the project's focus changed. The new focus shifted to collecting process data from universities with extensive experience translating the FWB soft skills innovation. As already noted, the FWB soft skills innovation has gained traction across universities in Australia and internationally over the past five years. Although the outcomes of such innovations have been evaluated, the intricate nuances of implementing them across diverse educational settings have frequently been overlooked. Therefore, the data amassed primarily through interviews with educators who have previously integrated the FWB into their subjects served as the foundational cornerstone of my research. This qualitative inquiry aimed to illuminate the opportunities and challenges associated with adopting wellbeing-centric pedagogical approaches, thereby informing strategies for effective implementation across varied institutional contexts. The approach has been reflected in the ethics application and approval process, which necessitated amendments and variations to accommodate the evolving scope of the research. To this end, it is now appropriate to delve into the aims of this project.

3.5 Primary Focus of this Research Project

Conducting research involves answering or addressing the research aim or objectives (Rojon & Saunders, 2012). It involves stating the research purpose to showcase its importance concerning existing knowledge and, often, practical implications (Rojon & Saunders, 2012). In this research project, based on the circumstances that led to the ethics variations, the primary focus is to understand the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating soft skills in teaching curricula using the FWB program as a case study. This understanding is pivotal in formulating a theory regarding how university educators perceive and experience the

phenomenon of integrating the FWB program within their teaching curricula. The three aims of this project, diagrammatically represented in Figure 2, include: (a) to explore the pedagogical concept of love in education and to understand the nature, characteristics, and outcomes of soft skills interventions within teaching courses at all educational levels using systematic literature review approaches, (b) to explore the challenges and opportunities of integrating FWB within existing, often busy, university teaching courses using qualitative grounded theory approaches, and (c) to discuss the findings to provide insights for practical application.

Figure 2
The Three Project Aims



3.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- discussed the partnership based on my interest in student wellbeing (as per Chapter 2), the JCU-led Empowerment Research Network's interest (NCFWB), and the JCU Pathways Program's interest in promoting student wellbeing within curricula
- discussed my initial plan of implementing the FWB program within the Pathways program
- discussed the change in focus of my project due to a lack of space within the already busy curriculum to fully implement FWB and the lack of research on challenges and opportunities in integrating FWB innovation in curricula
- discussed the extent of the FWB implementation across universities
- and finally, outlined my project objectives.

In the next chapter, I will:

- present the systematic review study on the nature, characteristics, and outcomes of soft skills interventions from school to university level as a published paper.

Chapter 4
Systematic Literature Review on Soft Skills Interventions

4.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter presents a systematic review of soft skills interventions in educational curricula from primary school through university, aligning with the research project's first objective and following the recommendation of Rojon and Saunders (2012) to contextualise research within existing evidence. The review addresses three key questions: (a) what is the nature and characteristics of soft skills interventions at each level of the education system? (b) what are the reported outcomes? (c) what is the design quality of the included interventions? Beginning with a comprehensive database search yielding 5,689 initial records and following the PRISMA 2020 guideline for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021), the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018), and Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP, 2010) Quality Assessment Tool, the review highlights substantial evidence of effective soft skills teaching, in primary, secondary, and higher education settings. The insights from the review inform the development of a theoretical model for integrating the FWB soft skills approach into mainstream curricula, addressing current gaps in practice and establishing the viability of teaching soft skills systematically within educational frameworks. The review's outcomes play a catalytic role in shaping the project's direction, particularly in light of the challenges I faced in implementing pilot sessions of the FWB program at the James Cook University Pathways program. Although this project focuses on university students' soft skills and wellbeing, the systematic review encompasses all educational levels to reflect the importance of these skills throughout lifelong learning. The complete systematic review, titled 'A systematic review of soft skills interventions within curricula from school to university level', is set out below.

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A systematic review of soft skills interventions within curricula from school to university level

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Background: Soft skills are increasingly promoted in curricula, writ large in its scholarly interest over the last decade. Yet systematic literature reviews covering all educational stages are lacking. This review addresses this gap by examining soft skills interventions across all educational levels, evaluating their characteristics, design quality, and outcomes.

Methods: A comprehensive search was conducted across ERIC, Scopus, Informit A+ Education, and Google Scholar databases from 2012 to 2022 to identify peer-reviewed studies on soft skills interventions within education curricula at all levels. Study characteristics were extracted, analysed and synthesised to inform conclusion. Quality assessment was performed using The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) and the Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) evaluation tools. This study is registered at PROSPERO (CRD42022309833).

Results: The search yielded 5,689 records, and after eligibility assessment, 38 studies were included. These studies employed various interventions that span three categories namely, workshop-based, creative-based, and project-based approaches, to enhance students' soft skills. Reported outcomes encompassed improved soft skills, employability, career planning, social–emotional learning, academic performance, and reduced issues like violence, drug abuse, depression, and bullying. Quality appraisal using CASP and EPHPP tools identified three studies as "best practice" among the 38. The review highlights diverse interventions and positive impacts on students' holistic development through soft skills programs.

Conclusion: The analysis of 38 studies underscores the shortage of literature on soft skills in primary and secondary schools compared to universities, a lack of high-quality "best practice" resources for soft skills development, and a tendency for control group participants to miss vital soft skills training. While randomised controlled trials (RCTs), considered as gold standard, informed 'best practice' studies, RCTs may not fully capture the nuances of complex social interventions like soft skills programs. Therefore, there is need for alternative approaches, such as continuous quality improvement studies using mixed methods. Consequently, we recommended that future research consider these aspects to enhance the effectiveness of soft skills development in curricula.

Systematic review registration: https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/display_record.php?ID=CRD42022309833, identifier CRD42022309833.

KEYWORDS

soft skills, wellbeing, interventions, curricula, primary students, secondary students, university students, systematic review

Background

Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are increasingly in demand in workplaces as essential skills needed for one to flourish in their professional life (Rego, 2017). "It is rightly said that people rise in organisations because of their hard skills and fall due to a shortage of soft skills" (Deepa and Seth, 2013, p. 8). According to Macqual et al. (2021), "If technical skills earn a job, soft skills facilitate success on the job, thereby creating more opportunities" (p. 2). Sadly, soft skills have been noted to be missing among graduates as greater emphasis is placed on the development of hard skills and procedural knowledge (Kaittyn et al., 2018; Macqual et al., 2021; Noah and Aziz, 2020; Taylor, 2016). This is evident in Australia's "Job-ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package," which directs funding towards job-ready courses like teaching, nursing, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), deemed crucial in national priorities, to fulfil workforce needs (Department of Education and Employment, 2020).

With the apparent lack of soft skills among graduates, there is growing pressure on education providers and educators to equip students with the skills that enable them to face the demands of the real world after graduating from institutions of learning. Even though studies have shown that universities are best placed to embed soft skills in their curriculum to enhance a grounded development of a student (Deepa and Seth, 2013; Macqual et al., 2021; Noah and Aziz, 2020), this practice is not widespread yet. A study by Robles (2012) identified the top 10 soft skills perceived as essential by business executives as communication, responsibility, positive attitude, teamwork, courtesy, flexibility, social skills, work ethic, integrity, and professionalism. This supports the demand for a greater emphasis on the development of such skills.

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are, broadly speaking, those competency skills that dynamically elevate one's inter/intra-personal skills/attributes and emotional intelligence to wisely navigate their professional and personal life. However, there is an overtone of ambiguity surrounding the definition of soft skills. As Matteson et al. (2016) remark, "[t]he phrase *soft skills* is catchy but ambiguous, and authors use it extensively with little agreement on meaning" (p. 75). This overarching "ambiguous" undertone has warranted disagreement on what are classified as soft skills. In other words, there is no formally agreed upon set of universal soft skills (Cinque, 2021; Matteson et al., 2016; McIlvenny, 2019a). Many have defined soft skills, but with varying degrees of detail on what they entail. According to Matturro et al. (2019), attempts at defining soft skills have been made in three ways: explicit definitions of soft skills, definitions by giving examples of soft skills, and definitions by comparison to hard skills. For example, Carblis (2000) suggests that soft skills denote those ranges of capabilities that involve simple skills of interaction and listening to the complex skills of conflict resolution and the inspiring skills of leadership. Macqual et al. (2021) define soft skills as those skills that embraces lifelong learning, creativity, communication, conscientiousness, and teamwork, which are vital for one's success in life and work. Noah and Aziz (2020) assert that soft skills complement one's hard skills in order to improve one's interactions and performance as well as one's professional development.

Viewing soft skills in relation to employability, Devadason et al. (2010) maintain that they are skills, abilities, and attributes that supplement graduates' performance in their field of specialisation. In the same vein, Rogers (2021) leans on the understanding of soft skills as "core skills" that enhance the effectiveness and wellbeing of people in their careers. For Gonzalez et al. (2013), "[s]oft or social skills are those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to fit in a particular structure such as a project team or a company" (p. 74). Taylor (2016) defines soft skills as intra and inter-personal skills necessary for one's personal development, social participation, and functioning in a specific work environment.

In contrast to hard skills, which are specifically tailored to the essential performance of the technical specifications of a given job (Tsey et al., 2018), soft skills involve "…a mind-set, underpinned by essential human qualities such as intuition, creativity, passion, responsibility and kindness, courage, and self-awareness" (Tsey et al., 2018, p. 3). For Matturro et al. (2019), soft skills involve "…the combination of the abilities, attitudes, habits, and personality traits that allow people to perform better in the workplace, complementing the technical skills required to do their jobs and influencing the way they behave and interact with others" (p. 19).

There are debates whether soft skills can be taught in a formal setting and implemented in curricula based on the ambiguity in defining them (Kyllonen, 2013; McIlvenny, 2019b; Rego, 2017; Touloumakos, 2020; Yan et al., 2019). According to Touloumakos (2020), the definitions of soft skills have become stretched to the point that their limits have become somewhat vague. Consequently, their development and inclusion in education curricula have been affected (Touloumakos, 2020). Experts even suggest abandoning the term "soft skills" and instead focusing on core competencies or critical skills, treating them with the same training emphasis as technical skills (Galloway, 2022). As the discourse regarding whether soft skills can be acquired through teaching and learning has spurred considerable disagreement within academic and professional circles, this systematic literature review addresses this debate by synthesising a wide range of empirical studies that investigate the effectiveness of soft skills learning interventions. Systematic reviews offer a critical synthesis by gathering, evaluating, and organising existing evidence (Munro et al., 2021; Young et al., 2014). By critically assessing and synthesising existing research, this systematic review provides valuable insights into the design and implementation of effective soft skills learning programs while fostering a nuanced comprehension of the overarching impact of soft skills within diverse spheres of human endeavour.

Soft skills and curricula

Over the years, there have been attempts to embed soft skills in curricula from school to university levels in many countries around the world (McIlvenny, 2019a). Regarding early childhood education, Whyte (2019) examines the impact of soft skills in improving a child's reading capabilities at home and in an early childhood centre in New Zealand. She maintains that parents and teachers can initiate the development of a child's literary skills through collaborative reading, and in doing so, develop the child's soft skills like that of curiosity, imagination, creativity, resiliency, and meta-cognitive skills. These

skills, therefore, become essential building blocks in preparing the child for school (Whyte, 2019). In Australian schools, there is evidence that soft skills are embedded in curricula through the General Capabilities, as noted by McIlvenny (2019a) while quoting UNESCO's (2015, p.1) statement, thus, "the Australian Curriculum implicitly and explicitly includes transversal competencies in every educational activity. To this end, the Australian curriculum provides detailed information on each capability and how it can be adopted across each subject" (p. 43). This presupposition is paramount for teachers to note. Soft skills are already deeply embedded in the Australian Curriculum, even though their identification may not be clearly stated (McIlvenny, 2019a).

At the university level, literature shows that attempts to embed soft skills in the curriculum have been particularised in disciplines. In the law discipline, Rogers (2021) acknowledges the agreement on the significance of teaching soft skills within a law degree, but recognises that existing scholarship is insufficient in doing so. She lists a growing range of scholarship on how to do so, but points to the pushbacks on embedding soft skills in curricula by those who favour a more traditional approach to teaching law and maintain that curricula reform would prove difficult. These traditionalists cite the understanding that embedding soft skills in law curricula would be a risky business and a deviation from the status quo. Rogers (2021) goes on to propose methods for embedding soft skills in the teaching of law, including online teaching, by integrating and diffusing soft skills teaching in the early stages of courses. She emphasises that this could be done both in the abstract and intellectual way through critical thinking with a touch of emotional, practical, and personal approaches, a position that Galloway and Jones (2014) share. Rogers (2021), therefore, suggests that a holistic approach to teaching soft skills would complement the "core skills" of law as a required component of the degree. In that light, Galloway and Jones (2014) posit that a shift in focus from the traditional law degree would enhance transformation in law students through embracing the soft skills of dispute resolution, students' emotional intelligence, and resilience to face the challenges of the real world. This approach would involve strategies to evolve the curriculum in order to tackle the psychological stressors encountered by law students and lawyers (Galloway and Jones, 2014).

In other disciplines, soft skills have gained some traction and attention in curricula of sales and marketing, management, and psychology degrees (Carblis, 2000). In dentistry, Gonzalez et al. (2013) acknowledge the benefit of possessing good soft skills in dental practice but recognise how it is still a challenge in dental schools. They consider the different soft skills used, how they are taught and assessed, and the issues that ensue from doing so, especially in relation to the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Malaya in Malaysia. In nursing, Bajjaly and Saunders (2021) report how a top-ranked United States nursing faculty prepared their students for success by including soft skills training in their courses. In management, Ritter et al. (2018) describe a curriculum redesign that incorporates a backward design approach to focus on developing soft skills for the students in the area of teamwork skills. In engineering, Matturro et al. (2019) undertook a systematic mapping study to identify existing research on soft skills and how some of them are relevant in software engineering. They inform how this will help in designing a curriculum for software engineering and development. In teaching, Macqual et al. (2021) assess the effectiveness of implementing soft skills curriculum and instruction in teacher education as it relates to pre-service teachers. In hospitality, Wilks and Hemsworth (2011) evaluate the level of soft skills competency in an undergraduate hospitality management program in Portugal, and assess the lack thereof among students. They accentuate the importance of soft skills development in hospitality and propose the adoption of soft skills in the curriculum in a balanced way. They, therefore, suggest the tutelage of students by industry managers as the way forward to improve soft skills development in hospitality, and they refer to this as "adopting a student." In human nutrition, a scoping review by Murray et al. (2020) examines the employability programs embedded within the course curriculum of a human nutrition degree for undergraduate students. They assert that this degree should incorporate the implementation of soft skills and project-based skills in order to expose the students to the reality of the diversity of workplaces in the industry (Murray et al., 2020). And in Information Technology (IT), Taylor (2016) compiles a list of soft skills that are considered most important according to literature, lecturers, students, and industry reports. She proposes further research into the incorporation of soft skills in the curriculum for IT students.

In addition to the published literature, we found a systematic review of soft skills protocol registered at PROSPERO on the 15th of March 2021 (CRD42021236944) by Vlemincx et al. (2021). The aim of their study is to assess the efficacy of soft skills interventions in improving students' employability, mental health, and wellbeing within higher education. Their focus is on soft skills interventions targeting specific outcomes and includes only experimental designs. Their review questions include the effectiveness of soft skills in improving students' employability, the interventions that are most effective, the outcomes that produced the largest effect size, and the interventions and soft skills that have been studied most. Their participants are higher education students, including college, vocational and university students—this extends to graduate students, students with disabilities, students in specific programs like nursing, dentistry, and students in specific countries.

While there is an abundance of published literature on soft skills development and systematic reviews of intervention focusing on a particular stage of education or discipline, as showcased above, there is a dearth of systematic literature reviews on soft skills interventions embedded in the curriculum across *all* stages of the education system from primary to secondary and tertiary level. This paucity of literature makes it impractical for policy makers and educators to make informed decisions and implementations based on evidenced-based research on best practice strategies for promoting soft skills in curricula across *all* stages of education. This inadvertently results in students missing out on soft skills development, which is tantamount to being unprepared to compete in the globalised workforce. This review, therefore, intends to bridge this gap in the literature.

Soft skills are universally relevant at all levels of educational systems. The more educators understand soft skills that are appropriate to each level of the education system, the more they can scaffold approaches that will consolidate students' soft skills development as they progress through their studies. This approach will ensure that constant improvement is undertaken at a systemic level to build soft skills learning as an integral part of a student's educational development journey. As emphasised by Churchill et al. (2016), learning is both a "process" and a "product," and as such, a "developmental" and "multifarious" adventure. Operationalising soft skills development in

the education system across all levels of learning could potentially enhance a student's grounded development and capacity to navigate the numerous challenges involved in the learning journey, from school to university level. From this perspective, embedding soft skills in the curriculum becomes a positive step in improving a student's wellbeing in their academic endeavours. Enhancing student wellbeing and soft skills not only adds to the process of learning but also to the mature development of a person in the grand scheme of responsible citizenship that education fosters. Our search in this direction begins with probing the following research questions.

Research questions

1. What are the characteristics of soft skills interventions at each level of the education system?
2. What are the reported outcomes?
3. What is the design quality of the included interventions?

Aim

The aim of this review is to assess soft skills interventions across all levels of education.

Objectives

- To examine the characteristics of soft skills interventions in curricula across primary, secondary, and tertiary institution levels.
- To determine the extent of interventions and outcomes at each level of the education system.
- To evaluate the design quality of the included interventions and make recommendations to inform practice.

Methods

This review aimed to explore and evaluate soft skills interventions embedded in curricula across all levels of education. It followed the current guidelines for the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (Page et al., 2021a). In line with recommendation for best practice in systematic reviews (Editors, 2011), the protocol was registered at PROSPERO (CRD42022309833). In conducting the review, we examined the nature of soft skills that were embedded in curricula, the extent of interventions and outcomes involved, and the design quality of the studies.

Eligibility criteria

The inclusion criteria for this review involved studies that assessed soft skills interventions and outcomes embedded in curricula across all levels of the education system. These studies must be primary research papers with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method design approaches. They have to be written in English to enable in-depth assessment by the reviewers, and they must be published in peer-reviewed journals. We restricted our search to studies published in the last 10 years, 2012–2022, based on the rationale to focus more on current evidence. We excluded papers that failed to meet the inclusion criteria, including papers that were conceptual, descriptive, theoretical, or non-evaluative in nature, as well as study protocols, review papers, narrative comments and grey literature (Table 1). The rationale for this is to focus only on original studies that are peer-reviewed rather than study reviews.

Search strategy

Our search strategy was developed with the help of an experienced librarian in the field of education and agreed upon by all the authors. The following databases were therefore searched: ERIC, Scopus, Informit A+ Education, and Google Scholar. The search strings and the Boolean operators "OR" and "AND" were used to narrow and expand the search. The PICO model helped us to organise the concepts underlying our search strategy (Table 2). The search was carried out with some or all of the following search combinations depending on the specific requirement of each database or search engine: "soft skills" OR "life skills" OR "transversal skills" OR "transferable skills" OR "21st century skills" OR "non-cognitive skills" AND curricul* AND "university student*" OR "tertiary student*" OR "college student*" OR "primary student*" OR "elementary student*" OR "high school student*" OR "secondary student*" OR "middle school student*."

TABLE 1 Eligibility criteria.

Categories	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Years	2012–2022	
Focus	Soft skills (and related terms) interventions and outcomes in curricula	
Research setting	All levels of education	
Sample characteristics	Students (primary, secondary, tertiary)	
Research design	Quantitative design Qualitative design Mixed method design	
Literature	Primary research peer-reviewed articles	Conceptual, descriptive, theoretical, or non-evaluative papers. Study protocols, review papers, narrative comments and grey literature.
Language	Published only in English	

TABLE 2 Overview of PICO.

P (population)	I (interventions)	C (context)	O (outcome)
"University student*" "Tertiary student*" "College student*" "Primary student*" "Elementary student*" "High school student*" "Secondary student*" "Middle school student*"	"Soft skills" "Life skills" "Transversal skills" "Transferable skills" "21st century skills" "non-cognitive skills"	(Curriculum embedded) curriculum*	Outcome concepts were not included in the search strategy to incorporate all students' level results.

*Represents flexible keyword search where *matches any unknown characters.

Selection of papers and data management

The first author (DO) screened the selected papers' titles and followed this with an in-depth reading of the abstract. Reading of abstract indicated whether an article will be read in full and judged to be included or not, using the criteria for inclusion. Another author (MH) cross-checked at least 20% of randomly selected papers, and author (KT) adjudicated any difference that ensued. The current Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram (Page et al., 2021a) illustrates the inclusion and exclusion process of studies (Figure 1). The citation management program "Endnote 20" was used by author one (DO) to store digital copies of the studies included, with their bibliographic information.

Extraction of data and analysis

A charting form was used to extract data, and this laid credence to the inclusion of a study. This charting form illustrated the following variables of a paper: author (1st author), year of publication, location, study aim, population/sample, study design/method, intervention/timeframe, intervention setting, data collection, outcomes, and co-design. The characteristics of included studies are presented in a tabular form (Supplementary material). Included studies were examined to assess the level of intervention and outcomes that were evident in embedding soft skills in the curriculum of a school or a university. Outcomes and interventions were thematically delineated to provide information on integration, barriers, enablers, and reported success. The review of included studies involved an iterative process to provide the best outcomes for the review's objectives. The whole process was adopted and documented using the PRISMA checklist (Page et al., 2021a).

Quality appraisal

The methodological quality of included studies was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) for the qualitatively designed studies, and Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP, 2010) Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies for the quantitatively designed studies. Mixed methods studies were assessed using both EPHPP and CASP. The assessment and inter-rater cross-checking followed the same procedure as data screening and extraction. Following the "Canadian Hierarchy of Promising Practices Evidence," included studies were categorised into three areas: best practice soft skills interventions (RCTs with high EPHPP scores), promising practice (all other study designs that scored "moderate" to "strong" across both tools), and emerging practice for those with weak scores (Heyeres et al., 2021).

Results

Our search in the four databases of ERIC, Scopus, Informit A+, and Google Scholar returned a total of 5,689 records. After duplicates ($n = 129$) were removed, we had a total of 5,560 records. After title screening, a total of 5,047 records were further excluded as irrelevant. A total of 513 reports were sought for retrieval, and after the abstract reading of these reports, a total of 372 reports were not retrieved due to lack of relevance to the focus of this review. Consequently, the full text of 141 reports was retrieved and assessed for eligibility. However, additional studies ($n = 2$) were recently published and, through an email notification from Informit A+ database platform, the study was retrieved for eligibility assessment, making the total number of reports retrieved in this study review 143. Of these 143 reports, a total of 107 were further excluded based on the following reasons: wrong study type ($n = 92$), not peer-reviewed ($n = 9$), wrong target population ($n = 4$), and duplicate data ($n = 2$). After a manual searching of reference lists of relevant papers, two studies ($n = 2$) were further included, making the total number of peer-reviewed studies included in this review 38 (Figure 1).

Characteristics of soft skills interventions/outcomes in included studies

Of the 38 reports included in this study, 15 studies were published between 2012 and 2017, and 23 studies were published between 2018 and 2022. The majority of the studies originated from the USA ($n = 10$), with four countries in Asia and Europe having three studies originating from each of them, *to wit*, the UK ($n = 3$), Malaysia ($n = 3$), Spain ($n = 3$), and Iran ($n = 3$). Taiwan ($n = 2$), China ($n = 2$), and South Korea ($n = 2$) each had two studies originating from them, and one each ($n = 1$) from Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, UAE, Canada, Poland, Lebanon, India, Algeria, and Indonesia (Figure 2).

The majority of these studies were conducted among students in universities ($n = 24$), followed by students in secondary schools ($n = 8$) and students in primary schools ($n = 6$). Of the 24 studies conducted among university students, USA ($n = 6$) had the majority, followed by the UK ($n = 2$), Spain ($n = 2$), China ($n = 2$), and Malaysia ($n = 2$); and one each ($n = 1$) from Australia, Poland, Canada, Iran, Lebanon, Taiwan, Algeria, South Korea, Indonesia, and Portugal. Of the eight studies conducted among secondary school students, USA ($n = 2$) had the majority, with Malaysia, India, Spain, UAE, Iran, and the UK having one study each ($n = 1$). Among the six studies conducted among primary school students, USA had two ($n = 2$) studies, with Iran, Taiwan, South Korea, and New Zealand having one study each ($n = 1$) (Figure 3).

There are a range of designs in the included studies. These include four ($n = 4$) randomised controlled trials (RCTs), five ($n = 5$) controlled clinical trials (CCTs), nine ($n = 9$) case studies, two ($n = 2$) interrupted

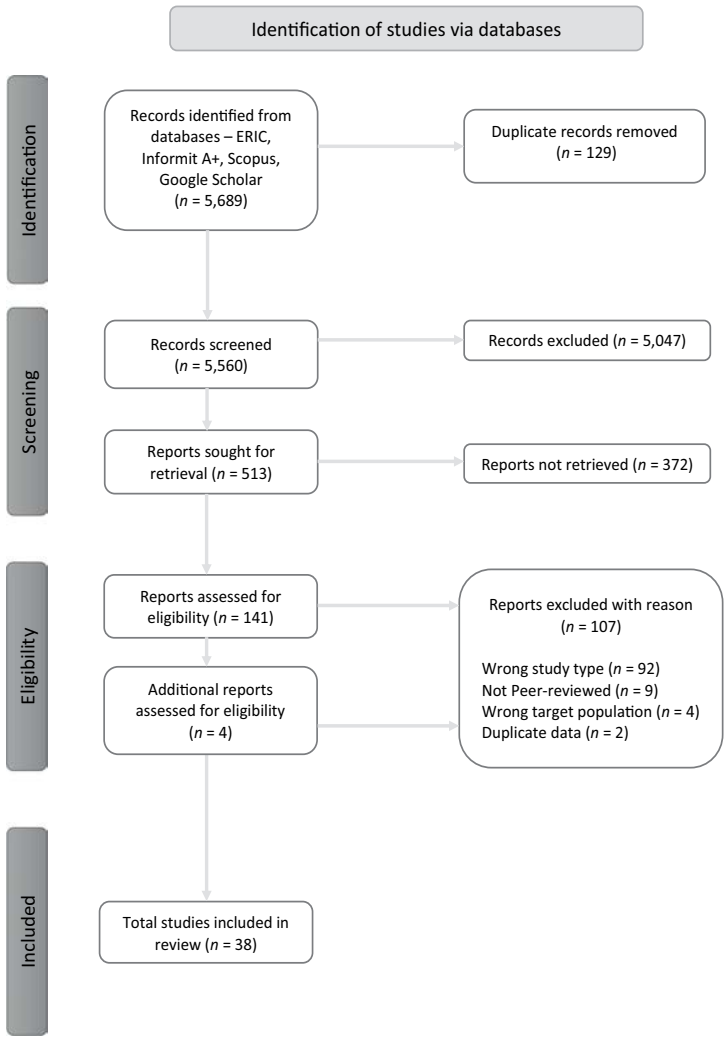

FIGURE 1
PRISMA flow diagram. From: Page et al. (2021b). For more information, visit www.prisma-statement.org/.

time series studies, 10 ($n = 10$) cohort studies, six ($n = 6$) cohort-analytic studies, and two ($n = 2$) case–control studies. The intervention setting of included studies ranges from the platform of face-to-face ($n = 25$), online ($n = 5$), and mixed mode delivery ($n = 8$). Data were collected using questionnaires ($n = 22$), interviews ($n = 2$), questionnaires and interviews ($n = 3$), and surveys, focus groups, and special instruments customised for certain study conditions ($n = 11$). Control groups were utilised in the study to assess the effectiveness of an intervention. Of the 38 included studies, 18 ($n = 18$) utilised control groups, while 20 ($n = 20$) were single group studies. Only one study ($n = 1$) from the USA out of the 38 included studies was a co-design study where students collaborated to design interventions that would improve their soft skills development.

Included studies reported primary, secondary, and university-based interventions aimed at improving students' soft skills/life skills development, career planning, employability, and social and emotional learning. The intervention timeframe of included studies varied. We have catalogued them into four categories: short-term period, medium-term period, long-term period, and no recorded timeframe. Of the 38 included studies, seven ($n = 7$) were catalogued "short-term

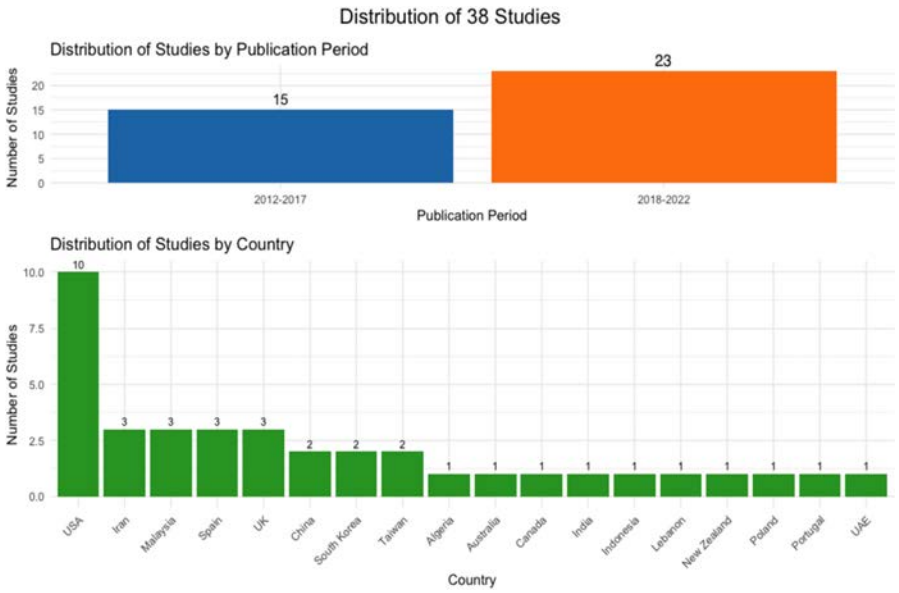

FIGURE 2
Distribution of studies.

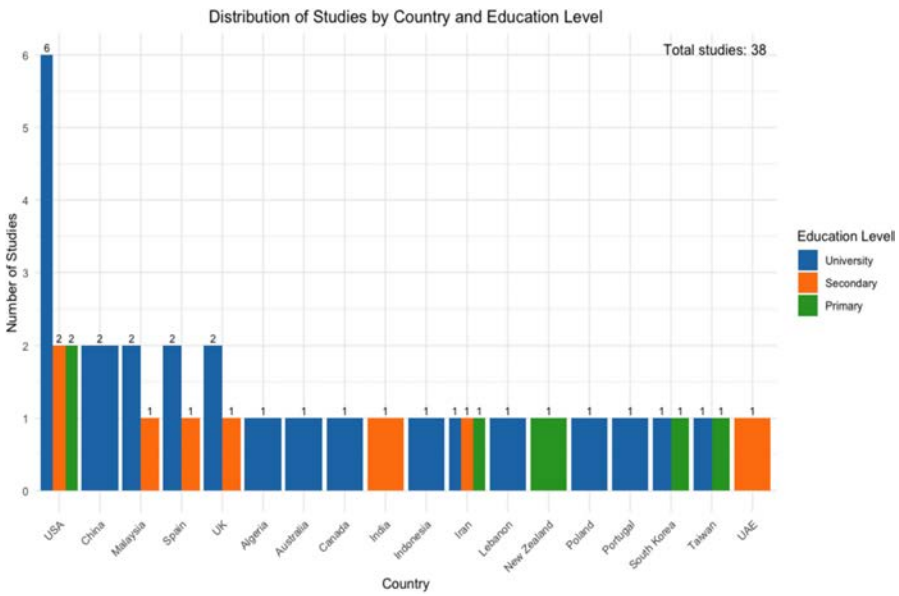

FIGURE 3
Studies by country and educational level.

period" because their interventions were administered for not more than 10 h (Bekki et al., 2014; Bradley et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2018; Jamali et al., 2016; Mardiah et al., 2022; Sohrabi, 2019; Wan Husin et al., 2016). Thirteen ($n = 13$) studies were catalogued "medium-term period" because their interventions were operationalised for not more than 11 months (Chang et al., 2021; Cronin et al., 2020; Deep et al., 2019; Escudeiro and Escudeiro, 2012; Healey Malinin, 2018; Horrillo et al., 2021; Klegeris, 2021; Lee J. Y. et al., 2020; Maddah et al., 2021; Sorensen et al., 2012; Whiteside et al., 2017; Wurdinger and Qureshi, 2015; Yan et al., 2019). Thirteen ($n = 13$) studies were catalogued "long-term period" because their interventions went for at least 12 months or more (Benson and Chau, 2017; Choudhury and Gouldsborough, 2012; Dyson et al., 2021; Espelage et al., 2015; Hernández-Fernaud et al., 2017; Jagannathan et al., 2019; Kuk et al., 2015; Lee M. J. et al., 2020; Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2018; Moshki et al., 2014; Rhee et al., 2020; Stawiski et al., 2017; Wang and Sugiyama, 2014). Other remaining studies ($n = 5$) were catalogued "no recorded timeframe" because there was no indication of how long interventions were carried out (Choi et al., 2021; Diez-Ojeda et al., 2021; Jarrah, 2019; Tadjer et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2021); even though Choi et al. (2021) indicated that survey responses were collected over three semesters.

Study outcomes and approaches

Reported outcomes in the included studies involve improving students' soft skills or life/transferable skills development, employability skills, teamwork competency, leadership and communication skills, social and emotional learning skills, resiliency skills, wellbeing, mental health and dietary habits, academic outcomes, and also reductions in the perpetration of bullying, violence, and drug addiction. These outcomes were realised using different approaches ranging from online to face-to-face interactive activities involving workshops, trainings, programs, assessments, presentations, discussions, courses, lectures; films, dramas, role-plays, games, reflections, and feedback; and undertaking projects. These approaches have been divided into three categories: category 1, category 2, and category 3, respectively. The categorisation of the interventions into three broad groups was a pragmatic attempt to capture the nuanced characteristics of a highly diverse yet overlapping soft skills interventions of included studies, aligning with the first research question. Given the considerable overlaps between the interventions, a decision was taken to categorise them according to the dominant way the authors of the included studies described the intervention. For instance, if an intervention had elements of both a "workshop" and "creativity," but the authors primarily described it as a workshop, it was categorised under the workshop category. This pragmatic approach to categorisation has its limitations, which were appropriately addressed in the relevant sections of the paper.

Category 1—workshop-based interventions (online and/or face-to-face activities involving workshops, trainings, programs, assessments, presentations, discussions, courses, and lectures)

Within this category, there are 26 studies that used activities either through online and/or face-to-face mediums in workshops, programs, trainings, courses, modules, assessments, presentations, discussions, and lectures, to improve students' skills development. Among these studies, two ($n = 2$) focused on improving students' problem-solving skills. In one instance, a scenario-based assessment was used for at least 5 h in online interactive problem-solving learning activities among female doctoral students in the United States who were divided into a treatment group and control group. Participants in the treatment group had better knowledge of interpersonal problem-solving skills and the application of these skills in relevant scenarios than the control group (Bekki et al., 2014). A similar result was achieved in Canada through a problem-based learning approach, where students in small teams engaged in two 80-min in-class sessions per week for 13 weeks and were evaluated at the end of the semester through generic problem-solving skills (PSS) scores, a peer evaluation, and examinations. Results indicated a statistically significant improvement in PSS scores. Paired *t*-test scores revealed 11.4% change out of 13 in 2018, 11.8% change in 2019, and 11.4% change in 2018 and 2019 combined. The scores in 2020 were significantly low in percentage change (13.0%) due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, results indicated that students' problem-solving skills were improved (Klegeris, 2021).

Five ($n = 5$) studies within this category focused on improving students' employability. A curriculum-based module, "careers corners," was used among undergraduate students studying either Criminology or Sociology with Psychology, or Childhood and Youth Studies with Psychology, in the United Kingdom. This involved a 5–10-min presentation at the end of each lecture over 11 lecture periods, focusing on career and students' employability. Participants had an increased sense of career planning and higher confidence to get relevant work experience (Bradley et al., 2021). In the same vein, another study used an industry-oriented capstone course to prepare electrical engineering and computer science (EECS) students for employability in Taiwan. Participants reported an increased sense of general ability, behaviour, and attitude towards employability (Chang et al., 2021). An employment training program called "ITINERA" was utilised over 31-h tutorials in one academic year to improve students' employment skills and personalised career orientation in Spain. Participants perceived improvements in the areas of employability, openness to learn, knowledge and self-efficacy for labour market, teamwork, and program satisfaction (Hernández-Fernaud et al., 2017). Another program called "Pathways to Your Future" was used in the United States among secondary school students to prepare them for college and upgrade their career readiness. The same program was also used to support their parents in preparing their children for college and future careers. Participating students engaged in 5 modules of this program over 40 h in a 10-week period, and parents engaged in pre-program orientation and take-home materials to support their child. There was a perceived improvement in students' skills to plan and manage their education and career goals, as well as parents' involvement in their children's college and career aspirations (Horrillo et al., 2021). A self-evaluative program called "UPGRADE Your Performance" was used among 4 secondary school students with disability in the United States to improve their employability soft skills. Participants learnt a strategy for self-evaluation, self-monitoring, self-graphing, and goal setting, while completing some tasks and evaluating the task on Job Performance Rubric (JPR) for 30–45 min daily, as well as evaluating soft skills developed for the day. Participants reported

perceived soft skills improvements in both targeted and non-targeted areas and were able to apply the skills in a new job setting within the school (Clark et al., 2018).

Ten ($n = 10$) studies within this category focused broadly on developing different sets of soft skills competencies. A self-determination theory (SDT) was used among physical education students in England. Participants' perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness were assessed, and these were noted to influence their life skill development in physical education (Cronin et al., 2020). A 12-week "Effective Communication course" aimed at improving students' soft skills, conflict resolution, and group learning in a Malaysian university reported significant improvement in students' conflict resolution skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, general knowledge, and research skills. Overall, this indicated perceived improvement in soft skills development, group learning, and overcoming communication difficulties (Deep et al., 2019). An intervention program called "Nurture thru Nature" (NtN) in a disadvantaged public elementary school in the United States included activities to improve students' academic outcomes, soft skills, pro-social behaviour, higher order thinking, and conscientiousness within an 8-year period. Results showed that participants performed significantly better in the areas of cognitive skills, pro-social skills, higher order thinking, problem solving, and conscientiousness after participating in the program (Jagannathan et al., 2019). A life skill training (LST) program was administered to elementary school students in Taiwan over 27 class sessions in 3 semesters through workshops, an online discussion forum—LINE, and photo assessment activity. Students in the experimental group showed significantly higher scores on cognitive reappraisals ($M = 30.47$, $SD = 7.64$) compared to students in the control group ($M = 29.64$, $SD = 7.77$) who undertook education as usual (EAU). Authors also suggest that LST reduced depressive symptoms in males ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 3.43$), but not in females (Lee M. J. et al., 2020). Another intervention program called "Competencies for the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (CFIR) in South Korea was used among engineering students in flipped class activities through online videos, peer-led discussions, and problem-solving tasks over 6 semesters in 3 years. There was perceived improvement in leadership skills, analytical thinking, interpersonal competency, professional attitude, and global mindedness among participants. In some of the semesters, there was improved creative attitudes among participants. However, there was no significant improvements in self-directed learning attitude, autonomy, and teamwork in the study (Rhee et al., 2020).

An integrated classroom practice in 12 private tertiary institutions in Malaysia involving students working in groups to develop soft skills through written assignments, discussions, presentations, and tests/exams, showed a perceived increase in the integration of teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Tan et al., 2021). Also, in Malaysia, another study used a STEM integrated program called "BITARA-STEM" to impact 21st century skills, higher order thinking, and research skills in secondary school students over 6 days through Project Oriented Problem Based Learning (POPBL) activities. Participants improved in digital literacy skills, inventive thinking, and effective communication. However, there was no improvement in spiritual values (Wan Husin et al., 2016). In China, a new physical education (PE) program was used among female undergraduate students. Students in the experimental group engaged in unique PE program activities each week for 14 months, while members of the control group received traditional lessons. The experimental group improved their social skills of companionship, self-disclosure, and adaptation (Wang and Sugiyama, 2014). A study in the United Kingdom used online activities over 18 lectures and four practicums in 1 year to develop transferable skills of undergraduate students. Participants perceived improvement in their communication, teamwork, and critical analysis skills (Choudhury and Gouldsborough, 2012). A cooperative learning approach was utilised among students enrolled in Infant Education (IE) and Primary Education (PE) in Spain. Teachers received training in cooperative learning, and students in the experimental group engaged in cooperative learning techniques. Participating students indicated improvement in social skills and efficacy, interpersonal and teamwork competencies, and professional competencies (Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2018).

Five ($n = 5$) studies within this category utilised life skills training to reduce drug addiction, violence and promote students' mental health and wellbeing. A drug abuse preventative life skill training was used among university students in Iran where participants engaged in 2 one-day life skills training workshops weekly in one semester. Results indicated that life skills training significantly improved drug abuse preventative behaviours among participants (Moshki et al., 2014). Another drug abuse preventative intervention used a school-based life skills program to create awareness about the hazards of tobacco among secondary school students in India. Participants engaged in 10 1-h classroom sessions and three out-of-classroom sessions per week. Results showed that students in the intervention group had significant knowledge about tobacco and related legislation, indicated efforts to prevent tobacco use among others, and improved self-efficacy. After 30 days of intervention, self-reported use of tobacco in the control group was twice as high as in the intervention group (Sorensen et al., 2012).

A life skill training involving empathy, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, coping skills, self-regulation, and assertion skills, was utilised for middle school students in Iran over 8 sessions for a month through lecture-style presentations, group activities, role-plays, and discussions. Participants improved their mental health, and reduced stress, sensation seeking, drug addiction and violence (Jamali et al., 2016). A similar result was achieved among primary school students in South Korea. Participants undertook a life skills program involving social skills training activities, violence prevention skills, conflict resolution, and positive interpersonal relationships for 45 min weekly over 12 weeks. Results indicated improved peer competency and attitudes toward school violence, and decreased school violence experience among participants (Lee J. Y. et al., 2020). The "KHOTWA (STEP)" program was used among students in a private university in Lebanon to improve their wellbeing. The intervention group undertook "Life Skills for Youth" as an elective academic course. Participants' behaviours, attitudes, knowledge, interaction with peers, decision making, weight gain, and mental health, were evaluated within 20 online sessions for 3 h per week over 10 weeks. The control group only undertook a self-administered survey twice with a 3-month difference. Results indicated significant improvements in life skills, dietary habits, and mental health scores at the 3-month follow-up within the intervention group (Maddah et al., 2021).

Two ($n = 2$) studies in this category focused purely on social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. A study involving a series of psychological workshops included video interaction and interpersonal training to improve SEL for both undergraduate and postgraduate

students in Poland for 8 h over 4 sessions in 15 months. Participants perceived significantly higher indicators of social competence and emotional intelligence to cope with intimate situations, social exposures, and with assertive demanding situations (Kuk et al., 2015). Another study used SEL to reduce bullying among primary school students in the United States. The intervention group engaged in "Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention" (SS-SSTP) program to improve the SEL skills of communication, emotion regulation, and empathy over 28 lessons in 3 years. The control group received the "Stories of Us—Bullying" program while waiting 3 years to receive the SS-SSTP. The intervention group demonstrated a significantly higher reduction in bullying perpetration compared to the control group (Espelage et al., 2015).

Two ($n = 2$) studies within this category utilised an Australian Aboriginal empowerment education program, known as Family wellbeing (FWB) program, to promote students' soft skills competencies. A study involving first-year social work undergraduate students in Australia used the foundational topics of the FWB integrated into a core social work subject to promote 21st century skills within 10 two-hour weekly workshops. Participants reported significant improvement in their social competency skills and the relevance of the FWB in promoting students' wellbeing (Whiteside et al., 2017). Another study adopted the Australian FWB program in China to promote soft skills among second-year Chinese undergraduate students within a 2-h weekly workshops for 10 weeks. Results showed statistically significant improvement in soft skills development and the relevance and acceptability of the FWB among Chinese students (Yan et al., 2019).

Category 2—creative-based interventions (online and/or face-to-face activities involving films, dramas, role-plays, games, reflections, feedback)

There are six ($n = 6$) studies in this category that utilised online and/or face-to-face platform activities through films, dramas, role-plays, games, reflections, feedback, to improve students' skills development. An online film project through a Team-Based Learning (TBL) approach, was used among undergraduate students in the United States to promote interpersonal skills. Participants undertook topics in interpersonal skills and in groups, analysed the films—"The Devil Wears Prada" and "Sully." Through discussions, feedback, group presentation, and a written report, they evaluated each other's work. Results showed that peer evaluation, teamwork performance, and team member collaboration positively impacted students' satisfaction toward TBL, thus, improving their interpersonal skills, particularly among students with <5 years of work experience (Choi et al., 2021). Similarly, a drama-based intervention among male high school students in United Arab Emirates (UAE), included sessions of watching plays to help with students' memory, problem-solving skills, artistic and aesthetic skills, creativity, reading skill, and pronunciation. The impact of drama increased students' life skills, reflective thinking, reading and numeracy skills, knowledge of one's personality strengths and weaknesses, and application of study to real-life situations (Jarrah, 2019).

A cooperative learning approach was employed to develop social and emotional learning (SEL) outcomes among students in physical education (PE) from 4 primary schools in New Zealand. Participants in small groups played different roles to complete a task and played a modified game. They then reflected on the experience using strategies to encourage each other. Results revealed that SEL skills improved during PE lessons as participants reflected the skills of being part of the team, learning how to listen, how to help and encourage each other, and how to make PE fair to everyone (Dyson et al., 2021). Another game-based intervention was used among female primary school students in Iran. It utilised group games for 6 weeks, two 60-min sessions per week, to engage students in an experimental group and improve their communication skills (Sohrabi, 2019).

Inquiry-based activities were used in a compulsory chemistry subject among secondary school students from high to medium socio-economic backgrounds in Spain. Participants, in groups under the supervision of a teacher, played the role of a director, secretary, spokesperson, or time manager; and reportedly developed 21st century skills in the areas of critical thinking, self-confidence, self-direction, disciplinary knowledge, and organisational management (Diez-Ojeda et al., 2021). Another study engaged undergraduate students in the United States in a 9-class negotiation course taught over a period of 5 years, where students engaged in role-plays to negotiate a contract for the supply of a chemical from a distributor. Participants reported improved abilities to think objectively, communicate effectively, and apply negotiation skills in real settings (Benson and Chau, 2017).

Category 3—project-based interventions (online and/or face-to-face activities involving building a project to develop soft skills)

Six ($n = 6$) studies under this category used the task of building a project to develop soft skills among students. A Project Based Learning course (PBL) was utilised among postgraduate students in the United States. Students developed relevant in-depth projects over a 16-week period for 3 h per week. PBL activities involving discussions, book readings, signing project forms, networking with peers and experts to complete a project, reporting on project progress to a large group, and presenting the project on the final day within 5 min. Results indicated life skills development in the areas of responsibility, problem-solving, self-direction, communication, and creativity (Wurdinger and Qureshi, 2015). In the same United States, an approach involving scrum practices was used among engineering students to develop 21st century skills in the areas of collaboration, self-awareness, and problem-solving skills within two studies. The first study involved first-year students in teams across disciplines designing a prototyped robot and collaborating to problem-solve. This study resulted in increased excitement among participants to pursue a career in engineering and improvement in all leadership skills, assessed in the areas of collaboration, problem-solving, and self-awareness. However, due to the lack of comparative data in the first study, which is a limitation, a second study was conducted. In the second study, students in an experimental group undertook a modified course that included scrum practices to build a project-based and iterative learning design with a periodic reflection. Students in the comparison group undertook the standard course. Participants in the modified

course enjoyed the course more and improved in all assessed individual and team behaviours compared to the students in the standard course (Stawiski et al., 2017).

In a similar approach, another study used a problem-based learning environment in a computer science master's course to impact soft skills and cognitive skills development among students in Algeria. In groups, students developed a software project to promote collaborative skills before a set deadline. Their soft skills were assessed during the design and implementation phases of the project; they presented the project afterwards. There was increased technical skills in software development and increased communication, time management, and initiative skills among students. However, there was no increase in curiosity skill (Tadjer et al., 2020). In Portugal, a cooperative learning course—"Multinational Undergraduate Teamwork"—was used among undergrad students from 9 different European countries at an international level. Students, in one semester, completed a project with some flexibility among partner institutions, and perceived improvement in their teamwork, communication, and academic learning outcomes (Escudeiro and Escudeiro, 2012). Another study utilised a design thinking-STEAM-PjBL model to enhance transferable skills among pre-service chemistry students in Indonesia. Over six online meetings in 2 months, students engaged in five stages of the design thinking process: *empathise, define, ideate, prototype,* and *test*. They reflected on their content knowledge to comprehend the rising temperature issue in Indonesia relating to thermodynamics, as a basic topic in chemistry courses, and created products to solve the associated issues. Results indicated improved communication skills and creativity, informed by integrative thinking and collaborative problem-solving activities. These culminated in students' having a greater sense of empathy and responsibility for the environment and improved adaptability as independent thinkers (Mardiah et al., 2022).

Finally, a 5-year service-learning partnership between undergraduate and middle school students in the United States resulted in participatory-design activities where they designed interventions in a middle school building and grounds. The university students engaged with middle school students weekly for 6–10 weeks each semester. After 2 years, the course became available for third-year undergraduate students. Students reflected weekly through in-class discussions, public blogging, and private writings on their website. They also submitted two papers on the first day of class and on course completion. After these activities, totally 772 artefacts, students improved their sense of empathy, flexibility, relationship building, systems thinking, professional goals, and employability skills in promoting creative resilience, especially in managing complex design practices. Of the 38 included studies, this is the only study that co-designed an intervention with students (Healey Malinin, 2018).

Across the three categories discussed, the interventional approach that rumbles at their base-note, connects, and underpins all of them, is a participatory social learning approach. This approach involves students engaging in a collaborative and shared learning endeavour, fostering active participation among them to problem-solve, irrespective of their backgrounds and experiences (Cunningham, 2009; Hedges and Cullen, 2012). This interventional approach is evident in categories 1, 2, and 3, in the ways students were involved in discussions, reflections, role-plays, dramas, and collaborative projects to share their experiences and knowledge, to improve their soft skills development, and to work in achieving common goals so as to empower each other.

The methodological quality of included studies

Among the 38 included studies, 29 used quantitative methods, three used qualitative methods, and six used mixed methods approach. As previously ascertained, quantitative studies were assessed using the EPHPP tool, qualitative studies were assessed using the CASP tool, and mixed methods studies were assessed using both tools of EPHPP and CASP (Table 3).

Quantitative studies

There were 29 quantitative studies assessed using the EPHPP tool. The score resulted in six ($n=6$) studies rated as "strong" (Bekki et al., 2014; Espelage et al., 2015; Lee J. Y. et al., 2020; Lee et al., M. J. 2020; Moshki et al., 2014; Sohrabi, 2019), nine ($n=9$) studies rated as "moderate" (Cronin et al., 2020; Jamali et al., 2016; Jarrah, 2019; Klegeris, 2021; Rhee et al., 2020; Sorensen et al., 2012; Tadjer et al., 2020; Wan Husin et al., 2016; Wang and Sugiyama, 2014), and 14 studies rated as "weak" (Benson and Chau, 2017; Bradley et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2021; Choudhury and Gouldsborough, 2012; Clark et al., 2018; Diez-Ojeda et al., 2021; Hernández-Fernaud et al., 2017; Horrillo et al., 2021; Jagannathan et al., 2019; Kuk et al., 2015; Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2018; Stawiski et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2021). The evaluation of the scores is according to the EPHPP global rating scale, which stipulates "strong" as having no weak rating, "moderate" as having one weak rating, and "weak" as having two or more weak ratings.

Most of the quantitative studies that were rated as "moderate" ($n=9$) scored "moderate" to "strong" scores in the areas of study design, confounders, and blinding. The majority of these studies described what kind of design they used, whether there were important differences among the study participants and if they were controlled to ensure all participants were in the same baseline before intervention, and whether participants or outcome accessors were blinded in the process of intervention. However, they scored "weak" in the areas of selection bias on how participants did not represent the target population (Cronin et al., 2020; Jarrah, 2019), how withdrawals and dropouts were not reported (Jamali et al., 2016; Rhee et al., 2020; Wan Husin et al., 2016), how validity and reliability of data collection tools were not shown (Klegeris, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2012; Tadjer et al., 2020), and how information about confounders was not indicated (Wang and Sugiyama, 2014). While there were 14 ($n=14$) studies that were rated "weak" as an overall score, one ($n=1$) RCT study (Jagannathan et al., 2019) in the "weak" category scored a "moderate" to "strong" ratings in all areas assessed, except in the areas of blinding and the reporting withdrawals or dropouts in the study. Without these shortcomings, Jagannathan et al. (2019) would have been rated a very strong paper with "best practice" according to the EPHPP recommendations.

Qualitative studies

There were three ($n=3$) qualitative studies assessed using the CASP tool. The rating of these studies involves having at least 8 out

TABLE 3 Methodological quality appraisal.

Study	Year	Study design	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed	Total score EPHPP	Total score CASP	Recommendation
Bekki	2014	RCT	x			Strong		Best practice
Espelage	2015	RCT	x			Strong		Best practice
Lee, M. J	2020	RCT	x			Strong		Best practice
Dyson	2021	Case		x		Strong		Promising practice
Healey-Malinin	2018	Case		x		Strong		Promising practice
Lee, J. Y	2020	CCT	x			Strong		Promising practice
Mardiah	2022	Case		x		Strong		Promising practice
Moshki	2014	CCT	x			Strong		Promising practice
Sohrabi	2019	CCT	x			Strong		Promising practice
Yan	2019	Cohort			x	Strong	Strong	Promising practice
Cronin	2020	ITS*	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Jamali	2016	CCT	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Jarrah	2019	Cohort	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Klegeris	2021	Cohort	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Maddah	2021	Cohort analytic			x	Moderate	Strong	Promising practice
Rhee	2020	Cohort	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Sorensen	2012	Case–control	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Tadjer	2020	Cohort	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Wan-Husin	2016	Cohort	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Wang	2014	CCT	x			Moderate		Promising practice
Whiteside	2017	Cohort			x	Moderate	Strong	Promising practice
Wurdinger	2015	Cohort			x	Moderate	Strong	Promising practice
Benson	2017	Cohort analytic	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Bradley	2021	Cohort analytic	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Chang	2021	Cohort analytic	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Choi	2021	Case	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Choudhury	2012	Cohort	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Clark	2018	Case	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Deep	2019	Cohort			x	Weak	Moderate	Emerging practice
Diez-Ojeda	2021	Case	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Escudeiro	2012	Case			x	Weak	Moderate	Emerging practice
Hernández-Fernaud	2017	Cohort analytic	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Horrillo	2021	Case–control	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Jagannathan	2019	RCT	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Kuk	2015	ITS	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Mendo-Lázaro	2018	Cohort analytic	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Stawiski	2017	Case–control	x			Weak		Emerging practice
Tan	2021	Case	x			Weak		Emerging practice

*ITS, Interrupted Time Series study.

of 10 "yes" scores to rate a study "strong" as *de rigueur* in the CASP stipulations. Among the three studies rated (Dyson et al., 2021; Healey Malinin, 2018; Mardiah et al., 2022), all of them resulted in "strong" scores with an overall 8 "yes" ratings.

Mixed methods studies

There were six ($n = 6$) mixed methods studies assessed using both the EPHPP tool and the CASP tool. Among these studies, one ($n = 1$)

scored "strong" in both the EPHPP quantitative evaluation and CASP qualitative evaluation (Yan et al., 2019). Three ($n = 3$) scored "moderate" in the quantitative evaluation of EPHPP tool, and "strong" in the qualitative evaluation of CASP tool (Maddah et al., 2021; Whiteside et al., 2017; Wurdinger and Qureshi, 2015). The remaining two ($n = 2$) studies scored "weak" in the quantitative aspect evaluated with the EPHPP tool, and "moderate" in the qualitative aspect evaluated with the CASP tool (Deep et al., 2019; Escudeiro and Escudeiro, 2012).

Practice recommendation

An overview of our study appraisal results, and recommendation for practice, is provided in Table 3. According to our rating in line with the "Canadian Hierarchy of Promising Practices Evidence," as outlined by Bainbridge et al. (2018) and Heyeres et al. (2021), RCTs with "strong" rating in the EPHPP tool are classified as "best practice." Other study designs with "moderate" to "strong" ratings across both EPHPP and CASP tools, are classified as "promising practice," and studies with "weak" ratings are classified as "emerging practice."

Based on this classification, three ($n = 3$) studies (Bekki et al., 2014; Espelage et al., 2015; Lee M. J. et al., 2020) utilised a RCT study design and scored "moderate" to "strong" scores in all areas assessed. Their studies were identified as "best practice." Their interventions include interactive online problem-solving activities and special life skill training/lessons to improve life skills/SEL skills and to reduce bullying and depressive symptoms. Their reported outcomes show improvement in the intervention group compared to the control group in developing problem-solving skills, life skills/SEL skills, and reducing bullying and depressive symptoms. They articulated in detail how interventions were administered, the methods used, and the reported outcomes. The remaining studies ($n = 35$) utilised interventions such as films, dramas, games, presentations, workshops, trainings, role-plays, reflections, feedback, assessments, and building a project, either face-to-face or online, to develop soft skills. Among these studies, 19 were considered "promising practice," and 16 were considered "emerging practice" (Table 3). Based on the limited number ($n = 3$) of "best practice" studies realised from our review, and the growing recognition that RCTs may not always be feasible for evaluation of complex social interventions (Dopp et al., 2019), we recommend that further implementation of relevant "emerging" and "promising" interventions are underpinned by appropriate evaluation designs, using continuous quality improvement approaches.

Discussion and recommendations

Embedding soft skills in curricula has been a clarion call for education providers, educators, employers, and policy makers. The importance of soft skills has attracted attention to the point that there is a "need" to practically embed them in curricula, so they are not seen as "add-ons" to the whole educational experience of a student. This systematic review outlines the assessment of published intervention studies on soft skills in curricula. It ascertains the level of scholarship, interventions and outcomes involved in soft skills development within primary, secondary or higher education curricula. The process was adjudicated by subjecting the included studies to quality appraisal using both the EPHPP and CASP tools. The aim is to advance scholarship and inform practice on soft skills development in curricula across *all* levels of the education system.

The interventions employed in the included studies sought to promote soft skills as part of curriculum-based activities. These activities are student-oriented because they create opportunities for students to work as a team, communicate, adapt, and problem-solve, developing transferable or soft skills. Evidence shows that these activities somehow promoted perceived improvements in students' soft skills, employability skills, and SEL skills development. In some cases, they also help reduce drug abuse, bullying and violence, and promote the psychological needs of students. However, the nature of the interventions differs in each level of education.

The majority of the interventions among university and secondary school students were based on hands-on activities, including building a project, giving presentations, and engaging in interactive online forums. Students in primary schools used dramas/plays, games, and role-plays appropriate to their level of understanding and engagement to develop soft/life skills. Their skills development focused on improving their teamwork skills and academic results, managing and regulating their emotions to reduce depressive symptoms, bullying and violence, and promoting pro-social skills behaviours. To be more precise, these interventions span three categories, *to wit*, workshop-based, creative-based, and project-based approaches.

In the first category, workshop-based interventions, the studies revealed significant improvements in problem-solving skills, employability, and a wide range of soft skills. For instance, one study demonstrated how a scenario-based learning activities positively impacted students' problem-solving skills (Bekki et al., 2014), while another emphasised the importance of SEL in enhancing students' communication and reducing bullying (Espelage et al., 2015). These findings highlight the effectiveness of structured workshops, courses, and training programs in nurturing essential life skills.

In the second category, creative-based interventions, the studies used innovative methods such as drama, role-plays, games, and reflections to enhance students' soft skills. These approaches contributed to improvements in interpersonal skills, artistic abilities, conflict resolution, and creative thinking. This category underscores the value of interactive and engaging activities in fostering holistic skill development.

The third category, project-based interventions, emphasised the significance of hands-on experiences and collaborative projects in developing soft skills. Students involved in project-based learning exhibited improvements in problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills. These findings emphasise the importance of practical, real-world applications in education.

Considering that places of learning have been seen as vital locales to develop emotional and social skills among students (OECD, 2017), most of the interventions in the included studies were focused on university students ($n = 24$ studies). Only eight ($n = 8$) studies focused on secondary school interventions and six ($n = 6$) for primary school students. This begs the questions: *were university students targeted as study participants because of the convenience of administering interventions to their age bracket? Or were soft skills deemed salient for them in order to prepare them for the real world/work experience?* The answer to these questions warrants exploring in future research. Our point of departure is that soft skills development is essential at every level of education. As educators understand the importance of soft skills development in each level of education, they will help develop frameworks that will support students as they advance in their educational endeavours, notwithstanding their level of education. Our recommendation is that educators scaffold ways

of embedding soft skills in the curriculum of primary and secondary school students as well as tertiary to help them develop the life skills needed to flourish in their education and in life. In doing so, policy makers, educators, and education providers will know how best to embed soft skills in curriculum as part and parcel of a student's learning objectives, and therefore contribute to the all-round, grounded development of a student who is ready for work/life experience for tomorrow, and thus contribute to their wellbeing in such wise.

The studies included in this review were restricted to the last decade. About 61% of the studies were conducted in developed countries, and yet, only one of the studies was conducted in Australia. Significantly, the outcomes of the Aboriginal Australian FWB study (Whiteside et al., 2017) influenced the subsequent FWB program uptake in China (Yan et al., 2019). Within Australia and internationally, there are calls to embed soft skills/social competencies within university curriculum to promote student wellbeing and complement the traditional hard skills students acquire to function in a rapidly changing world (Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). This call originates from the need to promote wellbeing by education providers as a way of optimising student experiences (Partridge et al., 2018). As reported by Orygen (2017), there are "…significant gaps in Australian research and data on the prevalence and nature of mental ill-health among university students" (p. 6). In essence, we recommend more evidence-based research on the promotion of soft skills within an Australian context. This will be of upmost importance in curbing the prevalence of mental ill-health among university students. Assessing this makes the conducting of this review salient for the Australian context.

Our review indicated that while all the included studies ($n=38$) reported perceived improvement in the participants based on the competency being measured, only three ($n=3$) RCT studies (Bekki et al., 2014; Espelage et al., 2015; Lee M. J. et al., 2020) with "strong" rating were considered "best practice" based on the "Canadian Hierarchy of Promising Practices Evidence" (Bainbridge et al., 2018; Heyeres et al., 2021). This shows the dearth of "best practice" literature in this field, and the abundance of "promising" and "emerging practice" studies ($n=35$). Although RCTs are considered the "gold standard" for quality research (Dopp et al., 2019; Leir and Parkhurst, 2016; Onnis et al., 2018; Parkhurst and Abeysinghe, 2016), they may not always be appropriate for some interventions involving complex social factors (Dopp et al., 2019). This means that alternative approaches need to be adopted to increase wider implementation and evaluation to strengthen the body of evidence-base literature (Dopp et al., 2019). Consequently, we advise that further implementation of "promising" and "emerging practice" interventions are underpinned by appropriately designed evaluations using, for example, mixed methods continuous quality improvement approaches to strengthen the evidence-base (Dopp et al., 2019).

In terms of collaboration with students to co-design an intervention, only one study (Healey Malinin, 2018) out of the 38 reviewed studies co-designed intervention with students. We recognise that most soft skills programs/trainings have already been developed and hence, factor the point of impracticality for a co-design. However, it is important we put into consideration the input of those whose lives are being affected by an intervention. As Reed et al. (2018) propose, when translating knowledge into practice, three strategic principles have to be considered, namely: (a) to act scientifically and pragmatically, (b) to embrace complexity, and (c) to engage and empower. Our focus in this context is on the last principle—"to engage and empower." This means that translating research into practice should embrace and engage the expertise and knowledge of those involved—stakeholders, staff, and beneficiaries—to empower changes that are uniquely theirs in terms of their concerns and motivations (Reed et al., 2018). It also fosters a collaborative approach to learning, intrinsic in the "Socratic way" where parties involved are open to learn from each other (Orih, 2022).

Finally, this review highlights the role of control groups in determining the effectiveness of an intervention. Among the 38 included studies, 18 studies utilised control groups to ascertain the effectiveness of their intervention. However, only two ($n=2$) studies (Bekki et al., 2014; Espelage et al., 2015) indicated that control groups later received the intervention after treatment groups must have finished with the intervention. The consequential need for soft skills development cannot be overstated, and this means that no student should be left out in acquiring these skills. As Tsey et al. (2018) affirm, soft skills are not only essential in promoting wellbeing, but they also help in nurturing a sense of work/life balance to equip one to flourish in their personal and professional life. We, therefore, recommend that it is paramount that those assigned to control groups get to have the opportunity to receive the soft skills intervention as those in the treatment group at some point in their educational journey. In line with Alain de Botton's advocacy for an education that will prepare students for the complexities of life, this will equip all students to develop the skills needed to flourish in an increasingly challenging world, and therefore contribute to their grounded development as responsible citizens in society (SBS SDF, 2013).

Strength and limitations

The strength of this review is that it systematically evaluated the heterogenous data retrieved from four databases on soft skills embedded in curricula. This showed the robust nature of knowledge the review provided on the range of interventions used in promoting soft skills development in curricula. The synthesis of data revealed gaps in the areas of primary and secondary schools, where the promotion of soft skills in curriculum needs to be emphasised, as compared to universities. It also identified a gap in that participants in the control group missed out on receiving intervention after those in treatment group finished with the intervention. We ascertain that soft skills development is primarily vital for the optimal development of every student. This establishes the linchpin for the aforementioned future research endeavour, and the necessity for education providers and policy makers to ensure that the promotion of soft skills at every level of education is emphasised on a systemic level.

Notwithstanding the extensive nature of this systematic review, limitations abound. One of the limitations is the possibility that some of the data sources may have been missed. Due to the ambiguous nature of soft skills definitions, and the varied ways of labelling them (Matteson et al., 2016), there is the possibility that some of the soft skills may have been discussed under different terms and/or in relation to wellbeing that may not be identified in our search strings. Our search strategy focused on soft skills embedded in curricula. We tried to include as many terms as possible of how soft skills are referred to in an educational context, under the auspices of an experienced librarian from the field of education. However, there is the possibility that some of the soft skills interventions may have been discussed in a term uncommon to us, and/or in relation to wellbeing, thereby making such studies difficult to identify in our keyword data search. We also acknowledge the scope was limited to peer-reviewed articles as "grey" literature was excluded. But this is only a potential limitation as the number of included papers is

relatively large which allowed the broad categories of workshop-based, creative-based, and project-based approaches to soft skills training to be explored, making our findings reliable. We, therefore, recommend that future reviews incorporate other uncommon terms for soft skills as well as wellbeing to widen the scope of data generated for review.

Another limitation emanating from the heterogenous nature of soft skills interventions is the inability to conduct a meta-analysis, and the difficulty in drawing meaningful conclusions and applying outcomes to other settings. In our included studies ($n = 38$), study settings and the nature of interventions indicate that interventions were applied in different settings, in different countries, and in different contexts with no consistency across studies. There is hardly any generalised tool for measuring outcomes except the tools deemed appropriate in a setting based on the competency being measured. This means that what worked in one country may not work in another when factors such as teaching methods, teaching resources, teaching policies, and cultural differences are considered. We, therefore, recommend that the generalisation of the findings of this review to other educational settings be interpreted with caution.

Conclusion

Embedding soft skills in curricula is increasingly considered vital in today's world. This systematic review aimed to evaluate the characteristic of soft skills intervention at each educational level, the reported outcomes, and the design quality of included interventions in order to inform practice. The reviewed studies collectively demonstrate the potential for educational interventions to enhance students' soft skills, employability, mental health, and wellbeing. Workshop-based, creative-based, and project-based approaches have proven effective in addressing a diverse range of skills and competencies.

The categorisation of studies into "best practice," "promising practice," and "emerging practice" highlights the need for more robust research methodologies, particularly in the field of soft skills educational interventions. While RCTs provide a gold standard for evidence, they may not always be feasible for complex interventions. Therefore, researchers and educators should consider alternative evaluation approaches, such as continuous quality improvement mixed-methods studies, to capture the multifaceted nature of soft skill development.

The benefits of incorporating soft skills development in curricula have been highlighted in terms of enhanced personal development and wellbeing, increased employability, pro-social behaviours, and improved academic performance. Nonetheless, there are challenges in the nature and definition of soft skills, the scarcity of literature on the primary and secondary schools' levels, the lack of "best practice" literature on soft skills development, and the absence of indications whether participants in control groups later received an intervention.

Overall, the preponderance of soft skills literature over the last decade is an indication of an increased scholarly interest in the development of soft skills among students, especially university students. However, this warrants careful attention in tailoring soft skills development to the needs of the students involved and their educational contexts. To empower students with the skills they need for success in various aspects of life, it is crucial to continue exploring and refining innovative educational interventions while maintaining a strong commitment to rigorous research and evaluation practices. This will ensure that future educational interventions are not only engaging but also evidence-based, leading to positive and lasting outcomes for students. Doing so will help education providers and policy makers integrate soft skills seamlessly into curricula. We hope that future research will take our recommendations into account and systematically embed soft skills into curricula as a core part of students' education journey, and thereby, contribute positively to their career's prospects and life situations.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

DO: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MH: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. RM: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. HU: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. KT: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1383297/full#supplementary-material

4.2 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- explored the nature, characteristics, outcomes, and quality of soft skills interventions within curricula from school to university level through a systematic review
- provided results indicating various interventions used across education levels, spanning workshop-based, creative-based, and project-based approaches
- reported outcomes from the three interventional approaches, including improved soft skills, employability, career planning, social-emotional learning, academic performance, and reduced issues like violence, drug abuse, depression, and bullying
- highlighted the positive impacts of soft skills programs on students' holistic development
- highlighted the teachability of soft skills within curricula despite their complexity.

In the next chapter, I will:

- elucidate the research methodology for this project.

Part Three
Grounded Theory Study

Overview

Part Three forms the core of this thesis, presenting the grounded theory study across four chapters (5–8). The summaries of Part Three are presented as a published article in Appendix 2 (see Orih et al., 2025). The work has also been accepted as a book with Springer (see Appendix 3 for accepted book manuscript information). This part connects the theoretical exploration of soft skills teachability from Part Two to a practical strategy for integrating the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program into university curricula as a soft skills approach. Chapter 5 examines the methodological framework, reflecting on the philosophical foundations, theoretical influences, and practical considerations that guided the research approach. Chapter 6 builds on this by detailing the study design, including data collection methods and analytical strategies. Chapter 7 presents an in-depth explication of the novel theoretical model 'Getting people to experience it', developed through this research. Chapter 8 discusses the grounded theory study findings, contextualising them within existing literature and research objectives. These chapters create a bridge between the contextual foundation of Part One, the exploration of soft skills in Part Two, and the concluding synthesis of the entire thesis in Part Four. The methodological foundation that led to the grounded theory study, its analysis and the discussion established here, supports the conclusions and recommendations presented in the final part of the thesis.

Chapter 5
Research Methodology

5.1 Chapter Outline

Research methodology involve a series of decision-making processes aimed at addressing a specific research question. Many of these decisions are crucial as they have the potential to alter the course of the entire project. Consequently, it is imperative to assiduously document the key steps taken during a research endeavour. Cheer (2019) cites Morse (1999), who used the armchair walkthrough approach to describe a method wherein one thoughtfully and critically reflects through each stage of a research project. This approach provides contextual insights into the methodological foundations of the research, thereby broadening the research's appeal to a wider audience. Within this chapter, I highlight the decision-making intricacies of my methodology by exploring my underlying research philosophy and theoretical influences. I discuss the considerations that guided my adoption of a particular research philosophy, shaping my research design. Subsequently, I expound upon the path that led to selecting a grounded theory methodology and elaborate on the reasoning behind opting for a constructivist grounded theory.

5.2 Philosophical Assumptions

Structuring a research project method involves delving into the underlying philosophies that shape one's ideological framework (Saunders et al., 2009; WalesDTP, 2015). Like an iceberg, the project method is the tip that is visible, but underneath this are ideologies and philosophies, which include ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology that shape the whole iceberg (WalesDTP, 2015). As an emerging researcher, my primary advisor emphasised the 'apprenticeship' nature of my PhD project, highlighting the importance of learning the fundamentals of effective research and cultivating self-awareness regarding the factors that influence my worldview. This involved critically reflecting on and scrutinising my experiences and perceptions of the world. Doing this ultimately helped unravel my research philosophy. According to Saunders et al. (2009), gaining insight into your research philosophy requires cultivating reflexivity - the ability to critically examine your own beliefs and assumptions with the same scrutiny you would use when evaluating others' perspectives. In planning this research, I had to ask myself about the philosophical underpinnings that shape my worldview.

From a foundational basis, the term ‘philosophy’ originates from the Greek roots ‘philos,’ meaning love, and ‘sophia,’ meaning wisdom. This etymology gives rise to the definition of philosophy as the ‘love of wisdom’ (Mautner, 2005). As eloquently expressed by Brinkmann (2017), “[a]nyone who is lovingly (philo) interested in the process of developing fundamental knowledge (sophia) can be considered a philosopher” (p. 3). Engaging in philosophy involves questioning sensory perceptions and cultivating curiosity about aspects that may not be immediately perceptible. In *Theaetetus*, as cited by Brinkmann (2017), Plato has Socrates declare that “wonder is the only beginning of philosophy” (p. 3). This implies that philosophy is ignited by a sense of wonder. According to Brinkmann (2017), Socrates believes that wonder leads to “a kind of puzzlement concerning existence,” prompting individuals to explore fundamental questions about life and death, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance (p. 3). This is why, in the realm of philosophy, the act of questioning is emphasised, lending credence to the notion that questions hold more significance than answers in the intellectual pursuit (Brinkmann, 2017).

Pursuing philosophy as an undergraduate degree equipped me with the tools to formulate what I would describe as my ‘philosophy of life’ – something integral to my worldview. As a philosophy student, I came to understand that philosophy is not merely a discipline but a way of life, a transformative force that shapes individuals and their souls, as emphasised by Pierre Hadot (1995) in his work, ‘Philosophy as a Way of Life.’ According to Brinkmann (2017), philosophy, in its original sense, is an existential affair aimed at guiding people in living their lives. Acknowledging this in my life and with the influence of my degree in education has contributed further to how I perceive relationships with myself, others, and the world.

Consequently, this foundation played a pivotal role in identifying the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that underpin my research. As noted by Saunders et al. (2009): “All research philosophies make three major types of assumption: ontological, epistemological, and axiological” (p. 151). Saunders et al. (2009) recognise that when researchers develop a coherent and logically consistent framework of assumptions, this creates a sound research philosophy that will serve as the foundation for their methodological decisions, research strategy, and methods for gathering and analysing data. This approach facilitates the design of a cohesive research project that integrates all elements (Saunders et al.,

2009). With that said, it becomes essential to understand the meanings of ontology, epistemology, and axiology and how they have influenced my research philosophy.

Ontology, defined as the study of being qua being, delves into the examination of being as such, forming the general theory of existence (Mautner, 2005). As Brinkmann (2017) notes, the term 'ontology' originates from Greek, signifying the study (*logos*) of being (*ontos*). It encompasses assumptions about the world and the nature of reality, which significantly influences a researcher's focus on identifying and approaching research objects and phenomena (Saunders et al., 2009). Blaikie (2000) further specifies that ontological claims involve assumptions that define the nature of social reality, encompassing aspects such as existence, appearance, composition of units, and their interrelationships. In simpler terms, ontology pertains to the assumptions or beliefs regarding the fundamental nature of reality (Warwick Education Studies, 2017). A researcher's ontological stance guides the exploration of the nature of the social and political reality under investigation (Grix, 2002). Establishing this ontological foundation is a prerequisite for discussing what is to be *known* about the existing social and political reality, leading to considerations of epistemology (Grix, 2002).

Epistemology, originating from the Greek words *epistēmē*, meaning knowledge, and *logos*, signifying reason or study/inquiry (Grix, 2002), is the field concerned with the theory or study of knowledge (Brinkmann, 2017; Mautner, 2005). This branch of study explores the nature and possibility of knowledge, delving into the scope and limitations of human knowledge, as well as the processes involved in acquiring and possessing such knowledge (Mautner, 2005). As Grix (2002) explains, epistemology directs its focus towards the knowledge-gathering process and endeavours to develop new models or theories that surpass competing alternatives. Epistemological assumptions play a crucial role in determining what is deemed acceptable, valid, and legitimate in terms of knowledge and how such knowledge can be effectively communicated (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Saunders et al., 2009). Brinkmann (2017) asserts that all qualitative research projects inherently embody ideas about the nature of knowledge and how it can be obtained.

The logical outcome of one's ontology shapes one's epistemology, influencing the methodological approach employed in research (Grix, 2002; Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, it is essential to understand how various epistemological assumptions will influence methodological decisions and to recognise both the strengths and limitations these assumptions

will place on the resulting research outcomes (Saunders et al., 2009). An epistemological realist perspective involves investigating knowledge as something inherent or observable in the world, while an anti-realist stance explores knowledge as a construct arising from human interactions (Brinkmann, 2017). Regardless of the chosen stance, a researcher's ontological and epistemological stances can result in varied perspectives on the same social phenomena (Grix, 2002). This, in turn, reflects the values held by the researcher in undertaking the research work, indicating their axiology.

Axiology, derived from the Greek words *axia*, meaning value or worthiness, and *logos*, meaning study, encompasses the study or theory of value (Mautner, 2005). As per Saunders et al. (2009), axiology pertains to the influence of values and ethics throughout the research process, involving questions about how researchers navigate both their own values and those of their research participants. The influence of one's values at every stage of the research process significantly contributes to the credibility of research outcomes (Saunders et al., 2009). In essence, axiological skills serve as the foundation for making judgements at every research stage, from the selection of philosophy to the choice of data collection and analysis methods (Saunders et al., 2009). The point of understanding one's ontological, epistemological, and axiological positions lies in determining what takes precedence in one's research endeavour.

5.3 Research Philosophies and Paradigms

Research philosophies can be categorised based on the positioning of philosophical assumptions among researchers along the spectrum of objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2009). At one end of the spectrum, objectivism embraces assumptions akin to those in the natural sciences, entailing a realist ontological stance that posits the independent existence of social entities apart from social actors (Saunders et al., 2009). An objectivist epistemological position seeks to uncover truth through observable means while adopting a value-free axiology (Saunders et al., 2009). Conversely, subjectivism aligns with assumptions prevalent in the arts and humanities, incorporating a nominalist ontological standpoint that perceives social phenomena as outcomes of human interactions, such as language, perceptions, and the consequential effects of social actions (Saunders et al., 2009). A subjectivist epistemological position directs attention to social actors as the creators of social realities, accompanied by a value-bound, reflexive axiology (Saunders et al., 2009).

In a broader context, researchers commonly align with five prominent schools of thought, namely positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism (Saunders et al., 2009).

i) Positivism, prevalent among natural scientists, revolves around observable social reality and employs a purely scientific empiricist method to produce unbiased data and facts independent of human influence (Saunders et al., 2009).

ii) Critical realism delves into the underlying structures of reality and their impact on observable events, emphasising the social construction of the real world (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020; Mautner, 2005; Saunders et al., 2009). Critical realists aim to explain observed phenomena by analysing them in the context of changing societal and organisational structures, revealing hidden factors that contribute to social order (Brinkmann, 2017; Saunders et al., 2009).

iii) Interpretivism, as a subjectivist philosophy, focuses on the meanings attributed to things by human beings, emphasising the study of meanings to generate fresh and insightful understandings of organisational realities (Saunders et al., 2009). Researchers in this school concentrate on lived experiences, cultural artefacts, participant perspectives, and interpretations to derive empirical results (Saunders et al., 2009).

iv) Postmodernism centres on the role of language and power relations in constructing reality. Postmodernists question dominant ways of thinking, aiming to give voice to those marginalised by prevailing power structures. Through deconstruction, they expose instabilities and absences in a conceived dominant reality, employing a radically reflexive axiology (Saunders et al., 2009).

v) Pragmatists view knowing as intrinsically tied to doing, with human reasoning conditioned by practicality (Brinkmann, 2017). Their ontology, epistemology, and axiology revolve around improving practices. Pragmatist researchers adopt a diverse range of strategies tailored to the nature of specific research problems they aim to address (Saunders et al., 2009).

Emerging perspectives from these philosophies are enormous. For the relevance of my project, it is crucial to emphasise constructivism and social constructionism. Constructivism asserts that social actors shape social phenomena and their meanings (Bryman, 2004; Grix, 2002), implying that social phenomena and categories are continuously subject to revision, constructed through lived experiences and human interactions (Cheer, 2019). While

constructivism centres on individuals' experiences in meaning-making, social constructionism explores how individuals and groups, influenced by social factors, collectively process reality (Cheer, 2019). From this perspective, critical realism can be understood as bridging the gap between these approaches by combining ontological realism with epistemological constructivism (Cheer, 2019). This theoretical foundation directly shapes my choice of research philosophy from an epistemological point of view. Social constructivism emerges as particularly relevant for this project, as my research examines how both educators as individuals and students as groups collectively experience and make meaning of the FWB program integration within their curricula.

5.4 My Philosophical Stances

Having examined all these philosophies, I found a sonic resonance that reverberates my research philosophy with that of critical realism. This is not just central to my worldview but also suitable for my research project. My philosophy of life involves the ever-present dynamically rhythmic nature of reality that evokes the core value of being human – one that is steeped into the vibrational nature of every atomic particle in the real world and quarks existing in the subatomic world. This understanding incorporates joining the 'expansive' flow of the universe that has been inflating for 13.8 billion years from the point of Singularity of the Big Bang (National Aeronautics & Space Administration [NASA], 2022b). Humans are inherently wired to connect with this expansive and inclusive movement, akin to the way particles naturally bond to form complex structures in the universe's expanding flow. This connection is rooted in the fact that every human being is composed of particles originating from the universe. Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson aptly notes that our molecules can be traced back to stars that exploded and disseminated elements across galaxies, indicating that our components are inherently integrated throughout the cosmos (WBUR, 2014).

Effectively, the grand narrative of the cosmos is a shared experience for all, eliciting a sense of 'largeness' rather than 'smallness' in individuals (WBUR, 2014). This, for me, marks the starting point of the natural flow of reality – an expansive aspect of human nature that encourages participation, adaptation, reflection, growth, resilience, integration, development, empowerment, and the pursuit of becoming better humans amidst the challenges of the human world. It also underscores a core principle in my philosophy of life: everything belongs. Every experience contributes positively to shaping an individual if the person approaches it with

openness. When one reflects and remains curious about such experiences, one begins to recognise that there is always more unfolding beneath the surface than initially realised. This perspective is evident in this thesis through the anfractuous steps of this research endeavour, from conceptualisation to the completion of the research project. The perspective also aligns with First Nations concepts of a holistic or ecological understanding of health, which forms the foundation for the FWB approach to teaching soft skills.

My exploration during my master's degree studies revealed a profound 'sense of wonder' in the face of approximately ~68% of dark energy, ~27% of dark matter, and ~5% normal matter comprising the universe (NASA, 2022a). The approximately ~95% of the universe consisting of dark matter and dark energy is fundamentally essential for the remaining ~5% of the universe, comprising normal matter (everything observable and verifiable with human instruments), to exist (NASA, 2022a). This aligns seamlessly with my critical realist perspective, defining 'the real' as embodying causal structures and mechanisms that give rise to changing properties; 'the actual' as events and experiences generated by the real, whether observable or not; and 'the empirical' as events that can be observed or experienced (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015; Saunders et al., 2009).

In addition to the critical realist perspective, my research philosophy also embraces pragmatism. According to Brinkmann (2017), it is possible for a project to be influenced by more than one philosophy, given that each phase of the research process is shaped by a particular philosophical perspective. As highlighted earlier, pragmatists adhere to a philosophy that involves transitioning from knowing to doing, shaping human reasoning in alignment with practicality (Brinkmann, 2017). The core tenet of pragmatism revolves around enhancing practices and emphasising the tangible application of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2009). This praxiological approach proves crucial for the implementation aspect of this project, as it ensures a focus on practical and actionable solutions that can effectively address the challenges and opportunities identified in the integration of the FWB soft skills approach within university curricula, and consequently advance the impact of this research in real life situations. Detailed explanations of critical realism and pragmatism are provided in the following section.

5.4.1 Critical Realism and Pragmatism

Critical realism encapsulates the notion of perceiving and elucidating reality in layers (Cheer, 2019). Oliver (2012) outlines that critical realism operates on the premise of an objective reality that exists autonomously from one's perceptions, and the pursuit of understanding this reality constitutes a key aim of knowledge acquisition. Nevertheless, critical realism acknowledges that any depiction of this reality is influenced by linguistic constructs, interpretation processes, and social environments (Oliver, 2012). Unveiling the layers that impact people's experience of a phenomenon requires clarifying the fundamental structures of reality that influence what can be observed, which is grounded in a philosophically structured ontology (Saunders et al., 2009). For the purpose and nature of my research project, this is pivotal in delving into the layers influencing the integration of the FWB soft skills approach into a curriculum, from the perspective of educators who have used the program.

Critical realism asserts that sensory perceptions are representations of the real, prompting a researcher in this position to focus on comprehending the broader context of what people experience in fragments (Saunders et al., 2009). Consequently, as the pioneer of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar (2010) contends that understanding the factors influencing the social world is synonymous with comprehending the social structures that gave rise to the phenomena in question. Therefore, a researcher taking a critical realist approach would focus on explaining observable organisational events by identifying the underlying causes and processes through which deep-rooted social structures influence quotidian organisational life (Saunders et al., 2009).

From an epistemological standpoint, a critical realist perceives knowledge as intricately linked to historical contexts – a product shaped by the constraints of time and space and influenced by specific human experiences (Bhaskar, 2010; Saunders et al., 2009). This perspective also acknowledges that social facts emerge from agreed-upon social constructions (Bhaskar, 2010; Saunders et al., 2009). In the context of my project, this entails examining the social constructions influencing the FWB program integration in a university setting; how the time and space of educators integrating the program influenced their perception of it; and how preconceived ideas about wellbeing and soft skills facilitated or inhibited the integration of the FWB program in curricula. Critical realism widens the understanding of causality beyond quantitative methods and statistical correlations, encouraging the application of a diverse range

of research methods (Saunders et al., 2009). This flexibility permits the utilisation of various data collection methods, including the use of literature and various forms of interviews tailored to the specific nature of my research. Moreover, it facilitates the generation of knowledge through grounded theory.

Axiologically, a critical realist adheres to the perspective that understanding reality is socially conditioned, suggesting that knowledge cannot be divorced from the social factors that contributed to its formation (Saunders et al., 2009). As a researcher adopting this stance, I have a heightened awareness of how my sociocultural background and experiences shape my research endeavours. This self-awareness serves to mitigate the potential for bias, fostering a commitment to objectivity in the research process.

Pragmatically, this project is designed with a focus on transferring research outcomes using the principles of implementation science theory, embodying the practical outcomes implicit in pragmatism for improving practices and impacting real-life situations (Saunders et al., 2009). Pragmatism, by nature, embraces a variety of strategies, adapting to the specific nature of the research question at hand (Saunders et al., 2009). For a pragmatist, the research process initiates with a problem and aims to provide practical solutions that can inform future practice (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 143). The pragmatic approach is inherently action-oriented, emphasising the importance of taking concrete steps to achieve tangible results (Brinkmann, 2017; Saunders et al., 2009). The outcome of this research project aims to develop a solution-oriented theoretical model that addresses the challenge of implementing wellbeing and soft skills programs within curricula – an issue educators often face when operationalising these programs in their teaching practices. In essence, critical realism, with a pragmatic influence, shapes the research philosophy of this project. These philosophical perspectives not only inform the overall approach to the research but also play a pivotal role in shaping the frameworks that guide the implementation and analysis of the project's findings.

5.4.2 Theoretical Influences

This project draws inspiration from three theoretical frameworks: the philosophy of emancipation and equality advocated by Jacques Rancière, the 'Socratic Way,' and implementation science theory. These frameworks collectively provide a rich and comprehensive foundation that guides the project's approach, aiming to integrate philosophical

principles, educational methodologies, and evidence-based implementation strategies. By intertwining these diverse frameworks, the project aspires to create a holistic and effective model that addresses the multifaceted aspects of the research endeavour.

5.4.2.1 The Philosophy of Emancipation and Equality of Jacques Rancière. Jacques Rancière's philosophy of emancipation and equality revolves around the concept of achieving emancipation from a foundation of equality (Bingham et al., 2010; Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). It serves as a response to the social and cultural inequities that may emerge during the pursuit of emancipation, potentially giving rise to power dynamics among the involved parties (Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). The issue of power dynamics becomes apparent when the emancipator assumes an active role in facilitating the 'freedom' and 'equality' of the emancipated, who, in turn, may appear to adopt a passive role (Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). This dynamic suggests that the individual seeking emancipation lacks the power to act independently and relies on the emancipator to take an active role in the emancipation process (Bingham et al., 2010). The resulting dependency of the emancipated on the emancipator reinforces the perceived superiority of the latter and, conversely, the perceived inferiority of the emancipated. This unequal dynamic poses challenges in the pursuit of freedom and equality.

Therefore, according to Rancière, for emancipation to truly stem from equality, the individual seeking emancipation should be perceived as an equal participant, actively involved in their own liberation – a role akin to that of the emancipator (Bingham et al., 2010; Rancière, 1991, 2004; Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). Rancière explores this perspective through the lenses of pedagogy, arts and policy, emphasising the Ignorant School Master's approach, the potential of an emancipated spectator, and the democratisation of perception (Bingham et al., 2010; Rancière, 1991, 2004, 2008; Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). This philosophy aligns with the core principles of the FWB program, which seeks to empower individuals to take control of their lives (McCalman et al., 2012; Tsey, 2019; Whiteside et al., 2017). It also resonates with the notion that, in the context of running the FWB program, the role of the teacher is operationalised as that of a learning facilitator (Tsey, 2019). This implies that facilitators routinely reflect on whether their practice promotes or inhibits participation and consider ways to enhance it.

5.4.2.2 The 'Socratic Way'. Exploring the notion of the 'Socratic Way' was central to my philosophical musings underpinning this doctoral study (see Orih, 2022). In that paper, I

philosophised how the 'Socratic Way' is rooted in the ancient Greek concept of love in education, where love serves as the catalyst for mutual enlightenment in the pursuit of the highest good (Orih, 2022). De Botton, in his 2016 talk on love at the Sydney Opera House (2020), posits that, according to ancient Greeks, love involves a reciprocal process of education where two individuals strive to improve each other because they genuinely care about each other's wellbeing. He emphasises the dynamic interplay of roles, where everyone is both a teacher and a student, actively engaged in teaching and learning from one another (Sydney Opera House, 2020). This dynamic, according to de Botton, signifies that love is not a dormant concept but a vibrant force in action (Sydney Opera House, 2020). It entails an appreciation of each other's virtues, accomplishments, character, and qualities, all in the pursuit of the highest good (Sydney Opera House, 2020).

Socrates, as portrayed in the dialogues of Plato (1892), envisioned humans as inherently driven to pursue the highest good (*Symposium*, 206).[1] Pursuing the highest good, in Socratic terms, involves responding to love and wisdom, essentially participating in beauty. Thus, an individual in love with beauty is considered a lover since such a person is taking part in love (*Phaedrus,* 249). Such individual is actively engaged in the pursuit of love's ultimate goal, which is generation in beauty (*Symposium,* 206). This pursuit implies a continuous openness to knowledge and wisdom, which portrays a philosopher as a lover of wisdom – one who beholds the beauty of love (Mautner, 2005).

The 'Socratic Way' holds profound significance in education as it is grounded in the fundamental principle of mutual learning, irrespective of one's role as a teacher or student, all in the pursuit of the highest good. Assiter (2013) eloquently captures this ethos by referencing Kierkegaard's teaching philosophy, asserting that teachers should recognise themselves as perpetual learners. Teaching, in this 'Socratic fashion,' involves a continuous process of mutual development, where both the teacher and student engage in a dynamic exchange of knowledge (Assiter, 2013). The FWB program embodies this collaborative spirit, fostering an environment where teachers and students seamlessly alternate roles, actively participating in teaching and learning to achieve the highest good. This approach, otherwise known as 'two-way learning' in First Nations parlance, embodies the value placed on mutual learning, where program providers and participants are simultaneously learners and teachers; and scholars assert that

[1] See Plato (1892). *The Dialogues of Plato*, *translated by B. Jowett*. (Vol.1). London: Oxford University Press, for references of *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

this principle is crucial in centralising First Nations perspectives within the research process (McPhail-Bell et al., 2018; McTaggart, 2021; Purdie et al., 2012; Varcoe et al., 2011). The FWB program's emphasis on deep learning and collaborative problem-solving aligns with the principles of the 'Socratic Way,' addressing complex issues such as student wellbeing and soft skills competency. This Socratic approach permeates the entire project, significantly influencing the research methodology employed in the grounded theory study.

5.4.2.3 The Implementation Science Theory. Implementation science involves the use of theoretical frameworks to comprehend and explain the factors contributing to the success or failure of a particular implementation (Nilsen, 2015). As articulated by Eccles and Mittman (2006), implementation research constitutes a systematic examination of methodologies aimed at fostering the methodical integration of research findings and evidence-based practices into regular routines. This, in turn, aims to enhance the quality and effectiveness of health services and care. The process involves the translation of research outcomes across different contexts, requiring specific conditions for successful execution. According to Nilsen (2015), theories, models, and frameworks serve as essential platforms for gaining insights into the mechanisms underlying successful implementation strategies. An overarching theme across theories, models and frameworks is the importance of ensuring a good 'fit' among the implementation process, the proposed innovation for adoption, and the broader contextual elements, encompassing structural conditions, organisational settings, and the individuals involved (McCalman, 2013).

Implementing interventions aimed at minority First Nations populations in developed countries like Australia must begin by acknowledging these specific conditions. However, it should also extend beyond this initial consideration to address the unique cultural nuances of diverse, disadvantaged populations (McCalman, 2013). McCalman (2013) suggests that when working with minority First Nations populations in developed countries, implementation strategies should place a greater emphasis on the empowering nature of the intervention and its implementation. Furthermore, it should consider multiple levels of interconnectedness among individuals and organisations concerning self, others, and the prevailing structural conditions. This implies that, when integrating a First Nations-developed FWB program, the transfer and implementation process should adopt an episode-by-episode, demand-responsive approach rather than relying on a top-down dissemination strategy (McCalman, 2013).

In the context of this project, the adaptation and integration of the FWB program into educational practices involved a dynamic process. This process entails rendering the program available and accessible in new settings through interactive engagement, collaboratively developed by program providers to instigate change and foster the integration of the program into a new organisational framework (McCalman, 2013). Consequently, a comprehensive approach is needed to understand the contextual nuances and intricacies of the transfer and implementation process. Given that the program is customised to meet the unique needs of students, a thorough understanding of the implementation setting, along with a recognition of First Nations Knowledge, is imperative. Implementation science theory aligns seamlessly with my project because my grounded theory study is about exploring the integration process of the First Nations-developed FWB program into mainstream university curricula.

With my established research philosophy and theoretical frameworks, the selection of an appropriate methodology aligned with my grounded theory research question becomes crucial. As acknowledged by Cheer (2019), Krauss (2005), and Sayer (1999), critical realism is not prescriptive about a specific methodology; instead, it allows researchers the flexibility to choose an approach that suits their research questions and aligns with the existing knowledge about the topic. Researchers employing a critical realist perspective navigate both intransitive and transitive dimensions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the world and contribute to knowledge generation for positive change (Cheer, 2019). Considering my personal worldview and the focus of my research, I determined that a qualitative approach would be most apt for investigating my area of study. In the following sections, I delineate the characteristics that render qualitative research particularly suitable for this study and elaborate on my exploration of various qualitative approaches, ultimately rationalising my choice of constructivist grounded theory.

5.5 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is focused on understanding human experiences through a humanistic and interpretive lens (Jackson et al., 2007). It advances a systematic exploration into the societal phenomena concerning individuals' experiences across various dimensions of their lives and their behavioural patterns (Teherani et al., 2015). Its primary goal is to delve into and interpret the meanings individuals assign to their experiences, emphasising the richness and intricacy of human phenomena (Jackson et al., 2007). It commences with underlying assumptions, a

worldview, and possibly employs a theoretical framework, all aimed at investigating the meanings individuals or groups attribute to a social or human issue (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By so doing, it illuminates the operational dynamics of organisations and the interpersonal dynamics shaping group relationships (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The primary aim of qualitative inquiry is to grasp the significance of human actions by delineating the inherent or fundamental features of social objects or human experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Jackson et al., 2007). This humanistic and interpretive approach is often referred to as 'thick-description' due to its emphasis on rich and detailed discussions (Geertz, 2008; Jackson et al., 2007; Liamputtong, 2023). Qualitative researchers primarily adopt this approach to shift attention towards comprehending the intricately woven experiences and reflections of individuals (Jackson et al., 2007). By utilising an emergent qualitative approach to inquiry, researchers gather data in a natural environment that respects the nuances of the subjects and settings under scrutiny, and thus, conduct an inductive analysis to identify patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Furthermore, qualitative research is particularly relevant in gaining a nuanced understanding of complex issues, often achieved through direct engagement with individuals in their natural environments (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Understanding the context in which participants express themselves – whether at home, with family, or at work – is integral, as what is said cannot be divorced from its surrounding circumstances (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Moreover, qualitative research proves valuable when developing theories, especially in cases where existing theories are insufficient for certain populations or fail to capture the complexity of the problem under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In contrast to quantitative research, which tends to be rigid, detached, and driven primarily by researchers, qualitative research is characterised by its contextual focus, personal engagement, and participant-driven nature (Creswell, 2014; Jackson et al., 2007). It thrives on the rich tapestry of participants' experiences and remains adaptable, lacking strict protocols or predetermined procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Instead, qualitative research evolves organically, continually adapting to new insights and perspectives, making it a dynamic and ever-changing approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Given these considerations, the qualitative research approach aligns perfectly with my study, exploring the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating the FWB within university curricula. This issue is well-suited for qualitative inquiry as it seeks to understand group

perceptions, unravel complex issues through participants' voices, explore contextual factors influencing FWB integration, and ultimately, construct a theoretical model to aid educators in seamlessly integrating the FWB program into their teaching practices. By adopting this perspective, the research explores the viewpoints of educators, positioning them as the focal subjects of inquiry while the researcher serves as the instrument facilitating the investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). As Creswell and Poth (2016) affirm, in qualitative research, the researcher assumes the pivotal role in gathering, analysing, and interpreting data to construct a nuanced portrayal of the research subject from the standpoint of participants. This approach is effective in eliciting insights into the values, behaviours, opinions, social context, and structural aspects of the participants. It facilitates the exploration of their experiences, interpretations, and perspectives, thus providing valuable insights into their narratives (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Mack et al., 2005).

5.6 Qualitative Methodology

The decision to adopt a qualitative approach necessitates an exploration of qualitative methodology (Cheer, 2019). As maintained by Birks and Mills (2015), the choice of methodology is guided by the research question. The methodology is thus influenced by one's research philosophy. Grix (2002) argues that by elucidating the interconnectedness between a researcher's ontological beliefs (what can be known about a subject) and their epistemological stance (how knowledge about it can be attained), along with their methodological approach (how to proceed with obtaining it), students can grasp the profound impact of their ontological position on what and how they choose to study. In alignment with the ontological and epistemological orientations, this study's methodology was shaped by the principles most aptly suited to guiding the generation and analysis of data.

Methodologically, qualitative research places importance on subjective interpretations, holistic comprehension, and inductive reasoning to explore the complexities of human experiences and behaviours (Jackson et al., 2007). The value of employing diverse methodologies and data collection methods in qualitative research underscores the significance of analysing textual data and assessing qualitative research according to specific criteria (Jackson et al., 2007). The final outcome typically comprises participants' voices, the researcher's reflexivity, and a detailed description and interpretation of the problem, often extending existing literature or advocating for action (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In grasping qualitative research methodology,

it is essential to distinguish between methodology and method. According to Jackson et al. (2007), this differentiation is crucial in understanding how qualitative and quantitative research differ.

Methodology encompasses the principles and concepts that underpin a study, while methods involve the specific steps associated with generating and analysing data (Birks & Mills, 2015). According to Grix (2002), methodology involves systematically examining the logic and potentialities of specific techniques or procedures, encompassing the science and study of methods and the underlying assumptions about knowledge production. Drawing from Kaplan (1964), Jackson et al. (2007) argue that method refers to the process of data collection, analysis, and presentation of results, whereas methodology involves identifying and employing the most suitable approach to address theoretical or practical problems. In practical terms, when designing a study, social science researchers typically initiate the process by asking questions about a social issue. They then delve into constructs and theories to comprehensively understand the problem, all the while considering the practical aspects of data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings (Jackson et al., 2007). Put simply, method pertains to the 'how to' of data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings, while methodology focuses on the 'why to' of selecting a particular data collection and analysis approach; both are crucial components of research design (Jackson et al., 2007).

As methods entail the actual procedures of data collection and analysis, methodology delves into the rationale, capabilities, and limitations of such methods (Grix, 2002). Consequently, the philosophical underpinnings of methodology shape the researcher's stance towards conducting research, which can range from a detached to an inclusive approach, thereby influencing data analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015). According to Liamputtong (2020), three areas of focus guide the selection of method and methodology: the theoretical framework of the study, the substantive area of study, and the intended outcomes of the study. As the nature of this study delineates, critical realism and pragmatism inform the research paradigm. The theoretical frameworks of emancipation and equality, the Socratic Way, and implementation science shape the focus and method of this study. The substantive area of research focuses on how students and educators experience the integration of the FWB soft skills approach in their curricula. And the intended outcome is the theorisation of this experience of the FWB soft skills approach from educators perspective to inform practice.

There are various approaches to qualitative inquiry, including narrative inquiry, ethnography, case study, phenomenology, and grounded theory (Cheer, 2019; Liamputtong, 2023; Saunders et al., 2009). As noted by Cheer (2019), these approaches share a commonality in their procedures for collecting, analysing, and reporting data. However, their distinctions lie in the specific methods each approach employs to address the focus of the study at hand (Cheer, 2019), which Liamputtong (2023) underscores as the social lives and circumstances of individuals engaged in the research. I shall highlight these various qualitative research inquiries to give context to the inquiry that is suited for my research methodology.

5.6.1 Narrative Research

Within the realm of qualitative research, narrative research often pertains to stories recounted by individuals, offering insight into their experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It involves engaging with diverse narrative materials that can be pre-existing, such as novels, films, or speeches, or they can be generated as part of the research process (Squire et al., 2014). Researchers utilising this form of inquiry may prompt participants to share their life stories orally, create photographic self-portraits, maintain daily journals, or express themselves through other creative means (Squire et al., 2014). Additionally, researchers may indirectly collect narrative data by prompting participants to reflect on personal experiences, sketch family trees, or engage in open-ended discussions about topics of significance to them (Squire et al., 2014).

This research approach allows for a deep exploration of individuals' lived experiences, offering rich and nuanced insights into their subjective realities (Squire et al., 2014). Citing Wang and Geale (2015), Cheer (2019) affirms that the primary aim of the researcher's inquiries is to facilitate the interpretation and comprehension of the participant's world rather than offering definitive explanations of it. By engaging with narratives, researchers gain access to the intricate layers of meaning embedded within personal stories and the cultural, social, and institutional contexts influencing them (Cheer, 2019; Squire et al., 2014). Furthermore, narrative inquiry provides a platform for participants to voice their perspectives authentically, enabling researchers to uncover patterns, themes, and connections that might not be apparent through other methods (Squire et al., 2014). Through the analysis of narratives, researchers can construct a holistic understanding of human behaviour, emotions, and social interactions, contributing to the broader body of knowledge within qualitative research (Squire et al., 2014).

5.6.2 Ethnography

Ethnography serves as a methodology for investigating a culture-sharing community and producing a comprehensive written account of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Liamputtong (2020) characterises it as an exploration of the cultural practices and norms governing human life. This research approach delves into the collective values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of the studied cultural group, offering descriptions and interpretations of their shared patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Ethnography entails prolonged observation, often through participant observation, wherein the researcher immerses themselves in the everyday lives of the group members, observing and interviewing them (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Liamputtong, 2020). By becoming integrated into the group, ethnographers aim to understand the significance behind their behaviours, language, and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). While the cultural group under scrutiny may vary in size, ethnography typically involves communities with numerous members engaging in ongoing interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Despite its focus on analysing shared patterns among a group engaged in consistent interaction, ethnography does not permit the development of theories based on individuals participating in similar processes across different locations (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This makes it unsuitable for addressing my specific research question.

5.6.3 Case Study Research

Case study research involves examining a specific issue through one or more instances within a defined system, such as a particular setting or context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It explores the intricacies and uniqueness of a single case and aims to comprehend its actions within significant circumstances (Stake, 1995). This approach enables researchers to explore either a singular bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, employing thorough and extensive data collection methods that encompass various sources of information, including observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, documents, and reports (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The findings of case study research typically comprise a detailed description of the case and the identification of thematic elements based on the case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

While the entire culture-sharing group in ethnography can be perceived as a case, the primary objective of ethnography is to unravel the workings of the culture rather than to address a specific issue or problem using the case as a particular illustration (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Yin (2014), a case study constitutes an empirical investigation that explores a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear. In essence, researchers opt for the case study method when they intentionally seek to incorporate contextual conditions that are deemed highly relevant to their study's phenomenon (Yin, 2014). The critical aspect that distinguishes a study as a case study is the selection of the individual unit of analysis and the delineation of its boundaries (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Although Stake (2005) disregards the case study as a formal research strategy or methodology, others perceive it as a distinct methodology, a qualitative research design, an object of study, and a resultant product of inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2014). Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that opting for a case study entails not just a methodological decision but also a choice of the subject of study. The approach to studying the individual unit can vary, including qualitative or quantitative methods, analytical or hermeneutical approaches, or mixed methods. The critical determinant of whether a study qualifies as a case study lies in the demarcation of the unit's boundaries rather than the chosen methodological approach (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Unlike other methodologies, case study research does not adhere to a specific philosophical stance; it offers researchers the flexibility to tailor the research design to suit specific research needs (Casey & Houghton, 2010; Cheer, 2019). Case studies can serve various purposes, such as explanation, exploration, or description, with the researcher's final interpretation often encompassing conclusions drawn from investigating the case (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2014).

5.6.4 Phenomenology

A phenomenological study aims to elucidate the significance of lived experiences for multiple individuals regarding a particular concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Selvi (2008) emphasises that phenomenology prioritises individuals' first-hand experiences over abstracted experiences of others, focusing on elucidating the meaning of phenomena through individual perspectives and self-experiences. Engaging in phenomenological inquiry entails introspection, self-exploration, and continuous learning, driven by a keen curiosity and a quest for understanding oneself and others (Selvi, 2008). Phenomenologists endeavour to identify shared elements among participants' experiences of phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016), such as depression, loneliness, or, in the context of this study, the integration of FWB within curricula. At its core, phenomenology seeks to distil individual experiences of a phenomenon into a description of its universal essence, capturing the very nature of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Priest, 2002; Van Manen, 2016). In conducting phenomenological research, the investigator collects data from individuals who have encountered the phenomenon, ultimately crafting a composite portrayal of the essence of the experience shared by all participants. This portrayal encapsulates both the 'what' and the 'how' of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology encompasses two main approaches: transcendental or descriptive phenomenology and hermeneutic or interpretative phenomenology (Connelly, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental/descriptive phenomenology, pioneered by Edmond Husserl, focuses on describing the essence of phenomena through the perspective of a participant. In contrast, hermeneutic/interpretative phenomenology, advanced by Martin Heidegger, builds upon and interprets Husserl's work, offering insights into the contextualised interpretation of meaning behind a phenomenon by a researcher (Connelly, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Transcendental/descriptive phenomenology prioritises the description of participants' experiences over the researcher's interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Citing Moustakas (1994), Creswell and Poth (2016) explain Husserl's concept of *epochē* (or bracketing), which advocates for researchers to set aside their own experiences as much as possible to approach the phenomenon with a fresh perspective. This viewpoint, known as 'transcendental', encourages the perception of everything anew, as if encountering it for the

first time (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers adhering to this notion begin by describing their own encounters with the phenomenon, then proceed by bracketing out their own perspectives to focus on the experiences of others (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Englander (2016) notes that students often misinterpret bracketing as assuming the role of an independent, completely unbiased observer, reflecting a simplistic attempt to assimilate *epochē* within their 'epistemic comfort zone.' However, phenomenological human scientific inquiry rooted in a phenomenological theory of science acknowledges the researcher to be a participant observer because its distinct subject matter is situated within life-world and subjectivity (Englander, 2016). Employing the *epochē* does not entail forgetting previous knowledge to attain a blank state; rather, it involves bracketing one's natural attitude, which is a shift in perspective, to examine the subject matter, or the phenomenon, in a new light (Englander, 2016).

Conversely, hermeneutic/interpretative phenomenology characterises research as focused on lived experience – *phenomenology*, and interpreting the 'texts' of life – *hermeneutics* (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Van Manen, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2016) explain that while Van Manen (2016) does not prescribe a set of rules or methods for phenomenology, he describes phenomenological research as a dynamic interplay of six key activities. Researchers begin by immersing themselves in a phenomenon, a significant concern that deeply engages them, such as sleeping or swimming. Throughout this process, they contemplate essential themes, endeavouring to grasp the essence of the lived experience. Subsequently, researchers construct a descriptive account of the phenomenon, ensuring a close connection to the topic of inquiry and maintaining a balanced portrayal of its components within the whole. In this context, phenomenology transcends mere description; it becomes an interpretive endeavour where the researcher meditates between different interpretations of the lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Van Manen, 2016).

One distinction between the two types of phenomenology lies in their treatment of bracketing. According to Connelly (2010), qualitative researchers should endeavour to identify and acknowledge any presuppositions they hold about the phenomenon before commencing a study. Descriptive/transcendental phenomenologists aim to bracket or set aside these presuppositions or biases to prevent them from influencing the study (Connelly, 2010). In

contrast, interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenologists argue that these ideas cannot be fully set aside because they are inherent to the researcher's being; thus, researchers can only be mindful of them and recognise their potential impact on the study (Connelly, 2010). It is crucial, therefore, for researchers conducting a phenomenological study to clearly specify which approach they have employed and how it aligns with the study's objectives (Connelly, 2010). As Munhall (2012) contends, adopting a phenomenological mindset and approach often leads to unexpected discoveries, prompting a shift in focus. While researchers may initially have certain expectations, maintaining an open mind allows for the revelation of entirely different perspectives or insights (Munhall, 2012).

In interpretive phenomenology, researchers delve into the profound understanding of a phenomenon, uncovering its concealed meanings and structural conditions within the lifeworld of participants (Cheer, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Given this focus, such a phenomenological approach could have been suitable for this research study, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the experiences surrounding the integration of the FWB program within curricula from the educators' perspectives. However, while phenomenology facilitates deep comprehension, it lacks the capacity to construct a theory grounded in participants' data. Recognising this limitation, I opted not to pursue phenomenological methodology for this research study. Instead, I chose grounded theory as my methodology to address the project's aims. Grounded theory methodology offers the opportunity to develop a theoretical model that assists educators in seamlessly integrating the FWB program into their curricula. As advocated by Birks and Mills (2015) and Creswell and Poth (2016), grounded theory seeks to move beyond mere descriptions, aiming to generate theories that explain the underlying social processes or actions associated with a phenomenon. These theories serve as novel insights that practitioners can utilise to inform their actions (Cheer, 2019).

5.7 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, as described by Birks and Mills (2015), embodies an integrative and thorough iterative process aimed at elucidating a phenomenon. Unlike the phenomenological approach, which explores the significance of an experience for various individuals, grounded theory endeavours to transcend mere description and to engender or uncover a theory (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), grounded theory constitutes a qualitative research design wherein the researcher, through a theory, formulates a

comprehensive explanation of a process, action, or interaction, drawing insights from a wide array of participants' perspectives. In essence, it serves as a broad methodology for crafting theory grounded in systematically collected and analysed data, revealing aspects such as social relationships and group behaviours, known as social processes (Noble & Mitchell, 2016; Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015).

Participants in grounded theory studies would have directly encountered the process, and the resultant theory could aid in illuminating practice or offering a framework for further investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The fundamental notion in this approach is that theory development is not preconceived but rather emerges organically from data gleaned from participants who have undergone the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This underscores why grounded theorists emphasise the importance of theories being 'grounded' in data, particularly in the actions, interactions, and social processes of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Hence, through the creation of a comprehensive theory concerning actions, interactions, or processes of people, grounded theory interconnects categories of information derived from individual narratives and showcases it with a diagrammatical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Grounded theory, as a methodology, is deemed more suitable for certain inquiries than others (Suddaby, 2006). However, misconceptions often prevail in practical applications of grounded theory, leading to the assertion that if any of its defining characteristics are absent, the researcher is not truly employing grounded theory (Tarozzi, 2020). In contrast to general inductive models, grounded theory provides a specific and systematic set of procedures (Tarozzi, 2020). This systematic approach encompasses the punctilious techniques of initial/intermediate/advanced coding and categorisation, memo writing, theoretical sampling, comparative analysis, theoretical sensitivity, identifying a core category, and theory generation (Birks & Mills, 2015). Tarozzi (2020) notes that researchers frequently resort to different grounded theory approaches in order to anchor their qualitative analyses in a technically legitimate framework.

Grounded theory is most suitable for understanding how individuals construct meaning from shared experiences (Suddaby, 2006). Its application should align logically with fundamental assumptions about social reality and the process of understanding that reality (Suddaby, 2006). Conversely, it is less appropriate to employ grounded theory when seeking to make assertions

about an objective reality, but more appropriate when aiming to understand how individuals interpret their reality (Suddaby, 2006). The widespread success of grounded theory can be attributed to the endorsement of its specialised technical language – a 'legitimizing jargon' which, sometimes, could overshadow the substantive application of the method (Tarozzi, 2020). This research project addresses these potential challenges by providing clear explanations throughout the thesis, showing how the method works in practice, defining technical terms in simple language, and focusing on meaningful findings rather than procedural details.

I was drawn to grounded theory for my project due to its structured approach, which assists researchers in comprehensively capturing sociocultural contexts when explaining a phenomenon (Bainbridge et al., 2013; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Cheer, 2019). Additionally, I found it pertinent to my research because it is particularly helpful in areas where knowledge is scarce and where the inductive generation of theory is the primary objective, as well as when the research context inherently involves processes that grounded theory methods are adept at clarifying (Birks & Mills, 2015). Having gained deeper insights into why grounded theory is appropriate for my research project, I needed to determine which type of grounded theory would best suit my project's needs.

5.8 Two Prominent Approaches to Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has undergone methodological evolution since its inception by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the late 1960s with their publication 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' in 1967 (Birks & Mills, 2015; Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015; Tarozzi, 2020). Over time, it has evolved ontologically and epistemologically with the emergence of constructivist grounded theory introduced by Kathleen Charmaz in 2006 (Birks & Mills, 2015). Initially rooted in modernist philosophy, grounded theory has expanded to encompass both constructivism and postmodernism, diverging from its original framework established by Glaser and Strauss (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). In this discourse, I outline the two types of grounded theory, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2016) and advocate for the one most suited to my project's needs.

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), two prominent approaches to grounded theory are the systematic procedures advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and the constructivist approach

pioneered by Charmaz (2006, 2008a, 2014). In Corbin and Strauss' systematic, analytical framework, researchers aim to methodically construct a theory, elucidating processes, actions, or interactions on various topics, such as curriculum development, or in the context of this project, teaching a soft skills subject in a university curriculum (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Aligned with the systematic approach to grounded theory previously discussed, Creswell and Poth (2016) liken the simultaneous data collection and analysis in grounded theory to a 'zigzag process.' This iterative process involves alternating between fieldwork to gather information and back to the desk for the analysis of the data, continuously going back and forth (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The number of iterations depends on whether the information categories become saturated and if the theory is fully elaborated (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participants are strategically chosen through theoretical sampling to aid in theory formation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The constant comparative method of data analysis involves comparing collected data to emerging categories, ultimately culminating in theory development (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The resultant theory, crafted by the researcher, can take various forms, including narrative statements, visual representations, or sets of hypotheses and propositions (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Charmaz (2006, 2008a, 2014) builds upon the groundwork laid by Strauss and Corbin. Rather than focusing solely on studying a single process or core category, as advocated in the Corbin and Strauss (2008) approach, Charmaz emphasises subjectivity and the researcher's active role in both constructing and interpreting data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Charmaz (2014) herself explains, "I chose the term 'constructivist' to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data and to signal the differences between my approach and conventional social constructionism of the 1980s and early 1990s" (p. 14). According to Charmaz (2014), researchers can employ grounded theory strategies without subscribing to mid-century assumptions regarding an objective external reality, a passive observer, or detached empiricism. Instead, by recognising that social reality is multifaceted, dynamic, and constructed, researchers must consider the researcher's position, perspectives, privileges, and interactions as integral components of the research reality because it is also a construct in itself (Charmaz, 2014).

Charmaz emphasises how crucial it is for researchers to clearly define their role in their research stories, as noted by Birks and Mills (2015). This means looking closely at how researchers interact with their participants and ensuring the final written work accurately

captures and represents the collected data (Birks & Mills, 2015). Constructivist grounded theory aligns well with the aim of crafting a theoretical model that facilitates the seamless integration of the FWB into curricula while drawing upon the researcher's perspective.

5.9 Constructivist Grounded Theory

The constructivist grounded theory methodology unveils the fundamental social dynamics surrounding a phenomenon by examining the interactions between researchers and individuals alongside the perspectives shaped by research practices (Charmaz, 2014, 2017). Situated firmly within the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research, constructivist grounded theory offers adaptable guidelines and emphasises theory development contingent on the researcher's viewpoint, thereby delving into experiences within concealed networks, situations, and relationships while illuminating power dynamics, communication patterns, and opportunities (Charmaz, 2006, 2017).

Rejecting the notion of a neutral observer and value-free expert, the constructivist approach requires researchers to scrutinise rather than erase their privileges and interrogate how their preconceptions may shape the analysis, acknowledging that their values shape the very facts they can discern (Charmaz, 2014, 2017). By viewing research as constructed rather than discovered, researchers cultivate reflexivity about their actions and decisions (Charmaz, 2014, 2017). In this methodological approach, researchers employ theoretical frameworks to interpret interactions with individuals, constructing theories that situate people's actions and behaviours within a broader social context (Cheer, 2019).

Charmaz (2006) prioritises the perspectives, values, beliefs, emotions, assumptions, and ideologies of individuals over the methods of research. However, she does outline practices for gathering comprehensive data, coding, memoing, and employing theoretical sampling. She argues that intricate terminology, diagrams, conceptual maps, and systematic approaches, such as those proposed by Corbin and Strauss, detract from the essence of grounded theory and serve as attempts to assert dominance in their use (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This implies that researchers should focus on capturing and understanding their data in straightforward, accessible ways rather than becoming constrained by complex methodological procedures that may serve more to demonstrate scholarly authority than to generate meaningful insights. Charmaz, therefore, advocates for the use of active codes, such as gerund-based phrases like

'being,' 'feeling,' 'navigating,' or in this thesis, 'experiencing the FWB,' in the analysis of grounded theory data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Furthermore, Charmaz (2006) contends that the role of the researcher in the grounded theory process remains significant. The researcher is responsible for making decisions about categories throughout the process, guiding inquiries based on the data, and incorporating personal values, experiences, and priorities (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016). While the constructivist approach views research as a construct, it acknowledges that this construction occurs within specific, possibly unknown conditions that may not align with the researcher's intentions (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2005), as stated by Creswell and Poth (2016), any conclusions drawn by grounded theorists are suggestive, incomplete, and inconclusive. The following section describes how constructivist grounded theory corresponds with the ontological standpoint of this study, which is critical realism.

5.10 Constructivist Grounded Theory and Critical Realism

As originally described by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory reflects a modernist ontology (Charmaz, 2006; Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). However, grounded theory has since evolved, leading to the methodology being viewed as a broad framework encompassing diverse variations, focuses, and pathways for considering data (Charmaz, 2016, 2017). Charmaz (2014, 2017) emphasises that the constructivist turn, which addresses criticisms of earlier versions of grounded theory, allows for greater flexibility in its application, resisting mechanical approaches. Based on this foundation, Oliver (2012) contextualises the compatibility of critical realism and grounded theory based on three criteria, *to wit*: (a) the capacity to integrate interpretive flexibility and hermeneutical nature; (b) the capacity for conceptualisation and re-conceptualisation; and (c) the capacity to embrace epistemic relativism.

The first criterion of a critical realist methodology is its integration of the interpretive flexibility and hermeneutical nature inherent in the constructivist paradigm (Oliver, 2012). Such an approach not only examines the event itself but also delves into the interpretations surrounding it (Oliver, 2012). It engages with data by employing predefined analytical concepts of emergence and generative mechanisms, aiming towards emancipatory objectives rather than mere description (Oliver, 2012). In the constructivist framework, grounded theory serves to uncover participants' assumptions and implicit knowledge, focusing on their sense-making

processes rather than asserting objective truths (Oliver, 2012). It facilitates the development of contextually relevant theories for practical application (Oliver, 2012). For critical theorists, grounded theory research is a tool for critiquing and reshaping prevailing social structures (Oliver, 2012; Wuest, 2001). These contemporary perspectives highlight the adaptability of grounded theory methodology to accommodate the predetermined analytical frameworks, broader social concerns, and explicit normative aims inherent in critical realist inquiry (Oliver, 2012).

The second criterion of a critical realist methodology involves its capacity for conceptualisation and re-conceptualisation, which reflects the acknowledgment that all understanding is inherently incomplete, provisional, and subject to change (Oliver, 2012). Grounded theory is particularly suited to enact critical realism's principle of fallibilism (Oliver, 2012). This approach hinges on the necessity to relinquish preconceived notions in the pursuit of intellectual exploration (Oliver, 2012). Through techniques such as open coding, constant comparison, and questioning of data, grounded theory aims to propel researchers beyond their initial assumptions, fostering ongoing refinement of theory (Cheer, 2019; Oliver, 2012).

The third criterion of a critical realist methodology involves embracing epistemic relativism, which acknowledges the existence of multiple ways of knowing (Oliver, 2012). This criterion places value on employing various data collection and analysis methods within the grounded theory framework (Oliver, 2012). Qualitative research often utilises multiple data sources, incorporating interviews, observations, and textual analysis (Oliver, 2012). This process in qualitative research facilitates triangulation, a practice that may seem contradictory within traditional paradigms but aligns coherently with a critical realist perspective (Oliver, 2012).

From these criteria, one can deduce that constructivist grounded theory aligns with the theoretical standpoint of symbolic interactionism, which acknowledges diverse forms of knowledge and perspectives on reality within settings shaped by, yet distinct from, the past (Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019). The theoretical framework becomes an interpretive endeavour for the researcher, which allows for constructing a theory by situating events and behaviours within a broad social context (Oliver, 2012). Consequently, the adaptable guidelines of constructivist grounded theory encourage researchers with differing fundamental assumptions to innovate in their application of the approach (Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019).

Considering all of these factors, engaging in constructivist grounded theory provides me with an understanding of how those integrating the FWB program in curricula experienced the process. It validates the influence of social dynamics, encompassing the perspectives, values, beliefs, emotions, assumptions, and ideologies of participants in the context of integrating the FWB program into their curricula. This understanding enables me to interpret and derive significance from educators' responses regarding the integration of the FWB soft skills approach. Additionally, it assists me in constructing meaning from their perspectives on students from undertaking the program as a subject. This approach allows for an evaluation of how both students and educators perceive the program, how they navigate through the challenges encountered, and how they discern the associated opportunities involved. Consequently, this understanding facilitates the development of a theoretical model based on these experiences and sense-making processes to highlight strategies for implementing the program and outcomes inherent in its integration. Such a model renders it feasible for educators to integrate the FWB program seamlessly into their curricula in the future.

5.11 Constructivist Grounded Theory and Pragmatism

Constructivist grounded theory follows the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach laid out by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, incorporating the iterative logic emphasised by Strauss and the dual focus on action and meaning inherent in the pragmatist tradition highlighted by Charmaz (2014, 2017). Charmaz (2017) posits that pragmatism and constructivist grounded theory complement each other in theory and method. The relationship between constructivist grounded theory and pragmatism is marked by significant continuities. Both philosophies conceive of reality as inherently social and dynamic, emphasising the ongoing evolution of life (Charmaz, 2017). By tracing temporal dynamics at various analytical levels, constructivist grounded theory offers insights into the fluidity and indeterminacy of reality, a concept also embraced by pragmatism (Charmaz, 2017). Constructivist grounded theory delves into the intricate interplay between meaning and action, recognising the reciprocal influence between the two, often leading to emergent and novel outcomes (Charmaz, 2017). Constructivist grounded theory creates understanding by working closely with people and taking their viewpoints seriously rather than trying to observe them from a distance or fit them into pre-existing theories. (Charmaz, 2017). Its approach resonates with the pragmatist logic of abductive reasoning, where a continuous interchange between narratives and analysis is employed, delicately balancing the ephemeral nature of experience with the enduring nature

of scholarly discourse (Charmaz, 2017). Both perspectives highlight the social embeddedness of individuals and advocate for an agentic approach to action, wherein individuals continuously reassess and adapt their behaviour in response to challenges (Charmaz, 2017). Charmaz (2017) succinctly outlines the relationship between these methodologies to avoid redundancy (see Table 2).

Table 2

Pragmatism and Constructivist Grounded Theory: A Comparison

Pragmatism	**Constructivist Grounded Theory**
Views reality as social	Views reality as social
Locates experience in its social context	Locates experience in its social context
Assumes process	**Studies** processes
Presupposes a fluid, somewhat indeterminate reality	Presupposes a fluid, somewhat indeterminate reality
Views human beings as agentic actors	Views human beings as agentic actors
Acknowledges multiple perspectives	**Seeks** multiple perspectives
Emphasises the significance of language	**Pays analytic attention to language**
Sees meanings and actions as emergent and as affecting each other	**Studies** emergent meanings and actions and how each affects the other
Provides the roots of a theory of action	Provides **methods for theorising action**
Studies people's actions to solve emergent problems	Studies people's actions to solve emergent problems
Takes temporality into action	**Offers tools** to study temporality
Joins facts and values	Joins facts and values
Unites the viewer with the viewed	**Bonds the researcher with the researched**
Unifies mind and body	Sees research as an embodied process
Treats truth as conditional	Views truth as conditional
Advocates social reform	**Provides a method for critical inquiry**

Source. Adapted from "The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry," by K. Charmaz, 2017, *Qualitative Inquiry, 23*(1), p. 38 (https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105). Copyright 2008 by Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

The pragmatic foundation of constructivist grounded theory empowers researchers to recognise their active involvement in the research process and appreciate the significance of the developed theory in terms of its practical utility for individuals within a specific context (Bryant, 2009; Cheer, 2019). Considering this perspective in relation to my own project, it becomes crucial to highlight the societal value of my research while acknowledging its potential impact on various aspects such as culture, health, or wellbeing.

In today's research landscape, merely demonstrating the quality of research through traditional metrics like journal prestige or citation counts is insufficient; researchers are now expected to present case studies illustrating the real-world impacts of their work on domains such as the economy, society, culture, health, or wellbeing (Australian Research Council, 2022a, 2022b). This shift in emphasis towards enhancing the societal value of research has emerged as a prominent concern for policymakers worldwide in recent years (Australian Research Council, 2022a, 2022b; Jefferson et al., 2024).

An emphasis on societal impact underscores the pragmatic dimension of my research endeavour. As highlighted by Charmaz (2017), pragmatism offers a framework for making explicit the actions and processes associated with social phenomena that may otherwise remain implicit. Through a constructivist grounded theory approach, this research project develops a theoretical model firmly grounded in the collected data. This theoretical model aims to seamlessly integrate FWB First Nations Knowledge into curricula to enhance student educational outcomes. The practical application of the theoretical model within curricula underlies the pragmatic undertone of this research through implementation science. Implementation science ensures the systematic adoption of research findings and best practices into daily operations while fostering effective translation of frameworks, models, and theories across different settings (Eccles & Mittman, 2006). This practical process underlying this research facilitates the societal impact and practical value of this research in making potentially meaningful differences in the lives of people within local communities, such as schools and universities in Australian society and potentially the global community. Charmaz (2017) attests that constructivist grounded theory and pragmatism provide the method for conceptualising and realising these actions and processes, namely, ways of conceptualising the framework and the practical means to execute it.

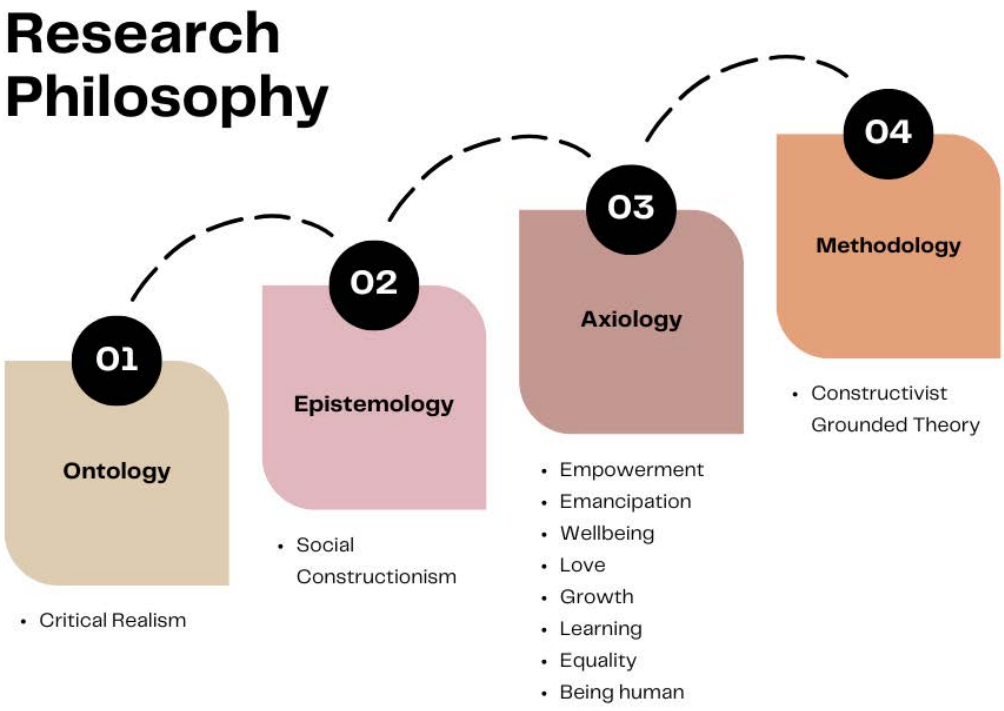
To bring this to light as a researcher, I need to maintain methodological congruence, ensuring alignment between my philosophical stance, research contexts, aims, and selected methodological approach (Birks & Mills, 2015; Cheer, 2019; Richards & Morse, 2012). Methodological congruence emphasises coherence within the research design, acknowledging that flexibility is permissible and that the design may adapt as the study progresses (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2017; Cheer, 2019; Richards & Morse, 2012). For instance, in utilising constructivist grounded theory, methodological strategies are tailored to explore emerging discoveries throughout the research journey, thereby encouraging the researcher's reflexivity (Charmaz, 2017). Throughout this study, I maintained methodological congruence by remaining adaptable as conditions changed and carefully examining emerging themes during data collection and analysis. This reflective approach helped shape the evolving theory, the details of which are fully explained in the data collection and analysis chapters (6 and 7).

Charmaz (2017) underscores the importance of developing and maintaining methodological self-consciousness within constructivist grounded theory, urging researchers to engage in deep reflexivity. This involves scrutinising our worldviews, language, meanings, and the actions we take each step to uncover their influence on our research in ways that may not have been previously recognised (Charmaz, 2017). Methodological self-consciousness extends to examining our roles and privileges, both earned and unearned, throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2017). Regardless of experience level, researchers must uphold a coherent epistemological position and justify their methodological choices, considering their theoretical context and the potential impact on the research outcomes (Carter & Little, 2007; Cheer, 2019). Overall, the practical undertone inherent in constructivist grounded theory means that it aligns with pragmatism. Due to this alignment, I have chosen to apply the constructivist grounded theory approach as my methodology.

To summarise this methodological journey, critical realism resonates with my ontology due to its focus on comprehending the broader context of fragmented human experiences. Social constructionism aligns with my epistemology as it investigates how social factors influence the collective processing of reality by individuals and groups. My axiology is imbued with value-based ideologies inherent in utilising a First Nations-developed FWB program aimed at enhancing wellbeing and empowering individuals to assert control over the conditions shaping their lives. Consequently, terms such as empowerment, emancipation, wellbeing, love, being human, growth, learning, and equality hold significant value. I have chosen constructivist

grounded theory as my methodology because it enables me to explore the significance of integrating the FWB soft skills approach within curricula from the perspective of educators and, thereafter, construct a theory grounded in data. In order to interlink the components of the methodological journey outlined in this chapter, I consolidate diagrammatically the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological viewpoints that underpin this research study in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Research Philosophy Underpinning this Study



5.12 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- explored my research philosophy highlighting the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological basis of this research
- explained the alignment of constructivist grounded theory with pragmatism
- discussed the reason for using constructivist grounded theory as my chosen methodology.

In the following chapter, I will:

- apply constructivist grounded theory methodology to my data collection and analysis methods.

Chapter 6
Research Method

6.1 Chapter Outline

Constructivist grounded theory emerged as a fitting methodology for investigating the challenges and opportunities surrounding the integration of the FWB program into curricula. Although some of its aspects align with pragmatism, I opted to utilise constructivist grounded theory as my chosen methodology. In qualitative research, the research design aims to provide the researcher with considerable insights about a phenomenon (Jackson et al., 2007). However, a significant limitation is the challenge of generalising the results to a broader population due to the involvement of only a small number of participants, despite the depth of detail offered by qualitative studies (Jackson et al., 2007). In conducting this research, the constructivist grounded theory methodology allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study while acknowledging the limitations of qualitative research in terms of generalisability. With this in mind, this chapter provides an overview of the research question of this grounded theory study, along with the practical strategies used for recruiting study participants, obtaining ethics approval, and managing data storage. Additionally, it delves into the intricate process of data collection and analysis inherent in grounded theory methodology, including engagement with literature, interviews, theoretical sampling, data saturation, transcription, coding and categorisation, constant comparison analysis, the use of memos and diagrams, and theoretical sensitivity. Although the write-up of this intricate process may appear to follow a linear progression, it was a nuanced journey, simultaneously involving both forward and backward steps. I consistently applied the constructivist grounded theory methodology throughout the data collection and analysis process. Discussing my approach serves as the foundation for presenting the findings in the subsequent chapter.

6.2 Research Question

In social sciences, Jackson et al. (2007) posit that the design of a study typically begins with a set of questions about a social problem. Researchers must then consider the constructs and theories that can adequately frame the problem conceptually while also addressing the practical aspects of data collection (Jackson et al., 2007). Key questions that researchers must contemplate include how to access and recruit participants, anticipate participant responses,

understand the insights gleaned from these responses, and ensure that the research questions align with the conceptual understanding sought (Jackson et al., 2007). These considerations were crucial for initiating my investigation. Having opted for constructivist grounded theory as my study design, I framed the core problem under investigation as my research question for this study: *What are the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating an Australian First Nations wellbeing program in university curricula?* Answering this research question against the backdrop of my project aims (illustrated in Chapter 3 – Figure 2) encapsulates the remaining chapters of this study. With the research question framed, I set out to recruit my study participants.

6.3 Study Population and Recruitment

Based on the nature of my research question, I needed to gain insight into the phenomenon of integrating the FWB program within curricula. This warranted involving universities that have integrated the FWB program into their curricula in Australia and beyond. To this end, the study population consisted of educators who integrated the FWB program into their courses at these universities. In Australia, these universities include James Cook University (JCU), which has integrated the FWB program into its Master's degree in Indigenous Studies since 2010; and more recently, since 2023, part of the FWB learning activities has been integrated into the Diploma of Higher Education. At La Trobe University in Melbourne, the FWB program has been included in the Bachelor of Social Work since 2014. Both the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the University of Queensland (UQ) have integrated the FWB into their Bachelor of Health Science since 2010. Internationally, the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) has employed the FWB in the Diploma/Master of Public Health since 2009. Shenyang University in China has integrated the FWB into the Bachelor of International Trade since 2016, while Guangzhou Agricultural University (GAU) in China has integrated the FWB into the Bachelor of Business since 2017. Between 2009 and 2023, the FWB program was integrated into these courses, serving 10 to 285 students each year from various social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. The program's successful adoption across different academic disciplines shows how well it can be adapted to various university courses. While previous studies have thoroughly examined student feedback on the FWB program (see Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019), this study focuses on the educators' experiences, with one to three educators from each participating university

interviewed. These universities are listed in Table 3 with a description of their offerings with the FWB program.

Table 3
Description of University Offerings with FWB Program

Name of University and Type	Country	Name of Degree[2]	Years FWB Integrated	Enrolled Students Annually	Available Educators for Interviews
JCU (Regional)	Australia	Masters of Indigenous Studies	Since 2010	10	1
		Diploma of Higher Education	Since 2023	285	1
Shenyang (Urban)	China	Bachelor of International Trade	Since 2016	30	1
GAU (Urban)	China	Bachelor of Business	Since 2017	60	1
La Trobe (Regional)	Australia	Bachelor of Social Work	Since 2014	120	3
UNSW (Urban)	Australia	Bachelor of Health Sciences	Since 2010	Not provided	1
UQ (Urban)	Australia	Bachelor of Health Sciences	Since 2010	Not provided	1
UPNG (Urban)	PNG	Diploma/Master of Public Health	Since 2009	30	2

Eight educators participated in this study, selected from a pool of 11 eligible participants. All of the educators are female. One educator identified as First Nations, while seven were non-First Nations. All participants were experienced educators: three had taught for 6–10 years, and five had taught for more than a decade. Most held senior positions, with five at the Associate Professor or Professor level and three as Lecturers or Senior Lecturers. All participants combined teaching and research duties. To prepare for delivering the FWB program, the educators completed two phases of training: first, an intensive two-day workshop covering

[2] Some of the names of these degrees have changed over time

program content and delivery methods, followed by a year of remote mentoring that focused on teaching preparation, program facilitation, and delivery debriefing (Yan et al., 2019). Table 4 provides detailed background information for each educator.

Table 4
Demographic Information of Interviewed Educators (n=8)

Characteristic	*Categories*	*Number of Educators*
Gender	Female	8
	Male	0
Indigeneity	First Nations	1
	Non-First Nations	7
Teaching Experience	0-5 years	0
	6-10 years	3
	Over 10 years	5
Academic Rank	Associate Prof/Professor	5
	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer	3
Role	Teaching and Research	8
	Teaching only	0
	Research only	0

The extensive implementation of the FWB program across the universities involved in this study meant that the educators possessed rich insights to share regarding integrating the program into curricula. Consequently, interviewing them would yield an invaluable understanding of the integration processes of the FWB within their curricula, enabling the construction of a theoretical model and informing future implementations. Eligibility of these educators was determined based on direct involvement in integrating the FWB program within their curricula. Initial contact was facilitated through an introduction by my primary advisor via email. I subsequently followed up with eligible educators to invite their participation. Recruitment continued iteratively until data saturation was reached. Educators were selected based on their potential contribution to emerging themes. Analysing the integration of FWB across diverse contexts and identifying key enabling factors contributes crucial insights to the literature, thus supporting the wider implementation of FWB across tertiary curricula, reflecting the pragmatic undertone of this study.

6.4 Ethics Approval and Variations

Before initiating data collection for my study, I obtained ethics approval for human research from the JCU Human Research Ethics Committee on July 14th, 2022, and an amendment on January 25th, 2023, bearing the approval number H8811. As per the ethics committee's guidelines, I committed to keeping the committee informed of any changes or unforeseen events that might impact the ethical acceptability of the project, and agreed not to deviate from the approved protocols without prior approval. I ensured all participants received comprehensive information sheets and consent forms outlining the ethical considerations involved. Additionally, I explained that our discussions would be audio recorded only with their explicit consent. The information sheet included clear contact details for the research team and myself for participants to use if they had any questions or ethical concerns related to the research. Participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary, with no payment, incentive, or other rewards offered for participation. Moreover, I assured participants of anonymity by assigning them pseudonyms for reporting purposes and emphasised that their contact details would be maintained with strict confidentiality. Participants were informed that the collected data would be used solely for research purposes, including publications, the final thesis, reports, and presentations.

Working with educators as participants for the primary data collection proved to be a smooth process, as they were well-versed in the ethical requirements and procedures involved. Importantly, there were no reports or complaints regarding the study, indicating participants' satisfaction with the research process. Overall, the careful adherence to ethical guidelines and the thoughtful approach to data collection ensured the integrity and rigour of the study, and thus, contributed to the value of this research.

6.5 Storing and Managing Data

The data collected for this study was stored and managed in strict adherence to the JCU Research Data Management Plan (RDMP). In-depth interviews conducted with educators were audio recorded, transcribed, and securely stored electronically. To ensure confidentiality, the contact details of all participants were kept undisclosed, and records were coded to maintain anonymity. Scanned consent forms were electronically stored. All electronic storage was safeguarded within the OneDrive platform of JCU, accessible only through password-protected desktops at the Cairns Institute, JCU. Original hard copies of signed consent forms were securely stored in a locked drawer at JCU. Furthermore, all data stored on the JCU Microsoft Office 365 OneDrive platform during the project has been archived in accordance with the JCU RDMP life cycle, ensuring preservation for a minimum of five years post-publication.

6.6 Data Collection

There are various methods of collecting data for research purposes. The procedure typically involves identifying a problem, formulating a research question, collecting data, analysing the data, and interpreting the results (Creswell, 2014). In quantitative research, researchers focus on studying specific variables, formulating hypotheses, measuring those variables, applying statistical analysis, and interpreting the findings (Creswell, 2014). Conversely, qualitative research involves collecting data from participants through methods such as observation or open-ended questions in interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires (Creswell, 2014). This data is then subjected to thematic analysis, and the findings are presented in narrative form or through a literary story (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods studies combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches, utilising both closed-ended quantitative data and open-ended qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of research problems (Creswell, 2014; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). By integrating the strengths of both types of data, researchers

can draw interpretations that provide a more nuanced understanding of the research topic (Creswell, 2014; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

In constructivist grounded theory studies, there are no rigid guidelines dictating the methods or sequence of data collection (Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019). Researchers gradually assume greater analytical control over their data collection process and the emergence of theoretical ideas (Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019). As a novice in grounded theory methodology, I found it necessary to engage with the scholarly works of other grounded theorists. I engaged in extensive reading of books and articles and actively participated in workshops and seminars to enhance my understanding of grounded theory methodology. This involved a thorough examination of their systematic approaches in conducting grounded theory studies, with the aim of discerning the most suitable approach for my own research inquiry. Through this process, I gained exposure to a diverse array of methods for data collection, analysis, and presentation inherent in the iterative nature of grounded theory. With the guidance and support of my experienced advisors and mentors in the field of grounded theory, I immersed myself in learning the essential steps of conducting grounded theory research. For example, the following are the steps I acquired under the mentorship of Whiteside (2009):

- Ensure a clear understanding of the research question to avoid getting side-tracked amidst the multitude of ideas that arise during data collection.
- Organise all data into a single set for ease of readability and accessibility.
- Carefully scrutinise each word or line of the data.
- Reflect on the significance conveyed by each small piece of data.
- Note down words or phrases to encapsulate emerging ideas adjacent to the data lines, which will later become ‘codes’ representing concepts like ‘learning’ or ‘making connections’.
- Identify patterns that arise from the coded data, which will facilitate the creation of categories such as ‘innovative learning approaches’, ‘development of soft skills’, ‘personal growth’, or ‘strategies for FWB implementation’.
- Within each category, delineate ‘sub-categories’, such as ‘maintaining a positive attitude’, ‘emotion management’, or ‘nurturing interpersonal relationships’.
- Pause to contemplate the emerging theory or narrative at this stage.

- Align the coded data with the research question to gauge how they contribute to addressing it, possibly using visual aids to conceptualise the emerging narrative or theory.
- Summarise the discoveries made thus far. Categories may evolve into themes in the grounded theory, but this remains flexible as revisions may occur during the writing and further contemplation of emerging ideas.
- Engage in discussions about the findings, including codes, categories, and visual representations, to solicit constructive feedback crucial for developing a well-grounded theory.

All these steps proved indispensable in sustaining the iterative process of employing grounded theory for generating a theory for my project. Whiteside (2009) posits that the practical application of constructivist grounded theory entails a multifaceted, dynamic interplay involving various elements such as research questions, data, literature, epistemology, theoretical perspective, and method. In the subsequent sections, I delineate the process of my data collection and analysis. As highlighted earlier, this process may superficially appear to follow a linear progression, but it was characterised by an iterative approach – constantly navigating between different stages, going back and forth, revisiting and refining positions, and shaping the emerging narrative through the processes of constant comparison.

6.6.1 Engagement with Literature

Engaging with the literature in grounded theory research has been a subject of debate, with conflicting perspectives on the appropriate timing for its use (Birks & Mills, 2015; Cheer, 2019). The primary contention lies around when to incorporate literature into the grounded theory process (Cheer, 2019; Dunne, 2011). In most research inquiries, literature engagement should precede data collection to position the study within the existing body of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In grounded theory research, the conventional approach involves deferring a formal literature review during the initial stages to prevent preconceived theories from influencing the study's processes and outcomes (Birks & Mills, 2015). Glaser and Strauss (2017) argue that no researcher enters the field with a blank slate (Birks & Mills, 2015). They further suggest engaging with literature from the study's outset but outside the topic area to avoid constraining data analysis with existing codes and concepts (Birks & Mills, 2015).

However, Birks and Mills (2015) argue that these positions may not significantly differ in practice, as no researcher enters a study without some knowledge drawn from the literature. They emphasise that engaging in a purposive preliminary review during the early stages can enhance theoretical sensitivity. Reviewing the literature on the proposed study topic offers insight into the existing knowledge landscape, aiding in justifying the study's need in formal proposals for approval or research funding. A practical approach for grounded theorists could involve conducting a literature review in the early project phases and temporarily shelving it while focusing on category development (Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019).

In this study, I immersed myself in the literature from the initiation of my study to gain insights into the landscape of soft skills programs implemented across various educational levels. This engagement served to elucidate the scope of discussions I could explore, understand the existing evidence, and inform the structure of my interviews. Additionally, I conducted my literature reviews to fulfil institutional and funding requirements for my research. These reviews were instrumental in evaluating effective pedagogy, examining the impact of wellbeing/soft skills programs in curricula, broadening my understanding of grounded theory, informing my decisions on data collection, and enhancing my theoretical sensitivity. Subsequently, I set aside these literature findings and commenced my analysis, underscoring the significance of my open coding phase.

6.6.2 The Choice of Data Collection Method

Given the unique nature of each research endeavour, it was imperative for me to identify the most suitable tool for data collection. This would enable me to effectively address my research question and enhance the societal value of my study. There are various established methods for qualitative data collection, including observations, interviews, document analysis, and the use of audio-visual materials such as photographs (Cheer, 2019; Creswell, 2009). In situations where researchers aim to understand the attitudes, trends, or opinions of a population, survey designs are often employed (Jackson et al., 2007). In qualitative inquiry, which inherently involves the approach of the 'human as instrument', researchers rely on participants to provide detailed responses to questions about their lived experiences and interpretations (Jackson et al., 2007). This approach underscores the importance of engaging with participants directly to gain insights into how they construct and comprehend a phenomenon.

Informed by the need to gain an understanding of my participants' views regarding their integration of the FWB program within their curricula, I opted to employ interviews as the primary method of data collection for this study. In qualitative research and grounded theory, individual interviews stand out as one of the most prevalent data collection techniques (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Donalek, 2005). An interview constitutes a purposeful, semi-structured dialogue between a researcher and an interviewee and encourages interaction that facilitates the construction of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Cheer, 2019). Essentially, an interview serves as a form of consultation wherein the researcher seeks the perspectives of the individual being interviewed on a particular issue (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). This consultative process in research is driven by a well-defined purpose, making interviews an interactive undertaking where questions are posed to elicit specific information (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017).

6.6.3 Interviews

Interviews can be conducted individually or in group settings, known as focus groups. In focus group interviews, multiple individuals are engaged in a flexible and exploratory discussion format, and this emphasises interactions among participants rather than solely between the interviewer and interviewees, with the interviewer assuming the role of a moderator (Qu & Dumay, 2011). However, for this study, I determined that individual interviews were the most suitable approach because they allow for a more in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perspectives without time constraints or interruptions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This implies that individual interviews will give each educator the privacy and time to fully discuss their experience with the FWB program integration. This format eliminates the pressure of competing for speaking time and creates a safe space for sharing sensitive information participants might hesitate to discuss in a group. Additionally, conducting one-on-one interviews allowed me, as the researcher, to explore specific responses in depth and address any unclear points (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Individual interviews also offer practical advantages, making it simpler to arrange and adjust meeting times according to each participant's schedule, as well as organise follow-up interviews to address emerging gaps in the data. Given the sample size, conducting focus groups was not ideal, making individual interviews the most suitable method for data collection in this study.

While interviews serve the common purpose of knowing the perspective of the interviewee, the specific aim of this knowing varies depending on the research question and the disciplinary perspective of the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Consequently, some research inquiries are structured to test predetermined hypotheses, often employing a highly structured interviewing format where questions and analyses are standardised (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Conversely, other studies aim to delve into the meanings and perceptions of participants, seeking a deeper understanding or generating hypotheses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The latter type of research typically necessitates qualitative interviewing methods, which encourage interviewees to provide detailed descriptions of phenomena while leaving the interpretation or analysis to the researchers (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

With this, one can underscore the different types of interviews available in qualitative research. Qu and Dumay (2011) delineate three primary categories: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews involve a predefined set of questions, limiting response options to a predetermined set of categories (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This format facilitates straightforward organisation and quantification of findings, as interviewers adhere closely to a scripted sequence of questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The standardisation ensures consistency, minimising researcher bias and enhancing the generalisability of results (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Conversely, unstructured interviews represent the informal end of the spectrum, drawing inspiration from open-ended ethnographic approaches. Here, interviewers adapt to the individual context, aiming to foster a relaxed and unpressured atmosphere for participants (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Departing from preconceived notions, this method allows for spontaneous exploration of topics, recognising that interviewers may not anticipate all relevant questions in advance (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Sitting between these two extremes is the semi-structured interview, which is widely employed in qualitative research (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This approach combines elements of both structured and unstructured methods, featuring prepared questions guided by overarching themes in a systematic manner (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Interviewers use probes to encourage detailed responses, maintaining consistency while allowing flexibility in conversation flow (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Although interview guides may vary in structure, ranging from highly scripted to more open-ended formats, their fundamental purpose remains consistent: to ensure a thematic approach that guides the interview, steering discussion towards key topics of interest (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Semi-structured interviews are widely favoured due to their flexibility, accessibility, and capacity to unveil significant, often concealed aspects of human and organisational behaviour (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Rooted in normal human conversation, this method empowers skilled interviewers to adapt their approach, pace, and question order to elicit comprehensive responses from participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Crucially, it allows interviewees to express themselves in their own terms, offering insights into their perceptions of the social world being studied (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Recognising these advantages, I opted for semi-structured interviews as the most suitable approach for my study. This decision resonates with the arguments of Birks and Mills (2015), who state that in grounded theory research, less structured interviews enable researchers to pursue emerging leads during conversations. Utilising this technique enabled me to dig deeply into the experiences of seasoned educators integrating the FWB program into their curricula, facilitating the construction of a theory grounded in the data. As DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest, the qualitative research interview serves to contribute to a conceptual and theoretical body of knowledge, highlighting the meanings that life experiences hold for interviewees.

Although interviews may seem straightforward from a distance, they actually require a deep respect for and curiosity about what people say, along with a systematic effort to truly listen and understand their perspectives (Donalek, 2005; Qu & Dumay, 2011). For qualitative research, conducting interviews is far from trivial; it demands not only skills like attentive listening and effective notetaking but also thorough preparation (Qu & Dumay, 2011). To gather interview data that is meaningful for research purposes, researchers must develop expertise in the relevant topic areas to ask informed questions (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Recognising my lack of professional training in conducting interviews, I realised the importance of enhancing not only my listening skills but also my ability to plan interviews effectively to avoid potential pitfalls that could arise without proper training. I, therefore, made the decision to enrol in an oral history course led by an experienced oral historian, Dr Rabbitt (2014, 2017), to acquire the foundational skills necessary for conducting successful interviews and achieving the intended research objectives.

Creswell (2009) stressed the importance of utilising an interview protocol prior to conducting interviews in qualitative research. This protocol typically consists of several key components: a header containing details such as the date, location, interviewer, and interviewee; instructions

to ensure standard procedures are consistently followed across interviews; a set of questions, usually starting with an ice-breaker followed by 4–5 main questions, often derived from the sub-questions in a qualitative research plan; probes for each question to encourage interviewees to elaborate on their responses; space provided between questions to record answers; and a concluding statement or question expressing gratitude for the interviewee's time (Creswell, 2009).

Engaging in a structured interview course, such as the one led by Dr Rabbitt (2014), allowed for the practical application of Creswell's theoretical concepts, thereby enhancing my skills in conducting interviews according to best practices. When designing interviews, various decisions must be carefully weighed, including selecting participants, determining the necessary number of interviews, choosing the appropriate interview format, and planning the analysis of interview data (Qu & Dumay, 2011). These considerations were not only emphasised in my training but were also integral to the constructivist grounded theory approach employed for this study, which enhanced my theoretical sampling.

6.6.4 Theoretical Sampling

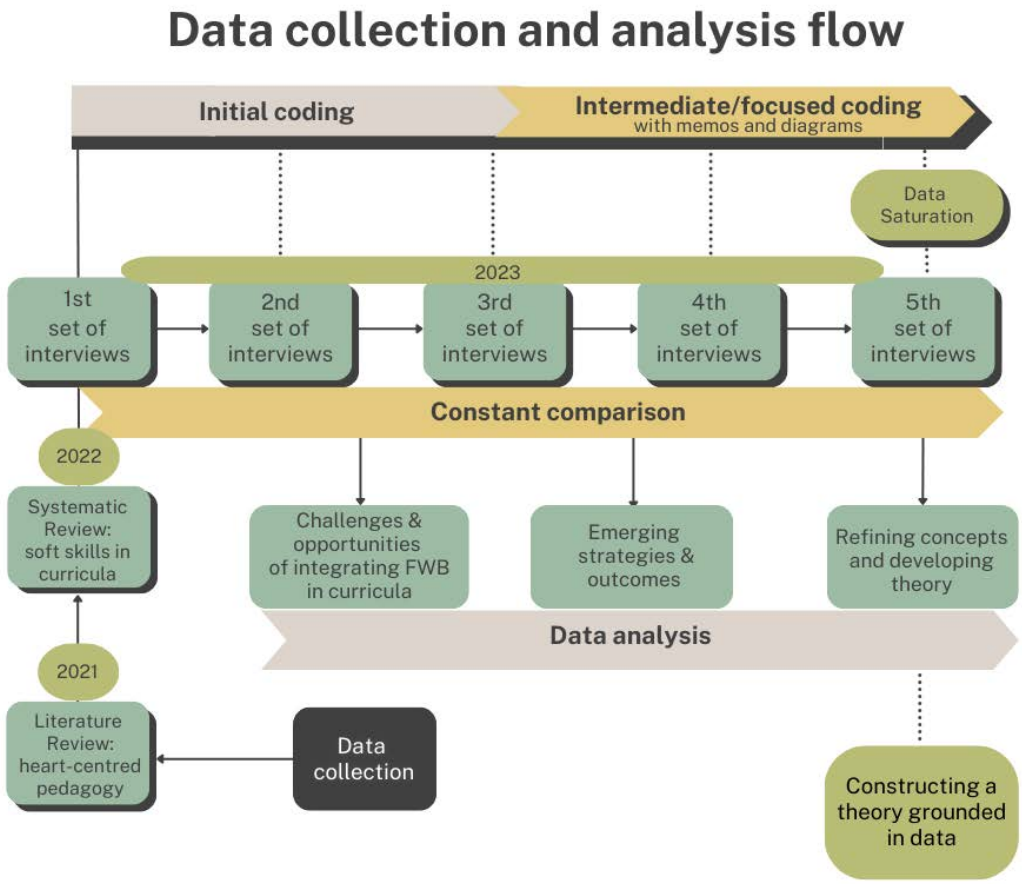
Theoretical sampling, as described by Birks and Mills (2015), involves identifying and pursuing emerging clues during analysis in a grounded theory study. According to Ligita et al. (2020), it aids in interpreting and clarifying the variations, properties, dimensions, and relationships among codes and categories, thereby facilitating the development of a credible and authentic theory. Theoretical sampling persists until no new codes are identified in the data. At this point, coding becomes more advanced, and the researcher seeks existing theories to enhance the explanatory power of their integrated grounded theory (Hoare et al., 2012). Birks and Mills (2015) underscore the underlying inquiries implicit in theoretical sampling, which involves exploring concepts from various angles, considering what is apparent, what is conspicuously absent, and whether more obscure implications are hinted at. These inquiries, driven by constant comparison, guided my sampling decisions and prompted a series of interviews aimed at addressing some questions in relation to my research objectives. Following Birks and Mills' (2015) framework, theoretical sampling provided a roadmap for subsequent data collection and selecting interviewees strategically at each stage of data collection, allowing for concurrent analysis in a cyclical process until categories were fully saturated.

In grounded theory methodology, data encompasses both information obtained directly through researcher-participant interactions and existing materials gathered from external sources (Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019). The process of theoretical sampling requires a purposeful selection of data sources relevant to the research focus, often involving interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Birks & Mills, 2015; Ligita et al., 2020). In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with educators who have integrated the FWB program within their teaching curricula, aiming to gain insights into their experiences. Analysis of the interview data allowed me to identify areas needing further exploration, clarification, or validation, as emphasised by Birks and Mills (2015). To supplement the primary data from my transcribed interviews, I also theoretically sampled diagrams and memos, leveraging these sources to enhance my understanding and theory development process.

6.6.5 Conducting Individual Interviews

Interviewing my participants was a significant step forward in my research. I divided the interview process with my participants, who are seasoned educators, into five phases: the first set of interviews, the second set of interviews, the third set of interviews as follow-up interviews, the fourth set of interviews, and the fifth set of interviews. Following careful consideration of each educator's potential contributions, I interviewed the first set of participants, anticipating rich data crucial for initial coding and analysis, as per constructivist grounded theory principles. Each stage of the interview process contributed to the outcomes of my research, as depicted in the data and analysis flow in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Data Collection and Analysis Flow



6.6.5.1 First Set of Interviews. The first round of interviews was conducted on the 14th and 15th of February, 2023, with two educators. The educators had integrated the FWB program into their course titled 'Reflective Communication' within the social work discipline. With many years of experience integrating FWB into their teaching, they possessed a deep understanding of the subject and its impact on students. Consequently, I was confident they were the ideal educators to begin my interviews. They were enthusiastic about participating and eager to share their insights and experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes.

Leading up to the interview, I had to familiarise myself with the lessons I had learned in conducting interviews. I ensured that my recording equipment was ready. Although I was interviewing experienced educators who had undergone many interviews, I wanted to ensure a smooth flow of conversation. During interviews, it was important to avoid using filler words like 'yeah', 'really', or 'is that right', and many more. I learned in my oral history class that they can disrupt the flow of the interview and the interviewee's responses. To prevent this, I

practised interviewing others. Additionally, since some of the educators were located in other states or countries, I had to ensure that scheduling a Zoom interview accommodated everyone's time zones, especially considering the time differences in southern states of Australia or for educators based overseas.

During my interviews, I made a conscious effort to avoid interruptions and to guide the conversation towards relevant topics. Interviewing lecturers and professors also requires skill in gently steering the conversation back to the topic at hand if they stray. This was something I had learned through my oral history course and was able to apply during my interviews. Through active engagement, listening, and adaptability, I responded effectively to the educators' contributions while keeping the discussion aligned with the research objectives. I knew that maintaining a smooth flow of conversation was crucial, particularly when discussing complex topics with experienced educators. However, in the first interview, I encountered technical difficulties; my computer experienced some glitches on the Zoom interface, and my recorder failed to power up. Despite these setbacks, my preparation and prior training equipped me to remain positive and implement a backup plan. I began the interview with my electronic tablet while using my mobile phone as a backup recorder. With the educator's understanding of the delay experienced in starting the interview because of the technical issues encountered, the interview proceeded smoothly, allowing for a rich exchange of perspectives in exploring the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating FWB within her curricula.

Following the interview, I expressed gratitude to the interviewee for her patience and understanding and promptly saved all recorded content. In preparation for my next interview, I recognised the need to refine some questions to avoid repetition and ensure they elicited the desired outcome. For instance, during my first interview, I noticed that asking, 'Can you tell me about your experience delivering the FWB…?' followed by 'What strategies do you use in your classroom?' led to redundant responses about teaching methods. Reflecting on this, I refined my approach for the second interview by replacing these overlapping questions with more targeted ones. I asked, 'Can you walk me through a specific FWB lesson that was particularly successful?' and 'Could you tell me about challenges you encountered when integrating the FWB program?' These adjustments yielded richer insights into both the practical application and barriers to integration, directly addressing my research objective of understanding educators' experiences with the FWB program.

Drawing from lessons learned during the initial interview, including addressing technical issues, I improved the interview process, and the subsequent interview proceeded smoothly. With the two interviews concluded, I commenced data analysis, although it seemed a little difficult to find clarity and coherence emerging from the collected data at this stage. Documenting this experience in my memo provided valuable insights for further refinement and progress in my research journey.

> *Doing my first set of interviews taught me a lot about the challenges one can face if not adequately prepared. Thankfully, the lessons I learned in conducting a good interview really helped me navigate through. At this stage, looking at my data feels like solving a puzzle; nonetheless, a puzzle I am able to solve. I'm currently analysing the data, and I hope that as I continue, everything will start to come together, and a clear story will emerge. Making small adjustments in my interviews helped me get the answers I needed in my second interview. This shows that being reflective and open to adjustments is crucial in research. Despite the challenges encountered, I'm delighted to see that I'm learning and progressing with my research*. (Memo: 16th February 2023)

6.6.5.2 Second Set of Interviews. On the 25th of February and the 4th of March, 2023, I conducted my second set of interviews with two educators from Chinese universities. One educator had integrated the FWB in the 'Economics and Management' course, while the other had integrated it into two courses: 'Enterprise Management Simulation Experiment' and 'Management Communication.' These educators, having encountered the FWB during time spent in Australia, recognised its value and introduced it into their courses in China. Their first-hand experience, coupled with evidence of the FWB's impact, persuaded them of its relevance for their students. Interviewing them provided valuable insights into how they adapted the FWB to the cultural and educational context of China, which was essential for my research.

When preparing to interview the educators from China, I anticipated delays in receiving replies due to the time zone difference. While these educators spoke English, I remained mindful that it was not their first language, and nuances could be missed if not carefully considered. My focus was on grasping the meaning behind their words rather than nit-picking on their language proficiency. Fortunately, I did not encounter difficulties understanding them, as their English proficiency was excellent. These interviews provided valuable insights that complemented those from my first set, covering challenges encountered in implementing the FWB in China, along with discovered opportunities and strategies employed. These helped me begin to

understand how these educators integrated the FWB into the hard-skill courses they were teaching. As I continued my analysis, emerging categories began to take shape, although some aspects required further clarification, prompting me to schedule follow-up interviews as my third set.

6.6.5.3 Third Set of Interviews. As I delved into my data analysis, I began to notice certain gaps that required further exploration. It became evident that some of the information provided by the educators during the interviews needed clarification and contextualisation. Recognising the importance of addressing these gaps, I scheduled follow-up interviews with the educators I had already interviewed to explore specific areas highlighted by my data analysis. For instance, when educators mentioned encountering challenges due to the sensitivity of certain FWB topics, I realised the necessity of probing further to understand the context surrounding these sensitive issues. What may seem acceptable in one cultural context could be triggering in another. Therefore, it was crucial to inquire about the cultural nuances and contextual factors influencing perceptions of sensitivity, especially given the diverse backgrounds of the educators interviewed.

In particular, I aimed to uncover how cultural differences influenced perceptions of sensitivity and appropriateness regarding FWB topics, especially emotions and feelings, within the university context. For example, while discussing 'feelings' in Australian educational settings, it was important to understand the meaning-making process of the educators and how it could be deemed inappropriate or uncomfortable in certain Chinese university contexts. Moreover, variations in cultural norms and educational practices between Australia and China necessitated a deeper exploration of how these factors shaped the educators' experiences with the FWB program. By conducting follow-up interviews and probing into these nuanced areas, I gained a clearer understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating the FWB program across diverse cultural and educational landscapes.

6.6.5.4 Fourth Set of Interviews. At this stage of my interviewing process, I had gone deeper into my data analysis. As the analysis continued, I identified certain gaps that needed to be filled, making me realise the necessity of interviewing more educators. Through my coding and categorisation, a cohesive narrative began to form. However, interviewing a wider range of educators would provide additional insights for analysing my data and developing a theoretical model consistent with the grounded theory methodology. Therefore, I initiated

discussions with my primary advisor, who possessed extensive experience in integrating the FWB program, to explore the possibility of interviewing additional educators.

Based on my theoretical sampling, I interviewed two educators who had used the FWB program within Australian universities. One of the educators had integrated the FWB into subjects including 'Community Development', 'Counselling Skills', and 'Cultural Diversity' within the social work discipline. Initially introduced to the FWB at JCU Cairns, the educator observed strong parallels between her teaching content and the FWB program's topics, leading her to integrate it into her subjects in 2014. The second educator integrated the FWB in a mandatory pre-semester workshop for students focusing on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing Across the Lifespan', as well as in a unit titled 'Environmental Health Management', designed for bachelor's students within the discipline of public health and community medicine. Having also been introduced to the FWB program in Cairns, the educator later integrated it into her subjects in Sydney and Brisbane. Given these educators' extensive background and diverse experiences with the FWB program, I deemed it necessary to conduct further in-depth interviews with them to gain deeper insights into their integration of the program within their curricula.

On the 12th of June, 2023, one of the educators identified for this fourth phase of interviewing happened to be visiting Cairns for a workshop. Considering her busy schedule, we strategically scheduled the interview during her time in town. She graciously offered me an hour and twenty-two minutes for the interview. During our face-to-face discussion, I had the opportunity to probe into her experiences integrating the FWB program into her curriculum. The interview flowed smoothly, resembling a conversation, providing additional depth to what I had already gathered from previous interviews. Moreover, it introduced new insights and areas for exploration. Given the semi-structured nature of the interview, I followed emerging leads in our conversation while keeping my research question in mind. This interview yielded a wealth of data for analysis and opened up new avenues for exploration in subsequent interviews.

On the 27th of June, 2023, I conducted my second interview with the other educator using the online platform Zoom. This educator provided valuable insights into her experience with the FWB program in her subjects. She shared the challenges she encountered when implementing the program as far back as 2010 and discussed the strategies she had used to overcome these obstacles while integrating the program into her curriculum. The interview lasted for one hour

and twenty minutes. This educator's contributions not only enriched my analysis but also helped address questions raised by previous interviewees.

These two sets of interviews played a crucial role in my analysis, as they helped confirm my categories and reveal relationships with other categories. At this stage of my intermediate/focused coding process, any initial doubts and confusion I had were gradually dissipating, and the significance of the data was becoming clearer. Following the approach outlined by Birks and Mills (2015), intermediate coding involves linking categories and continuously comparing data, categories, and sub-categories to explore the relationships between concepts. Through this process, I began to discern the emerging narrative and identified the necessity of conducting another set of interviews to determine theoretical saturation.

6.6.5.5 Fifth Set of Interviews. Having accumulated rich data and engaged in iterative discussions with my advisors and mentors, who were well-versed in grounded theory, my theoretical model began taking form. However, to ensure that no new information was overlooked, I arranged for a fifth and final set of interviews. These participants were selected through theoretical sampling, a process outlined by Birks and Mills (2015), which aims to gather data that will theoretically saturate the core category, along with its related categories and sub-categories. At this stage, having identified my core category, I focused on tracing connections between frequently occurring variables and all other categories, sub-categories, and their properties and dimensions. Following the guidance of Birks and Mills (2015), I navigated between initial coding and intermediate/focused coding, driven by theoretical sampling. During this process, I realised that my scheduled interview with two educators would provide sufficient additional insights at this stage of my analysis.

Consequently, on the 6th of December, 2023, I conducted a thirty-minute interview with an educator who tried to integrate aspects of the FWB learning activities in the digital literacy course titled 'Learning in a Digital Environment' at the JCU Pathways program. The purpose of the interview was to gain insight into her perspective on integrating the FWB into a technical subject such as Digital Literacy and to validate the narrative emerging from my data analysis. Since the educator happened to be in Cairns briefly, we arranged a face-to-face interview to capture her input on the FWB integration process. The interview was particularly impactful as this educator passionately articulated the positive effects of using the FWB with her students and how she strategically integrated some of the FWB activities with the learning objectives

of the course. This interview provided valuable data that contributed to consolidating my conceptual model.

On the 12th of December, 2023, following the leads of my analysis, I conducted an interview with a First Nations elder and professor who has been acquainted with the FWB program dating back to the year 2000. Initially, she approached the program with scepticism, but over time, she witnessed its profound impact and decided to introduce it to postgraduate students at JCU studying health sciences (including nurses and allied health professionals) and the Master of Indigenous Studies in the subject titled 'Empowerment and Change'. As a First Nations educator implementing a wellbeing program developed by First Nations people, it was invaluable to hear her perspective on the program's efficacy and how she navigated challenges along the way. She eloquently discussed the significance of the program compared to other non-First Nations wellbeing initiatives, highlighting the bureaucratic hurdles that often hinder their effectiveness. As the sole First Nations educator interviewed, her insights provided a unique and complementary viewpoint to the non-First Nations educators.

6.6.6 Data Saturation

The data collection progressed through five stages, involving interviews with eight of 11 available educators, ultimately reaching theoretical saturation. Data saturation was reached when no new insights emerged after the fourth set of interviews. To validate this, a fifth set of interviews was conducted with two additional participants, which confirmed saturation as no new themes or data were generated. This process supports the robustness of the saturation claim and the adequacy of the sample size. Throughout the interview process, I witnessed the gradual evolution of theoretical insights from their initial, fragmented state to a coherent narrative. This was evident in how the data initially appeared disconnected and complex, but as the research unfolded, patterns and relationships emerged organically. The iterative process of interconnecting categories was particularly rewarding, culminating in the development of a robust core category.

Consultation with my advisors and mentors proved crucial in refining the analysis, providing critical insights that enhanced the emerging theoretical model. As emphasised by Birks and Mills (2015), the intermediate coding phase is pivotal for comprehensively developing and interlinking categories. By consciously elevating theoretical sensitivity and rigorously

examining categories before deeming them theoretically saturated, researchers can avoid the trap of superficial, thematic analysis, thus propelling their analysis to an advanced stage (Birks & Mills, 2015). With this awareness, I became poised to finalise my theoretical model through my analysis.

6.6.7 Reflecting on the Interviews

Upon reflection on the series of interviews I conducted, I noted that all the educators interviewed happened to be females. This was not by design but rather a result of selecting educators who had met the eligibility criteria of having integrated the FWB program into their curricula. It is noteworthy to mention that the interviews were conducted using two different modes: online and face-to-face. Among the eight interviewees, six interviews took place online, while two were conducted in person. Despite encountering initial technical challenges during the first online interview, all the interviews flowed naturally, and participants' responses remained unaffected. Regardless of the logistical hurdles of conducting remote interviews across varying time zones, I remained adaptable, ensuring that all participants were accommodated. Employing a semi-structured interviewing process, I prepared interview questions as prompts for engaging discussions. I adapted them as necessary during the interviews to explore leads pertinent to my research question. Table 5 summarises the key questions, with the full interview questions provided in Appendix 1.

Table 5
Sample of Interview Questions

• Could you tell me about the challenges you encountered when integrating the FWB program?
• What were some of the opportunities or enabling factors that helped in integrating the family wellbeing within the university curriculum?
• Could you tell me how the FWB was integrated into the existing curriculum without compromising the academic rigour and requirements?
• How did the integrating of the FWB program impacted or enhance student wellbeing, resiliency, or academic outcomes?

In hindsight, the thorough preparation and effective strategies I implemented before and during the interviews played a pivotal role in their success. Leveraging the insights gained from my oral history course and honing effective communication skills, I confidently and professionally

navigated through the interviews. These experiences underscored the significance of careful preparation and flexibility in conducting fruitful interviews, especially within a research framework. Collaborating with university educators greatly facilitated data collection, offering a level of ease and cooperation that was not always present when working with other groups, such as students who primarily are focused on their studies rather than engaging in a research project. Such challenges in recruiting university students highlight the logistical constraints and access issues emphasised by Birks and Mills (2015). However, adapting my study to use university educators streamlined the data collection process because of their readiness to participate and accessibility. I further elaborate on how these aspects influenced my analysis in the subsequent section.

6.8 Data Analysis

Analysis is often perceived as the most challenging aspect of grounded theory for novice researchers (Birks & Mills, 2015). However, despite the necessity for rigorous application of essential grounded theory methods, this approach inherently allows for flexibility (Birks & Mills, 2015). This flexibility was evident in my experience with grounded theory, which I describe in the subsequent pages. The process was filled with twists and turns and, at times, felt overwhelming; it required adaptability on my part. However, with guidance from my advisors and mentors experienced in grounded theory, I successfully navigated the analysis. Through reflexivity, I gleaned valuable insights from the process.

According to Charmaz (2014), grounded theory methods offer structured yet adaptable principles for collecting and analysing qualitative data, enabling researchers to derive theories directly from the data. Consequently, research endeavours result in the formulation of theories firmly rooted in the data they have gathered (Charmaz, 2014). Analysing data in grounded theory is always an iterative process (Cheer, 2019). According to Charmaz (2014), "[g]rounded theory begins with inductive data, invokes iterative strategies of going back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps you interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis" (p. 1). This iterative process deters from the linear progression that I previously thought would be the normal trajectory of this research. As a young researcher and a novice in conducting a grounded theory, my grasp of following the sequence of sampling, data collection, coding, categorisation, continuous comparison, theoretical sensitivity, memo composition, analysis and interpretation, as outlined by Charmaz (2014), was not bereft of

‘disturbances’ caused by a ‘linear progressive mindset’. I later realised that it is in the ‘disruptive iterative process’ of ‘going back and forth’, as Charmaz (2014) describes, that the valuable analytical insights worth discovering in one’s journey of data analysis lie.

Following my initial round of interviews, I commenced the transcription process, only to realise the underestimated challenges and time-consuming nature of the task. Despite my initial belief that using a transcription program would expedite the process, I found myself investing more time and energy than anticipated. Understanding the importance of maintaining accuracy, I resisted the temptation to resort to shortcuts. Poland (2003) emphasises the significance of researchers adhering to fastidious conventions to guarantee verbatim transcripts of interview content. Adhering to this principle, I transcribed every word, ensuring an accurate representation of the recorded audio files. The subsequent narrative encapsulates my journey through the transcription process.

> *I commenced the transcription of my first set of interviews, and now, I am realising the challenges associated with it. I initially thought that transcription would be a relatively straightforward task with the assistance of a transcription program. However, I am finding out that I’m investing more time and effort into transcription than I had anticipated. It has proven to be a significantly more time-consuming and energy-draining process than I had initially imagined. I had to listen to the interviews back and forth; rewind, pause, play, and follow the transcribed words line by line to ensure accuracy. Notwithstanding these challenges, I am committed to maintaining the integrity of the research. I recognise the importance of ensuring that every word transcribed accurately reflects the content of the audio files, and I am determined to resist the temptation of taking shortcuts.* (Memo: 16th February 2023)

Recognising the challenges inherent in conducting interviews, I initiated mental adjustments regarding the allocated time for interviews, transcription, memoing of my experiences, and data analysis. These adjustments guided how I refined my upcoming interview questions and determined the scheduling of interviews to adhere to the deadline I set for myself for data analysis.

6.8.1 The Process of Transcription

Transcribing recorded interviews is a widely adopted method in qualitative research to convert spoken data into a textual format suitable for coding and analysis (Poland, 2003). This process involves making various decisions influenced by both theoretical considerations and practical necessities, contributing to the (re)construction of data during transcription (Poland, 2003). Transcription practices encompass a spectrum defined by two primary modes: naturalism and denaturalism (Oliver et al., 2005). The naturalistic approach seeks to transcribe every utterance with accurate detail, aiming for a verbatim representation of speech that mirrors the real world (Oliver et al., 2005; Schegloff, 1997). On the other hand, denaturalised transcription involves the removal of idiosyncratic elements, such as stutters and pauses, asserting that within speech lie meanings and perceptions shaping our reality (Cameron, 2001; Oliver et al., 2005). These represent the endpoints on a broader transcription continuum, and between them exist numerous variations combining elements to meet specific analytical objectives and research goals (Oliver et al., 2005). The choice between these methods, or a hybrid approach, hinges on the researcher's decision-making, raising questions about alignment with research objectives and concerns about participant confidentiality (Oliver et al., 2005).

While both naturalistic and denaturalised methods can be pertinent to specific research inquiries, Oliver et al. (2005) advocate for an intermediate step – a reflective period. Taking time for contemplation allows researchers to assess how their transcription choices impact participants and align with the research goals before plunging into data analysis (Oliver et al., 2005). Oliver et al. (2005) emphasise that the importance of this intermediate step is to allow for a thoughtful decision-making period during the transcription process, ensuring that the transcribed data is congruent with the overarching research objectives.

Reflecting on the most appropriate approach to transcribing my interviews, given my use of the constructivist grounded theory approach by Charmaz (2014) – which highlights the active role of the researcher in constructing a theory grounded in the data – I opted for the denaturalised approach. This choice is further validated by Oliver et al. (2005), who maintain that grounded theorists and critical discourse analysts place greater emphasis on the meanings embedded within a transcript than on verbatim utterances. This choice ensures that elements like pauses and stutters do not diminish the importance of the words spoken by the interviewees. As my interviewees were educators and researchers, they were well-acquainted

with the interview process. Despite some interviewees being educators from China with English as a second language, the confidence in English they gained through their research experiences in Australia assured me that their English proficiency would not hinder their ability to express their thoughts and experiences fully during the interviews. This led me to confidently choose the denaturalised approach, aiming to eliminate unnecessary elements in the interviews, correct grammar for non-native English speakers, and preserve the authentic meaning of the spoken words. I documented this decision in my reflective memo, outlining the factors that influenced my choice.

> *Today, I spent time thinking about how I'm doing my research. I wanted to write down my thoughts to make things clearer for myself. In my transcribing, I had decided to use the denaturalised approach because of the level of education of the people I interviewed. They are educators from Australia and China. My research is about understanding what these educators think and feel about the FWB program they had integrated in their subjects, and this method fits well with that idea. I realised that this method helps me focus on what the educators are really saying. It removes things like hesitations and pauses from the written words, making it easier for me to understand their main ideas. This is crucial for building a theory based on their experiences. Considering that the educators are very good at what they do and some speak English as a second language, I thought this method would show their intentions more clearly. Even if English is not the first language of the educators from China, their confidence gained from working in Australia should make things clear. Using this method will also make sure the words are written correctly, fixing any grammar issues while keeping their words genuine, clear and real. I am writing all these down to remember why I made this choice. I believe it will make my research better and help me learn important things about what the educators think and feel.* (Memo: 7th March, 2023)

Initially, I underestimated the significance of transcription in my research, perceiving it as a behind-the-scenes task. However, this perspective swiftly shifted as I recognised its pivotal role in the analytic process. Oliver et al. (2005) note that transcription is often relegated to a background role in data management, overshadowed by other aspects of research. Acknowledging the importance of transcription as more than a mere procedural step, I began exploring approaches to transcribing my interviews.

Considering my budget constraints, transcription services and software options were too financially burdensome. Scepticism about the accuracy of free transcription software led me to search for alternatives. Fortunately, I discovered the transcription feature in the online version of Microsoft Word, allowing users to upload audio files for efficient and accurate transcription at no extra cost. As a subscription-based package that I already have access to, the discovery of the online Microsoft Word transcription feature alleviated budget concerns. It provided a reliable tool for transforming spoken content into a text format conducive to subsequent analysis. Nonetheless, I needed to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed words by listening to the interviews and reviewing them line by line.

6.8.2 Coding and Categorisation

Coding, as described by Birks and Mills (2015), serves as a shorthand method where researchers systematically identify recurring concepts and similarities in participants' experiences. Groups of codes representing higher-level concepts are then organised into categories (Birks & Mills, 2015). Categories are theoretically saturated when the analysis of new data results in codes that can only be accommodated within existing categories (Birks & Mills, 2015). Additionally, these categories are thoroughly elaborated in relation to their properties and dimensions (Birks & Mills, 2015). The active coding process draws from the substantive area under investigation, the researcher's knowledge and experience, and existing theories (Birks & Mills, 2015). The researcher's prior understanding of existing theories, professional expertise, and everyday experiences can also influence the identification of codes (Birks & Mills, 2015). Charmaz (2014) advocates for the use of *gerunds* (verb nouns ending with 'ing,' such as being, helping, and dealing) in coding, emphasising their role in examining enacted processes. This approach underscores the importance of focusing on actions and processes rather than individual elements in constructing a theory (Charmaz, 2014). Coding prompts researchers to question the data, to gain a deeper understanding of the studied experiences and thus, guide further data collection to address analytical concerns (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Cheer, 2019). Looking at the wealth of data obtained from my transcription, I realised that they would serve as a robust foundation to initiate the coding process, a decision duly documented in my memo.

> *After conducting interviews with two educators who shared their experiences integrating the FWB in their subjects, I decided to dive into the process of transcribing. It felt like a crucial step to truly understand the richness of our*

> *discussions. My initial coding process started after I had thoroughly processed the interviews and transcriptions. I wanted this stage to guide the flexibility of my questions in subsequent interviews. It's all about adapting and learning from the insights gathered so far. Transcribing turned out to be incredibly insightful. It allowed me to capture subtle nuances in the educators' responses by delving into their feelings, thoughts, and even the tone of their voices. It feels like I have unveiled valuable data; and looking at the data, I'm eager to embark on the coding process and exploring the questions that are emerging for me at this stage of analysis*. (Memo: 16th February 2023)

Embarking on the analysis of my interview transcripts, I employed grounded theory coding techniques, scrutinising the data line by line (Cheer, 2019). This involved examining sentences or paragraphs while coding for the actions and processes associated with integrating the FWB program into curricula. By systematically examining the text, this coding approach allows for identifying and exploring patterns, contributing to the development of meaningful categories that capture the essence of participants' experiences integrating the FWB program within their curricula. My initial coding commenced with scrutinising my data line by line. Initial coding, as articulated by Birks and Mills (2015), serves as the foundational step in data analysis, involving the identification and labelling of crucial words or groups of words within the data. The term 'in vivo,' derived from Latin and signifying 'within the living,' in the context of *in vivo coding,* pertains to the utilisation of significant words or phrases (often verbatim quotes from participants) to label a code (Birks & Mills, 2015). Initial coding is an inherently reflexive activity, demanding continuous self-interrogation regarding the early analytical decisions made throughout the process (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through the process of initial coding, the researcher promptly explores the data, unveiling conceptual possibilities (Birks & Mills, 2015).

While creating my initial coding, I encountered challenges that prompted relentless self-questioning about the accuracy of my interpretations. As a novice grounded theorist, this phase was overwhelming and immensely challenging. Seeking solace and insight, I examined the works of established grounded theorists to see how they navigated the process. This proved to be exceedingly helpful in reassuring me that I was on the right track. I embraced the unfolding of the journey, allowing the codes to emerge organically without imposing predetermined structures. I documented the experience in my memo:

> *As I look at my coding today, it seems like there is no purpose to it, and it is all over the place. This concerns me because it feels like I am missing a lot in tying them together. It seems they are not making sense. The process of coding is very difficult at this stage. It feels like agony, agony, and agony, being so lonely going through this journey. It feels like I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm just going through the motion. I have these lingering questions: am I getting this right? Am I missing something? I had to read some of the works of previous grounded theorists, and I realised they went through similar experience while conducting their grounded theory. This gave me a lot of consolation and courage. I remain steadfast in my process constantly paying attention to what was unfolding before me in terms of my struggles and challenges and how they are informing what the interviewees were talking about. At this stage, I allowed what was unfolding before me to be done unto me without forcing the codes to belong in some certain areas that were unconsciously preconditioned.* (Memo: 20th February 2023)

Amid the struggle to make sense of my initial coding, a transformative moment occurred as I gleaned the insights provided by other studies and the guidance available on the crucial steps in conducting grounded theory. The fog surrounding my coding process began to lift, and I started to discern a coherent pattern in the methodology. My advisor's words (*You don't have to have a definite answer for everything. It's a journey of discovering something. You have to allow yourself to discover what the data is telling you because you are trying to build a theory that is grounded in the data*), offered reassurance and emphasised the exploratory nature of the process. This played a pivotal role in helping me align with the essence of grounded theory in allowing the data to lead the way in theory construction. The realisation marked a turning point, and I documented my reflections in a memo.

> *Everything is making sense today. It feels like I am finally grasping the coding process. Still have a lot to learn, but reading the important steps in conducting a grounded theory, coupled with the wisdom shared by my primary* advisor*, has played a crucial role in providing structure to my steps thus far.* (Memo: 30th May 2023)

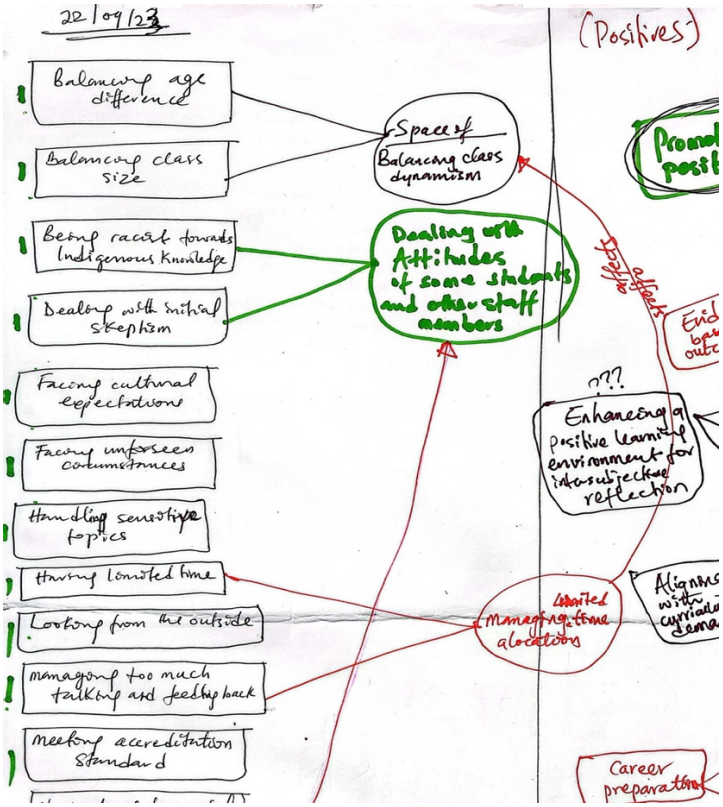
6.8.3 Constant Comparative Analysis

Constant comparative analysis is crucial in grounded theory, allowing theorists to juxtapose existing data with new information. This process facilitates the identification of similarities and differences, enabling the theorist to address any gaps in the dataset. As outlined by Birks and Mills (2015), the process of constant comparison involves initially generating codes by comparing incidents within the data. Subsequent incidents are then evaluated against existing codes, with codes being compared to other codes. The organisation of codes into categories occurs next, and these categories are utilised for comparing with future codes. The iterative nature of this analytical approach drives theoretical sampling and the continuous collection or generation of data, thereby resulting in the development of high-level conceptual categories imbued with meaning, properties, and an explanatory framework (Birks & Mills, 2015).

In my case, I initially attentively coded the data line by line using the NVivo software, systematically comparing information to identify patterns of similarity and difference. However, as I progressed to refine my categories and identify the core category, I transitioned to manual analysis. This involved drawing connections and refining the emerging theory. These approaches overlapped and straightened each other by facilitating the determination of which codes should be grouped under another, which codes were evolving into distinct categories, and how the categories were informing the core category. For example, the codes ‘dealing with big class size’ and ‘getting enough rooms for all the classes’ were consolidated under the umbrella of ‘balancing class size.’ This decision was driven by their shared focus on addressing the fundamental challenge of achieving equilibrium in the number of students within a given class size. Furthermore, I explored the interconnectedness among ‘balancing class size,’ ‘balancing the age brackets of students,’ ‘having limited time,’ and ‘managing too much talking and giving feedback.’ The data revealed how the allocation of teaching time is impacted by the number of students and how this, in turn, is influenced by the dynamic age differences among students, particularly between older and younger students. In response to these findings, I amalgamated these codes into a broader category labelled ‘balancing class sizes, time, and age brackets of students.’ This amalgamation became a pivotal element of the overarching category of ‘adapting teaching,’ representing a significant step within the ‘strategies’ component of the theoretical model for integrating the FWB program within curricula. Figure 5 depicts how I used diagrams to aid in illustrating connections during the later stage of my categorisation process based on my coding. I reflected on the whole process in my memo:

One thing that is clear here is that class size is always dependent on time factor. To handle big classes demand that educators get enough time to implement the program in an engaging way, and that also involves how educators balance the age brackets of students to allow mutual learning from one another. Having limited time is a challenge that needs to be balanced in reference with class size, and age brackets of students. Many educators interviewed mentioned that limited time is a factor either in terms of considering the FWB program too long or the fact that there is not enough time to manage all the students or implement the program in its entirety or even get all the students involved. The question rumbling at the base-note of these views is: how can more time be allocated when universities somehow do not rate the FWB program as deserving more time within the curricula compared to other mainstream technical subjects? This reflects back on the challenges of crowded curricula, meeting accreditation standards and pushbacks from certain staff members. (Memo: 21st August, 2023)

Figure 5
Rough Diagram of Data Categorisation



The ongoing process of constant comparison was instrumental in highlighting crucial knowledge gaps that required attention for the development of my theory. In my memo, I wrote about how impactful this has been in furthering my research.

> *Another thing that I realised today was the need to restructure my coding process and realign the codes to adequately address the key questions stemming from my overarching research question. I will organise the categories to fill each missing gap that I am trying to fill with my research question. Speaking to my primary advisor today elucidated my understanding that it is all part of the process; and that I could keep restructuring my coding for almost 30 times, and it is perfectly okay. According to him, it means that I am thinking about it and I'm making them better. It is the constant comparison at work. This helped me to stop spiralling into different places and to be able to focus on areas that are essential in developing information relevant to answering my research question.* (Memo: 9th June, 2023)

Through my data analysis, for example, it became evident that the category of 'conducting research' emerged under 'opportunities' in integrating the FWB program within curricula. However, bridging the gap between this potential for research and the actual generation of new funding and deeper insights into First Nations Knowledge demanded further investigation. Consequently, I arranged an interview with a First Nation educator who had first-hand experience with the program. Given her background and expertise, I anticipated valuable insights that would contribute significantly to addressing the gaps that I identified. I captured my decision to undertake this interview in my memo.

> *Today, as I screened through my coding and categorisation, I realised that I needed to explore more on the theme of 'potential for research' as one of the opportunities that could be gained in using the FWB in curricula. I need to find out how research carried out by educators has been leveraged to gain funding to further explore and advance First Nations Knowledge. I need to set up an interview with one of the First Nations educators who can provide fresh insight into this phenomenon. This will help me to connect the dots and fill in the gaps that are missing at this point.* (Memo: 30th November, 2023)

As fresh insights poured in through interviews, my focus honed in on the burgeoning theory. This often necessitated re-evaluating my previous work, a somewhat painful yet profoundly enlightening process. It felt like, as Masschelein (2010) underscores, navigating through paths that might seem to lead nowhere but hold the potential to lead everywhere. To make sense of

the evolving theory, I crafted conceptual maps and distilled summaries of emerging concepts. Seeking perspectives beyond my research team, I shared these materials with trusted PhD colleagues to gauge if the concepts and my attached explanatory summaries resonated with them. In my written summaries, I strived to unravel the workings of my diagrams, ensuring there was clarity in each phase of the conceptualisation.

6.8.4 Writing Memos, Drawing Maps and Diagrams

Developing an interest in writing memos was akin to cultivating a new skill – a muscle that needed growth through practice. In the realm of grounded theory, crafting high-quality memos serves as the essential lubricant for the iterative process of constructing a theory grounded in the data (Birks & Mills, 2015). The art of writing memos revolves around capturing evolving ideas in the midst of progress (Charmaz, 2008a). When consecutive memos focus on a specific category, they effectively chart its evolution as the researcher accumulates additional data to shed light on the category and delves deeper into its analysis (Charmaz, 2008a). As per Birks and Mills (2015), memos encapsulate the researcher's thoughts throughout the grounded theory journey, varying in intensity, subject, coherence, and theoretical content, ultimately influencing their utility in the final body of research. Memo writing serves as a unique opportunity for exploring the data, transcending the mere act of summarisation (Charmaz, 2008a). The process of writing and storing memos establishes a structured framework for exploring, validating, and refining ideas (Charmaz, 2008a). Through this expressive form, the grounded theorist's ideas unfurl as revelations unfold during the research journey (Charmaz, 2008a).

Acknowledging the significance of documenting and preserving my memos, I embraced the need to become comfortable with writing, capturing memo entries, detailing struggles, and recording decisions pivotal to advancing my research. In alignment with Birks and Mills (2015), I understood that the act of writing memos contributes to building one's intellectual assets – an insight that proved true in my own experience. Revisiting moments of uncertainty or questioning specific research directions became clearer by going through my memos. Each documented instance became a crucial signpost guiding me towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Through my memos, I became aware of the need to let the dataset take me on a journey in grounded theory by discovering what was emerging before me. I wrote about this realisation in a memo:

> *Engaging in grounded theory is like embarking on a journey without a predefined map, challenging the notion of having a clear direction or expecting everything to unfold according to a plan. It's a venture into the unknown, where you immerse yourself and await the unfolding of your exploration. Sometimes, it leads you to unexpected realms, while at other times, it brings you back to familiar grounds. Throughout the process, grounded theory keeps you on your toes, urging you to navigate the uncharted territory that unravels before you. It's a dynamic exploration, an immersion into the dataset, allowing it to guide you to answers that may have eluded you before. The subtleties inherent in the process become apparent – you experience the phenomenon in question, hearing and feeling what it tries to reveal. In this immersive process, you realise that letting your dataset lead you to unexplored territories is an integral part of the entire journey of conducting grounded theory.* (Memo: 8th June, 2023)

Glaser (1998) advocates for researchers to jot down memos whenever an idea strikes, regardless of the time or manner. Memos serve as valuable material for grounded theorists, providing something tangible to engage with, reflect upon later, and delve into more deeply during exploration (Charmaz, 2008a). I recorded this rather mundane experience of feeling stuck, letting go, and coming back to my work with renewed vigour and insight about how to proceed with my theoretical sampling.

> *Today, I felt stuck like I am bereft of ideas. I keep pushing myself to advance, but it seems that the more I push myself to get clarity, the more I feel confused. Is this disillusionment at its peak or am I getting the pinch of guilt? The guilt of not getting enough done. I think it is the later. As later during the day at about 4pm, I found out that I cannot keep pushing myself. I don't have any other ideas to offer to my rather stern-looking codes trying to tell me that there is nothing more to explore here. With all the papers I have read trying to understand my approach to theoretical sampling, I was still a little bit unsure about the next best step to follow. The papers I have read offered me at most general idea about undertaking theoretical sampling. Since it is your journey, your creation, your grounded theory to explain how to understand a phenomenon in question, you have to explore what lead will better answer your research question with a clear mind. I decided it is time to call it a day. I went out and talked to my neighbour, a good friend, and we had a laugh and it helped. Why? Because when I was having a shower, I kept*

> *thinking about my theoretical sampling and I began to think of ways to approach it the next day. That gave me renewed vigour and insight to look for comparative data to uncover concealed properties within a category. Through my comparative analysis, I felt a breakthrough in the process.* (Memo: 12th June, 2023)

Engaging in memo writing provides researchers with a platform to expand their thinking while interrogating their data (Charmaz, 2008a). Grounded theory's approach to memo writing transforms qualitative inquiry into a deliberate analytical pursuit, pushing researchers beyond mere description and storytelling (Charmaz, 2008a). As an example, I focused on the code 'scepticism towards the FWB program,' analysing the properties associated with this 'scepticism' across a spectrum of interviews. I identified distinct yet similar conditions triggering this scepticism, ranging from a condescending attitude towards First Nations Knowledge – given the FWB program's First Nations origin – to the perception that, as a wellbeing program, it lacks substance and credibility, being considered nebulous and insubstantial. It became evident that this attitude carried undertones of racism in certain contexts. I tried to draw the dimension by which the 'scepticism' was perceived by academics, and I realised that it contributed to the category of 'pushbacks from staff' and yet somewhat connected to the category of 'racial prejudice towards First Nations Knowledge' in the broader context of the attitude of some students who resisted it and some staff who found no relevance of it within their curricula. In drawing this connection, I decided that the code of 'scepticism towards the FWB' is instrumental under the categories of 'racial prejudice' and 'pushbacks from staff'. I documented the rationale guiding this thought process in a memo.

> *Some people harbour scepticism towards the FWB program due to its First Nations nature, perceiving it as a 'wishy washy' initiative with no tangible impact on their lives or career aspirations. This scepticism is closely tied to a negative attitude, rooted in the belief that the program lacks evidence-based foundations, making it seem less academically rigorous and unrelated to curricula. The scepticism may also be related to the category of 'racial prejudice' towards First Nations Knowledge, as one interviewee highlighted the prevailing perceptions of 'Indigenousness' in the country. It could also relate to the category of 'pushbacks from staff' because of how some educators affirmed how some staff do not rate the program as important to other technical subjects because it is a wellbeing program and looks a bit wishy washy for them. I have to explore these further. Overcoming this initial scepticism requires fostering openness among individuals to experience*

> *the program. As one educator pointed out, the most effective approach is to encourage people to experience the program before passing judgement on its significance* (Memo: 23rd August, 2023).

Immersing myself in the analytical process of exploring meanings, evaluating situations, and scrutinising actions through memo writing, as emphasised by Charmaz (2008a), initiated inquiries that guided my addressing of subsequent data collection.

Speaking to my advisors, I was encouraged to use diagrams for my conceptualisation to help me understand the emerging themes and how they are related to each other. Utilising diagrams, particularly in the form of flowcharts, enabled me to visually communicate the evolution of my theory. This approach demanded a dedicated period to analyse the landscape and the intricate web of connectedness of the diagram to evaluate the missing gaps in my data. As Cheer (2019) concurs, creating diagrams and flowcharts proves invaluable in conceptualising links between developing categories and pinpointing potential gaps. Seeking guidance from my advisors on my visual representations proved instrumental in advancing my theoretical modelling. To capture the challenges faced during this visual representation process, I documented my sentiments following a phone conversation with my primary advisor, especially when I felt stuck with my drawings.

> *Today, I found myself grappling with confusion as I attempted to visually conceptualise my theory through drawings. Realising that I needed guidance, I decided to consult my primary advisor. His insights proved invaluable in refining my approach. He emphasised that research is essentially a journey of discovery, requiring the researcher to guide others through their findings using a compelling narrative. His advice emphasised simplicity, cautioning against overcomplicating things with excessive diagrams that demand extensive explanations. I am relieved to have documented this guidance as it will serve as a guiding principle for my future steps in data analysis.* (Memo: 25th September, 2023)

Being a newcomer to grounded theory, I remained receptive to suggestions aimed at advancing my data analysis skills. A mentor recommended the use of situational mapping, and this prompted me to explore its application in understanding the intricacies of my research scenario involving the integration of the FWB program within university curricula. According to Clarke (2003), situational analyses involve creating three types of maps and subsequently engaging in analytic work and diverse memos. These maps include situational maps, delineating the key

human, nonhuman, discursive, and other elements within the research context, stimulating analyses of their interrelations (Clarke, 2003). Situational maps aim to encapsulate and explore the intricate complexities of the situation, capturing its dense relations and variations (Clarke, 2003). The second type, social worlds/arenas maps, outlines all collective actors and the commitment arenas where ongoing negotiations occur (Clarke, 2003). These maps provide meso-level interpretations, exploring the dimensions of collective action, including social, organisational, institutional, and discursive aspects (Clarke, 2003). The third type, positional maps, outlines the primary positions adopted or omitted in the data, relating to specific discursive dimensions of variation and difference, areas of concern, and controversies evident in the research scenario (Clarke, 2003). Crucially, positional maps do not link to individuals or groups; instead, they aim to represent the complete spectrum of positions on particular issues (Clarke, 2003). Trying to use situational mapping in my research was challenging. When I started, I had to document how I felt initially.

> *Today as I plan to do situational mapping and to describe the properties of my categories, I was confused and I had to read more paper to understand the subtle nuances involved and a step-by-step guide to help me, as I feel like I have no idea about what I am doing*. (Memo: 17th August, 2023)

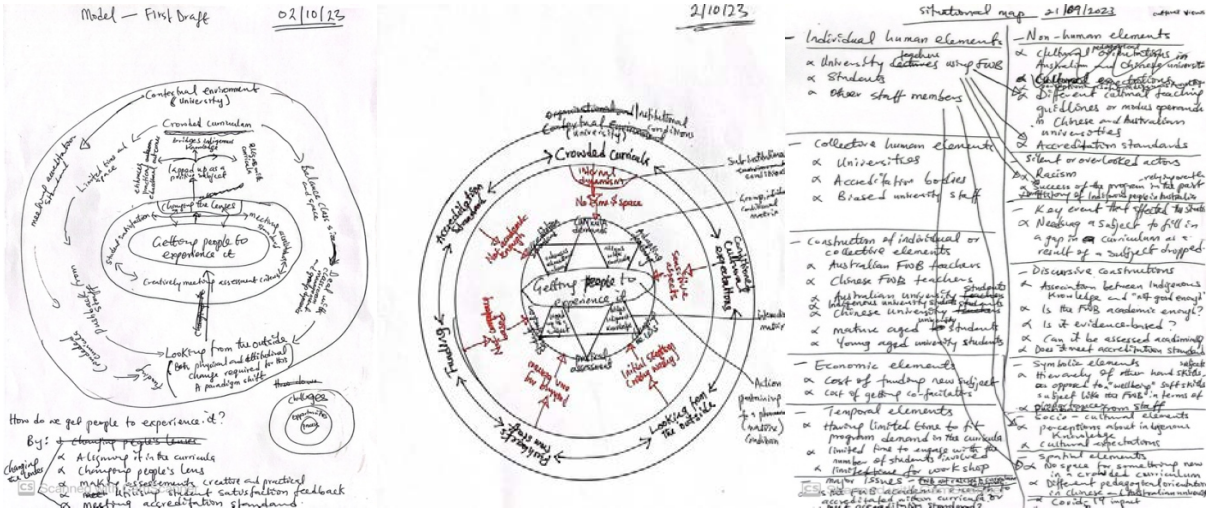
As a novice in grounded theory, I felt compelled to strictly adhere to the prescribed guidelines of situational mapping. Observing how others incorporated this method in their research led me to believe that detailed adherence was essential in my analysis. However, I soon realised that this is not always the case, as each research endeavour is unique, requiring a tailored approach. When I discussed my struggle with using situational mapping in my case with my primary advisor, he emphasised the necessity of approaching my analysis uniquely and recognising that every project is distinctive and warrants such an approach. I documented this experience in a memo.

> *Today's conversation with my primary advisor proved highly beneficial. I had initially assumed that I must incorporate situational mapping into my grounded theory, likely influenced by my novice status in this methodology. My conceptualisation made sense to me through diagrams, and attempting to integrate the situational mapping framework seemed to elude me. When I shared my struggles with my advisor, he clarified that situational mapping serves as a tool to unravel the complexities one is trying to understand but should be approached based on its relevance to one's specific research. He emphasised that just because others used*

> *it doesn't necessitate its application in my case, as every research project is unique and requires a tailored approach. This insight realigned my focus, steering me back to the essential steps in my data analysis.* (Memo: 25th September, 2023)

Situational mapping is not a necessity in grounded theory but rather a supplement to traditional grounded theory (Cheer, 2019). Understanding this opened the door to further exploration of using diagrams to convey the meaning of my model. As emphasised by Birks and Mills (2015), for researchers who integrate situational analysis methods into a grounded theory study from a postmodern perspective, the visual representations are intended to be works in progress rather than final products. With this understanding, I shifted my focus away from fixating on incorporating situational mapping in a detailed way. My initial attempts at situational mapping highlighted the complexities I was trying to understand. However, I found using diagrams more helpful in laying out the various factors influencing the integration of the FWB program in university curricula. I depicted my initial attempt at using situational mapping as well as my initial modelling drafts in Figure 6. Storing drafts of the theoretical model in a dedicated folder allowed me to track the development of the theory from the initial draft to the latest version after incorporating feedback. In line with Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Birks and Mills (2015), the emphasis was on ensuring that any visual representation of a grounded theory contains minimal labels, lines, and arrows, instead focusing on abstraction, logic, and flow. Following this guidance, I transitioned from a first draft replete with arrows, lines, and labels to a more evolved theoretical model that encapsulated a sense of flow and meaningful abstraction.

Figure 6
First Drafts of Model and Situational Analysis



Analysing my data brought the inherent challenge of wrestling with doubts about whether I was on the right track or missing something in my coding. Frequently, I sought reassurance from my advisors, mentors, and fellow PhD colleagues, sharing my uncertainties to be reminded that this analytical wrestling is an integral part of the research process, contributing to the growth of a researcher, as characterised by Charmaz (2014). I documented these emotional fluctuations in a memo.

> *Today, I found myself compelled to speak to my primary* advisor *and candidly express the challenges I have encountered so far. In his calming tone, he reassured me that these challenges are an inherent aspect of conducting grounded theory. According to him, if I were undertaking grounded theory without experiencing such uncertainties, I would be in a different world and not approaching it correctly. Grounded theory is supposed to be neither debilitating nor excessively easy; it resides in the middle, where the journey is challenging yet manageable. He emphasised that feeling overwhelmed is part of the process, but now, guided by my research question, I feel like I have a sense of direction on where to go.* (Memo: 9th June, 2023)

Grappling with uncertainties played a crucial role in forging new avenues for understanding my research and adopting effective approaches to data interrogation. An illustrative instance occurred when the code 'spirituality' emerged as a 'sensitive topic' that needed modification. Acknowledging the necessity for a more profound exploration, I immersed myself in understanding the context of spirituality within the FWB program. The FWB learning materials defined spirituality as a connection to something beyond oneself, which encompasses religious connotations like God for some, while for others, it involved connections to ideas, land, and culture, or other elements fostering harmony and love. Consequently, I explored literature to grasp religion at its core, tracing its etymology. 'Religion' stems from the Latin word *religio*, signifying to re-bind, re-align, or re-connect with the whole what is torn apart by ignorance (Rohr, 2023). This understanding empowered me to extrapolate that the concept of spirituality within the FWB context can emphasise a broader sense of connection and wholeness.

With my initial coding, the act of writing memos and creating diagrams played a pivotal role in exploring the emerging relationships and processes within my data. I started the development of my categories by interconnecting sub-categories and exploring their dimensions and

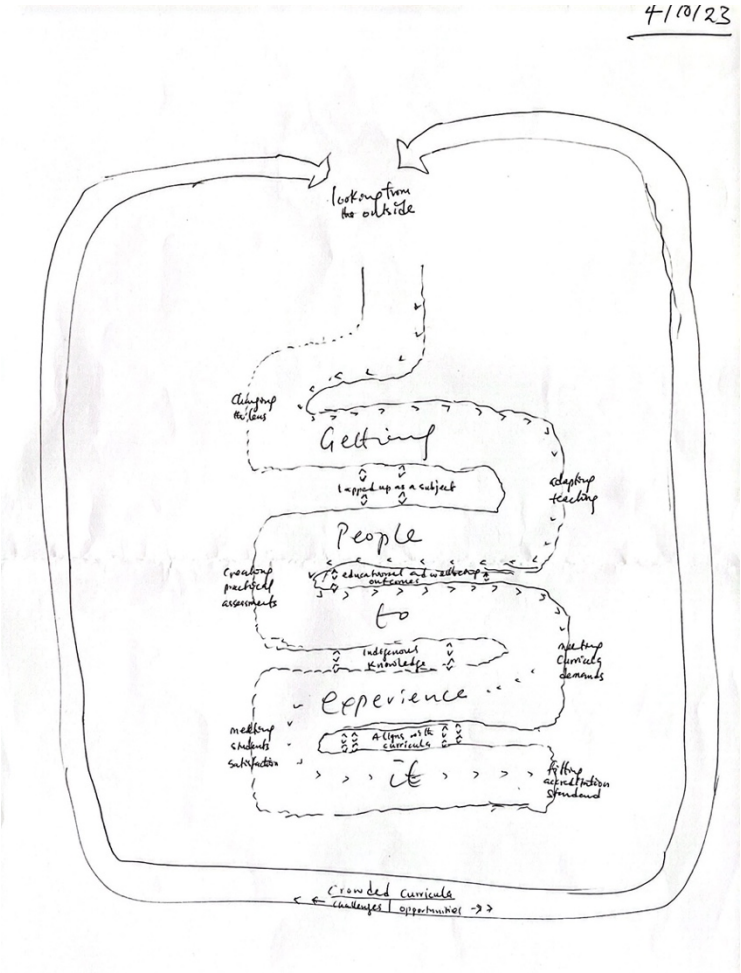
properties. This exploration naturally progressed to linking these categories together. According to Birks and Mills (2015), Charmaz (2006) underlines this analytical process as 'focused coding,' where the existing significant codes guide the direction of the analysis. This process of 'focused coding' was characterised by its inherent messiness, involving constant changes and refinements of codes. Despite the challenges, it proved incredibly rewarding as it facilitated the identification of explanatory and conceptual patterns within my analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015). Following the perspectives of Glaser (1998) and Cheer (2019), I consciously avoid imposing data onto my theoretical model. Instead, I strived to allow the data to speak for itself while taking a moment to reflect on it in a memo.

> *Today, I looked at my initial coding and I am happy with it. I was able to move things around and align them in the right categories. I am very pleased with how my initial coding turned out, and how my focused coding is going, not forcing any data onto my theoretical model. Now, it is time to organise my next set of interviews, and continue my focused coding.* (Memo: 5th June, 2023)

Through additional interviews and a thorough analysis of my data, I reached a point where no new insights were emerging, and no further connections were being revealed in relation to my developing theory. I adopted the technique of using a storyline for my theoretical integration. As emphasised by Birks and Mills (2015), Strauss and Corbin (1990) maintain that a storyline serves as a descriptive narrative encapsulating the central phenomenon of the study while also functioning as the conceptualisation of the story – the core category. This means that the storyline is both a way to describe what is happening in the data (narrative) and a way to conceptually make sense of it (theory). It functions as the bridge between description and theoretical understanding, ultimately leading to the main theoretical insight (core category). This dual function of storyline in grounded theory aids in producing the final theory. When utilising a storyline, the researcher is essentially crafting a theory, elucidating the relationships among the concepts that constitute the theory, thereby offering an explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (Birks & Mills, 2015). As I engaged in the process of crafting a storyline, I began to discern the intricate relationships among the concepts within my emerging theory. I portrayed my initial storyline draft in Figure 7. Iteratively refining my drafts, I eventually reached a point where I felt confident to seek feedback from my advisors. This marked a significant step and indicated that I was successfully making sense of the evolving theory before me. With this newfound clarity, I could articulate the insights gleaned from my emerging data to my advisors and mentors, whose feedback played a crucial role in further

refining my theoretical model. Throughout the process of drafting my storyline, I engaged in constant comparative analysis, a practice that permeated the entirety of my thesis writing.

Figure 7
First Draft of My Storyline



6.8.5 Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity is a crucial concept in grounded theory (Hoare et al., 2012). Birks and Mills (2015) highlight that a researcher's level of theoretical sensitivity is highly personal, offering insights into both themselves and the subject of their research. Their intellectual history also shapes this sensitivity and indicates the extent of their reading, absorption of knowledge, and its application in their daily experiences (Birks & Mills, 2015). In essence, researchers are a product of all they have encountered and learned (Birks & Mills, 2015). Drawing from Glaser (1978), Hoare et al. (2012) maintain that researchers entrenched in a

specific field or discipline should immerse themselves in relevant literature, especially when dealing with variables like codes and categories in the data. The interpretation of Glaser's intention with the use of literature remains somewhat unclear, as noted by Birks and Mills (2015), who cautions against the potential ambiguity of enhancing sensitivity through literature while avoiding the imposition of pre-existing theories onto the data. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, literature, along with professional and personal experiences and the analytical process itself, are recognised as valuable sources that contribute to the development of theoretical sensitivity (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hoare et al., 2012).

Hoare et al. (2012) state that the concept of theoretical sensitivity equates to the metaphor of 'dancing with data,' a dynamic process involving a series of coordinated moves. This metaphor signifies the act of stepping back and forth to converge into a unified understanding (Hoare et al., 2012). The acquisition of sensitivity occurs through reflective pauses, considering diverse perspectives, making comparisons, pursuing leads, and building on ideas (Charmaz, 2014; Hoare et al., 2012). This approach to theorising is described as non-mechanical; it is the unusual and wonder-driven endeavour that uncovers novelty within the seemingly mundane (Charmaz, 2014; Hoare et al., 2012). Such theoretical activities stimulate the recognition of possibilities, the establishment of connections, and the formulation of probing questions (Charmaz, 2014). Documenting these decisions, as depicted in my memos, aided me in reflecting on my approach, emphasising what was emerging for me and how I processed these insights.

6.8.6 Presenting My Findings

In grounded theory, researchers have a range of options for presenting their findings, depending on how these findings contribute to understanding the theoretical concept under analysis. Birks and Mills (2015) assert that the beauty of grounded theory lies in the seamless integration of its components. Based on this, it is imperative to ensure that the integrated components collectively illuminate the theory under analysis by promoting clarity and coherence. Effectively communicating grounded theory findings to potential readers is crucial for contributing to the body of knowledge and establishing a personal scholarly reputation characterised by integrity and significance (Birks & Mills, 2015). A question that Strauss and Corbin would ask, according to Birks and Mills (2015), is, "[D]o I need this detail in order to maximise the clarity of the analytic discussion and/or to achieve maximum substantive understanding?" (p. 130).

Recommended practice, according to Birks and Mills (2015), is to present findings as a whole by introducing the overall theory before going into detailed explanations of its individual components. A well-integrated grounded theory should demonstrate logical consistency, brevity without sacrificing depth, and effectively communicate its contribution to knowledge in a compelling manner (Birks & Mills, 2015). Drawing from insights gained by examining how other researchers have analysed and presented their grounded theory findings, such as through diagrams and models in various scholarly formats, I determined that utilising a storyline with illustrative modelling would be the most suitable approach for presenting my findings.

Birks and Mills (2015) distinguish between diagrams, which serve as a strategy for analysis in grounded theory, and models, which are employed as a presentation strategy. They advocate for using a storyline to present findings independent of existing theory and contemporary literature, followed by a discussion of their relationship to both. To enhance my ability to use a storyline to craft a compelling narrative from my analysis, I participated in a 'How to be a Narrative Ninja' course led by Dr Maria Gardner on the 19th of June, 2024 (see Gardiner & Kearns, 2011; Gardiner et al., 2012). This training, based on the Hegelian Triad of 'thesis, antithesis, and synthesis' and implemented through the 'And, But, and Therefore' model, emphasised that narrative construction is the most crucial element in determining the quality of academic writing, surpassing even data, literature, or theory in importance. The workshop explored the significance of narrative, techniques for its construction, how language can impede narrative flow, methods for recognising effective narratives in others' work, and strategies for crafting one's own narrative. By engaging with these concepts and practices, I was able to articulate the underlying phenomena of my study in a manner accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences. The subsequent chapter presents my findings through the storyline narrative of my grounded theory model, revealing the challenges and opportunities of integrating the FWB program within university curricula.

6.9 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- illustrated the implementation of constructivist grounded theory
- stated the ethics approval for the study

- expounded on the process employed for the series of data collection and analysis inherent in constructivist grounded theory
- introduced how my findings will be presented as per grounded theory.

In the subsequent chapter, I will:

- present an in-depth conceptual overview of the constructed grounded theory, the contextual environment from which the theory emerged, followed by an explanation of the categories and their attributes as sub-categories.

Chapter 7
Findings

7.1 Chapter Outline

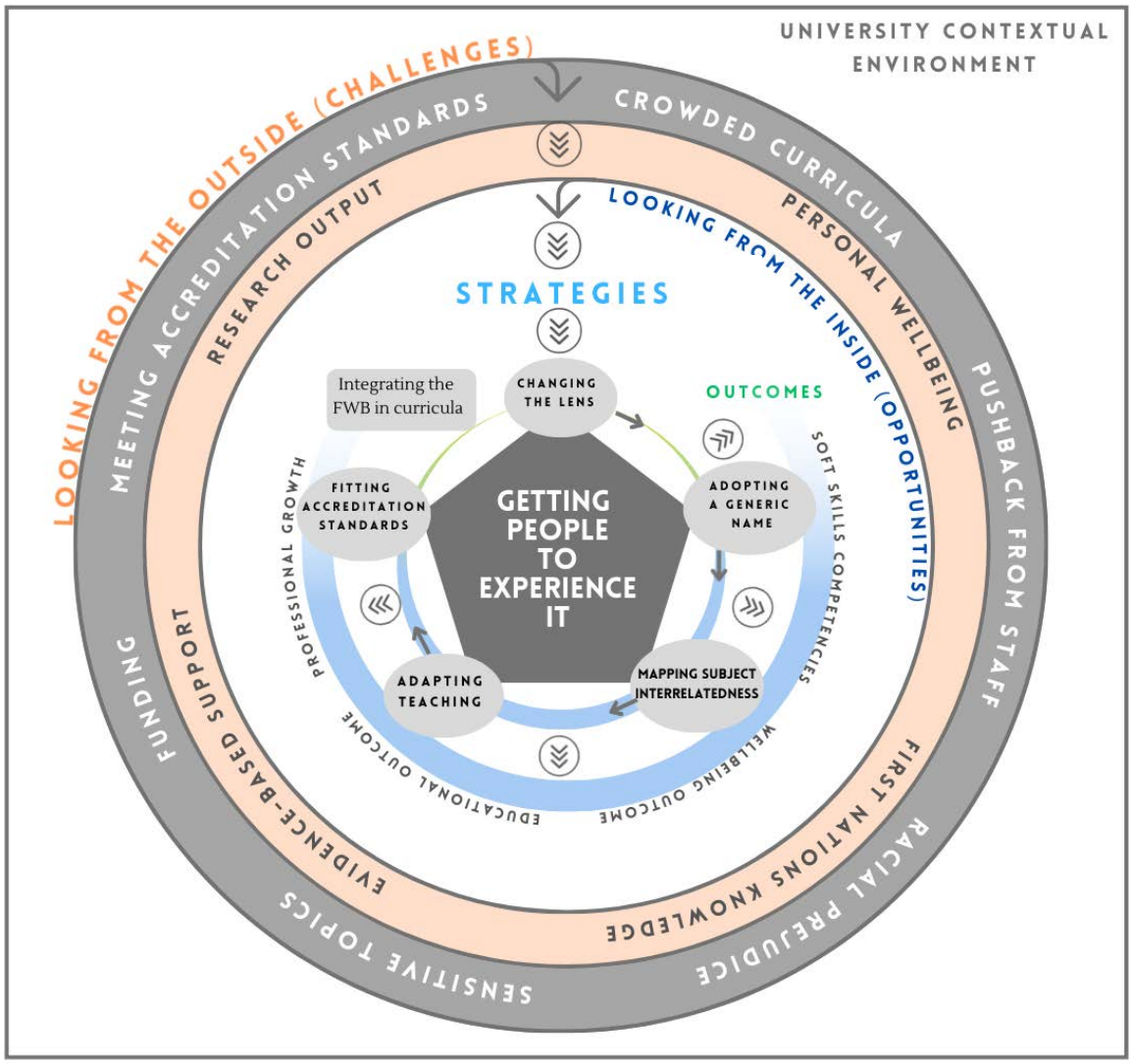
In this chapter, I detail the theoretical model titled ‘Getting people to experience it’ aimed at assisting educators in seamlessly integrating the FWB program into their curricula. Addressing the primary concern for educators, namely the challenge of crowded curricula, the experiential process emphasises the obstacles arising from crowded curricula, the often-hidden opportunities beneath these challenges, the strategies involved in integrating the FWB program, and the reported outcomes from its integration. I commence with a conceptual overview of the theory, followed by an exploration of the contextual environment from which the theory emerged. The subsequent sections provide a detailed description of the four main categories of the theoretical model: looking from the outside (challenges), looking from the inside (opportunities), getting people to experience it (strategies), and outcomes, along with their attributes as sub-categories (refer to Table 6). This grounded theory reveals the intrinsic involvement of these categories and sub-categories in the process of getting people to experience the FWB program within university curricula. By doing so, it furnishes a comprehensive model for integrating such wellbeing programs and similar initiatives into curricula to enhance the overall educational experience of students. The summarised published version of this grounded theory study (Orih et al., 2025) is attached as Appendix 2.

7.2 Overview of Theoretical Model

At the core of integrating the FWB innovation within university curricula is the central concept of ‘Getting people to experience it’. This model acknowledges that for individuals to truly understand the significance of the program in both their personal and professional lives, they have to *experience it*. This is why the theme of *experiencing the program* is the linchpin of this theoretical model, as diagrammatically presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Theoretical Model: How to Integrate the FWB Program in Curricula by 'Getting People to Experience It'



Within the university contextual environment, when most educators hear of integrating the FWB program in curricula, their first response is oftentimes enshrined within the narratives of having crowded curricula. Limited time and space due to the crowded nature of existing programs deter many educators from embracing something new that might 'disrupt' their established curricula. The issue of 'crowded curricula' launches the other challenges that ensue, which include pushbacks from staff, racial prejudice, sensitive topics, funding, and meeting accreditation standards.

However, the majority of potential implementers who primarily consider the challenges often do so from an external perspective – *looking from the outside,* which was an in-vivo code that emerged from an educator during an interview. This external viewpoint tends to obscure the program's potential significance within the curricula. Consequently, they often concentrate on concerns related to overcrowded curricula, the sensitivity of certain FWB topics, the necessity of meeting accreditation standards to secure funding, and addressing resistance from some staff regarding the integration of the program. Initially, *looking from the outside* is a common response. Nonetheless, it does not deter certain educators who opt to shift their focus to the opportunities rather than the challenges associated with integrating the program within the curricula.

As some of these educators shift their perspective to start *looking from the inside*, they begin to discern the concealed opportunities that lie beneath the surface of the challenges. These opportunities encompass the prospect of enhancing student wellbeing – a pressing concern for educators, educational institutions, and policymakers in light of the high levels of mental distress among university students. These educators also recognise the advancement of First Nations Knowledge within mainstream university curricula – a focal point that the Australian Government has underscored as vital in contemporary academia. Additionally, they identify the potential to harness the program's extensive evidence-based foundation, built over many years of research, to inform practices aimed at enriching students' educational experience and, consequently, the chance for conducting research against the demand to publish in academia while maintaining teaching load. It is at this juncture that these educators invariably make the decision to experiment with integrating the program into their curricula.

In essence, the challenges and opportunities involved in the FWB integration are akin to the dual facets of a single coin, inherently intertwined in pursuit of the overarching objective of *getting people to experience it*. At times, one might initially perceive the potential opportunities, only to subsequently discern the accompanying challenges. Conversely, one may first encounter the challenges and subsequently highlight the concealed opportunities that emerge in their wake. This ongoing interplay between challenges and opportunities is contingent upon the observer's standpoint. This dynamic equilibrium is most aptly characterised as *looking from the outside* or *looking from the inside.*

Once educators are willing to take the journey of 'Getting people to experience it,' a set of strategies becomes accessible to facilitate the integration of the program into curricula. This theoretical model's significance lies in its *solution-based* approach, providing a framework for integrating the FWB program effectively within curricula. These strategies include *changing the lens, adopting a generic name, mapping subject interrelatedness, adapting teaching, and fitting accreditation standards.* The sequence of these strategies is not strictly delineated but has been shaped by the insights of educators who have previously integrated the FWB program into their curricula. They set out ways they framed and used the program, and their experiences and evaluations have contributed to the formulation of this strategic model.

In following the strategies of integrating the FWB program into curricula, participants reported outcomes that showcased the benefits of using the program. These outcomes include improved *soft skills competencies, wellbeing outcomes, educational outcomes, and professional growth*.

7.3 Explanation of Model

The challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes within the theoretical model 'Getting people to experience it' are itemised in the table 6 as categories and sub-categories.

Table 6
Categories and Sub-categories of Integrating the Family Wellbeing within Curricula

Categories:	**Challenges**	**Opportunities**	**Strategies**	**Outcomes**
Sub-categories:	*Crowded curricula*	*Personal wellbeing*	*Changing the lens*	*Soft skills competencies*
	Pushback from staff	*First Nations Knowledge*	*Adopting a generic name*	*Wellbeing outcomes*
	Racial prejudice	*Evidence-based support*	*Mapping subject interrelatedness*	*Educational outcomes*
	Sensitive topics	*Research output*	*Adapting teaching*	*Professional growth*
	Funding		*Fitting accreditation standards*	
	Meting accreditation standards			

7.4 University Contextual Environment

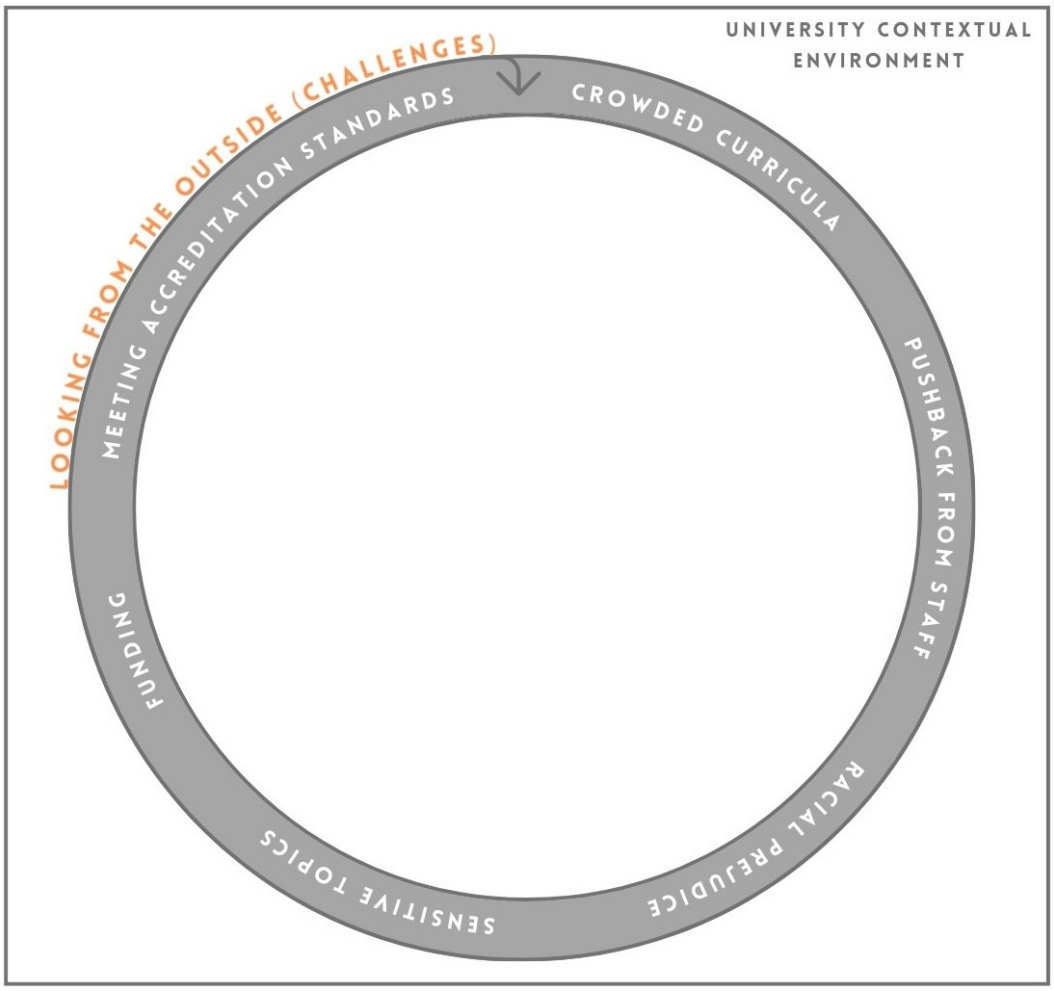
In a university setting, integrating the FWB program into curricula presents a spectrum of challenges and opportunities. Initially, the challenges tend to be more conspicuous and often shape educators' initial response when considering adding something new to established curricula. Conversely, the opportunities are not immediately apparent and require a deeper examination. These challenges encompass issues such as *crowded curricula*, *pushback from staff, racial prejudice, sensitive topics, funding, and meeting accreditation standards*. On the other hand, the opportunities include *personal wellbeing, First Nations Knowledge, evidence-based support, and research output.*

Crucially, the perspective from which educators view the integration of the FWB program within curricula plays a significant role. When educators look from an external standpoint, the challenges tend to dominate their perspective. However, when they delve deeper, examining the situation from within, the opportunities come into clearer focus. In both scenarios, both challenges and opportunities serve as complementary elements in the endeavour to *getting people to experience the program*. The subsequent section delves into an explanation of the challenges of looking from the outside prevalent in the university contextual environment.

7.5 Looking from the Outside (Challenges)

When attempting to introduce something new into university curricula, the inherent challenges boil down to the issue of *crowded curricula*. Many educators faced a similar situation with the FWB program, struggling to find room to integrate the wellbeing initiative within their already packed curricula. The crowded nature of existing programs, with limited time and space, deters many educators from embracing new additions that might disrupt their established curricula. This issue of overcrowded curricula spawns other challenges, including *racial prejudice, sensitive topics, pushbacks from staff, meeting accreditation standards,* and *funding,* as depicted in Figure 9.

Figure 9
Challenges Inherent in Looking from the Outside



7.5.1 Crowded Curricula

Educators identified the issue of overcrowded curricula as a significant obstacle to the integration of FWB innovations in university curricula. Educators often resist incorporating new ideas into their existing courses due to an extensive list of topics and concepts they are already required to cover:

> *From the perspective of leading the program and attempting to get lecturers to take the content on board and integrate it into their existing subjects where they have their existing learning outcomes and assessments, has been a challenge. People have tended to pick up the parts of the program that they like, that speaks to them, that works well within their specific subject. But I, and for lots of different reasons, just like time, too much content in the subject already.* (Ada)

Stringent accreditation standards also dictate the content that must be included in the curriculum, further complicating the situation. This challenge is exacerbated by the pressure to keep up with existing coursework and the reluctance to adopt new teaching methods. As a result, the crowded nature of curricula presents a significant hurdle to the integration of the FWB program. One educator concisely captured the challenge of crowded curricula, stating:

> *The first barrier was just a crowded curriculum, and teachers don't really want to have to think about and learn something new too. I think in every discipline, the common barrier is that they all have a lot of things they have to cover in their curriculum…. There's a lot of things that the accreditation standards say you have to cover in a curriculum so it can be hard to find space for anything new. They're all just keeping up and they don't want to learn anything new or have to develop a new subject. Often sounds enormous too.* (Alexandra)

However, it is important to recognise that this challenge is not insurmountable. To overcome it, educators can re-examine their curricula and find ways to integrate FWB activities into their lessons without adding to their existing workload. This can be achieved by breaking down FWB activities into smaller, manageable components that can be seamlessly integrated into the curriculum:

> *The teachers are looking for little activities that they can get students to do to engage in some form of active learning. And if you can give them little bite-size chunks that they can slot into those spots in those lessons where they're looking for, that would be helpful for them.* (Ada)

7.5.2 Pushback from Staff

Educators described staff resistance regarding integrating the FWB program as often arising from the assumption that the FWB program is unrelated to their existing curriculum. Consequently, they deem its inclusion unnecessary. Many educators were deeply invested in their respective subjects and had developed a strong attachment to their established teaching practices, making them resistant to change:

> *People being invested in their own subjects. People like to own their own subjects, and they have put a lot into it. People tend to be a coordinator of a subject and they've written it over the years, and they don't really want to change it or bring something new in. They get a bit married to what they're doing. So, the academics*

have their own things they're teaching and they're busy with that, and so they will say things like 'We already know what we're doing.' (Alexandra)

Some staff members have dismissed the program's relevance to their curricula, citing its complexity and perceived lack of efficacy. This negative attitude hinders the program's acceptance among certain staff, as demonstrated by a course coordinator who doubted the program's alignment with the curriculum, despite another educator pointing out that the coordinator had not inquired about the program's relevance or alignment:

The psychologist, who was the course coordinator, said, oh, it's not related to the curriculum. And I said, you didn't even know. You didn't even ask me how it's related. I could tell you how it's related. But yes, I did have that problem with the psychologist and they couldn't see how it was related. It was not a good interaction with the psychologist because I'm sitting over public health and social work. They were sitting in psychology, and they needed FWB to understand it. So, the challenge there was really people looking from the outside, don't recognise how unique and valuable it is, and considering it silly. Across the board, that's our biggest problem. They think there's a wellbeing program, but then there's this wellbeing program, but to me the FWB program is the gold standard by far. (Maya)

7.5.3 Racial Prejudice

Educators described how racial bias presents a significant challenge to the integration of the FWB program in university settings, as its origins as a First Nations-developed wellbeing program are deeply rooted in the Australian cultural context. This prejudice is interconnected with broader issues of respect and attitudes towards First Nations people and their knowledge. Some individuals may dismiss the program's relevance in academic settings by claiming that it is wishy-washy or not evidence-based, which can lead to a condescending or even 'racist' attitude towards the program from certain non-First Nations people:

The FWB looking a bit wishy washy for them, I was just lucky I got that break in social work. And then sometimes wellbeing gets dropped off because it sounds a bit wishy washy, a bit soft. And people think they want the hard technical skills from, say, physiotherapy or other allied health, including social work. (Alexandra)

> *…there's a lot of people who are racist and redneck, and this was a required course, so a lot that came through that they don't like the name Indigenous…They don't think they can learn anything from Aboriginal people.* (Josephine)

Following the initial prejudice directed towards the program, educators believed that First Nations students often experience a natural reaction characterised by fear and apprehension. These students may worry about the burden of having to defend the program, given the prevailing conception that 'Indigenousness' may not be widely admired in the country. This concern arises from the fear that embracing the program may further contribute to a sense of shame or diminish their pride in their First Nations cultural heritage. One educator expressed this feeling in this manner:

> *Probably the only other thing I would say about is, I think one of the things that can feel a bit concerning when you do something like this is that the students who are First Nation students can feel my goodness, this is a thing that comes from my culture, and maybe, I will be expected to defend it or something.* (Josephine)

These anxieties and uncertainties dissipated as both First Nations and non-First Nations students expressed to educators (as shown under *educational outcomes*, particularly *advancement of First Nations Knowledge threshold*) that they were overwhelmed by how good the course was, noting that it effectively represented the First Nations culture in a positive light, and expanded their First Nations Knowledge threshold.

7.5.4 Sensitive Topics

Educators found that certain topics of the FWB program may be considered too sensitive in academic settings, leading some educators to express concerns about the program's sensitivity. Topics such as *basic human needs, beliefs and attitudes, relationships, crisis and emotions, and grief and loss* concern some educators. These concerns revolve around both the potential repercussions on students and the educators' sense of inadequacy in facilitating these topics. Some educators argue that these subjects are too emotionally charged for the classroom and should not be integrated into the curriculum:

> *A lot of the topics and other topics might challenge people, and they've got to make sense of things. They're just everyday topics like our beliefs and attitudes or our values or our relationships. Whether it was too risky to run this in the curriculum, maybe it is too sensitive.* (Alexandra)

Other educators lack the confidence and competence to address such sensitive topics. This sentiment is often expressed to maintain a clear separation between personal feelings and academic pursuits:

> *I've heard mainly from educators, the sense of, I need to do this. And I want to do this. But I don't yet feel that I can or that I know how, or that I've got time and space in workload to do it. A lack of confidence in themselves possibly, I think in delivering the content just because they didn't feel that they have a big enough knowledge base to be able to do it properly and effectively or to integrate it into subjects properly and effectively.* (Ada)

As educators consider whether the program's content is too sensitive for their curricula, or their adequacy in teaching them, it is essential to weigh the potential benefits of addressing these issues in the educational context. One educator highlights how this is lacking in the field of healthcare, empathising that there is a notable deficiency in equipping professionals with the necessary skills and theoretical comprehension to navigate sensitive issues such as grief and loss. Drawing from a nursing background, she asserts that the curricula provided minimal guidance on how to handle aspects like grief and loss:

> *I think there's a big lacking in the health field. I think it's changing over time where people actually are taught the skills or just the theoretical understanding about grief and loss. I know that my background is nursing so when I went through the program many years ago, there was hardly anything taught about how you handle grief and loss. But over time, I know that it has changed because I was responsible then for nursing curricula overtime where people do have an understanding of things like grief and loss.* (Nneka)

The FWB program's strength lies in its foundation built on offering a crucial resource for healing and developing the necessary skills to address such challenges. This insight sheds light on emphasising the need for support mechanisms and strategies to bolster educators' confidence and competence in addressing sensitive topics effectively within the educational framework. In this *solution-oriented* theoretical model, addressing sensitive topics is recognised as a dual challenge involving both the context and the process. Therefore, the modification of sensitive topics will be discussed as one of the strategies under *adapting teaching*. This exploration aims to illustrate how educators can proactively implement safety

measures to handle any unexpected issues that might arise while integrating the FWB program into their curricula.

7.5.5 Funding

Educators acknowledged that securing funding poses a significant hurdle in integrating the FWB program within university curricula, particularly concerning meeting accreditation standards. One educator shed light on how funding affected the program's initial integration within their curriculum:

> *…funding has always been a big issue. I guess the way that I used the FWB program for our students in our course, funding didn't come into it because they were the students undertaking the subject. But you'd like to think that just having that framework might have taken people on to actually use that in their research, as they suggest that they would, and along with that, provide a basis for funding later, but they weren't at that stage at the time.* (Nneka)

Additionally, there is concern about allocating funds for a new program in the curricula, which educators may view as less crucial compared to other mainstream academic subjects offered at universities:

> *Faculty is always worried about funding, but also, student satisfaction. So, if you put a case to faculty, you might get some interest. But I think generally it'll be about the cost of it and also, they'll be worried about meeting accreditation standards like, can you fit it in the curriculum? And it's hard to get the long-term funding to strengthen the evidence.* (Alexandra)

These insights underscore the challenges of obtaining adequate financial support for the program and aligning it with university budget priorities, making funding a pivotal consideration in the integration process.

7.5.6 Meeting Accreditation Standards

Educators found that integrating FWB into university curricula requires meeting accreditation standards, which can be challenging:

> *But then you had to meet the accreditation standards, the academic quality standards and have enough readings in it. We were able to, as a discipline, develop*

our own curriculum as long as we met accreditation standards and quality teaching standards. (Alexandra)

Developing a curriculum that aligns with these standards while maintaining academic quality is necessary to ensure program legitimacy and effectiveness. This encapsulates the intricate task of balancing the program's academic integration without compromising its essential, transformative nature for students. Striking the right balance between assessment vis-à-vis the holistic nature of the program is a crucial consideration for educators as they navigate the integration of the FWB program within the university curricula.

Educators also often face the challenge of convincing curriculum bodies of the merit of introducing new subjects, such as the FWB program, noting that the challenge lies in justifying the introduction of the subject and providing case studies to demonstrate its value. However, once the benefits are recognised, the uptake of the program is usually impressive:

We had to convince the curriculum body because everything has to be accredited. So, we had to put up a case for introducing the subject and it was fairly well accepted, but we had to actually justify why we wanted this in the program and given it was a bit different to the subjects we were using in the postgraduate studies. I guess the challenge was they were actually coming from that clinical basis, and also the fact that they hadn't actually done any wellbeing program as a participant; they're very much looking at it from a theoretical basis. So, we try to introduce some case studies. And then we had all the literature, and there's quite a bit of literature out there because it's been systematically evaluated ever since. So, they came from that theoretical base rather than actually experiencing being a student in it. So that was a bit of a challenge. But it shouldn't be a problem because the uptake was very impressive, and they just saw the value in it. And of course, we have that evidence base just to show that it actually works. (Nneka)

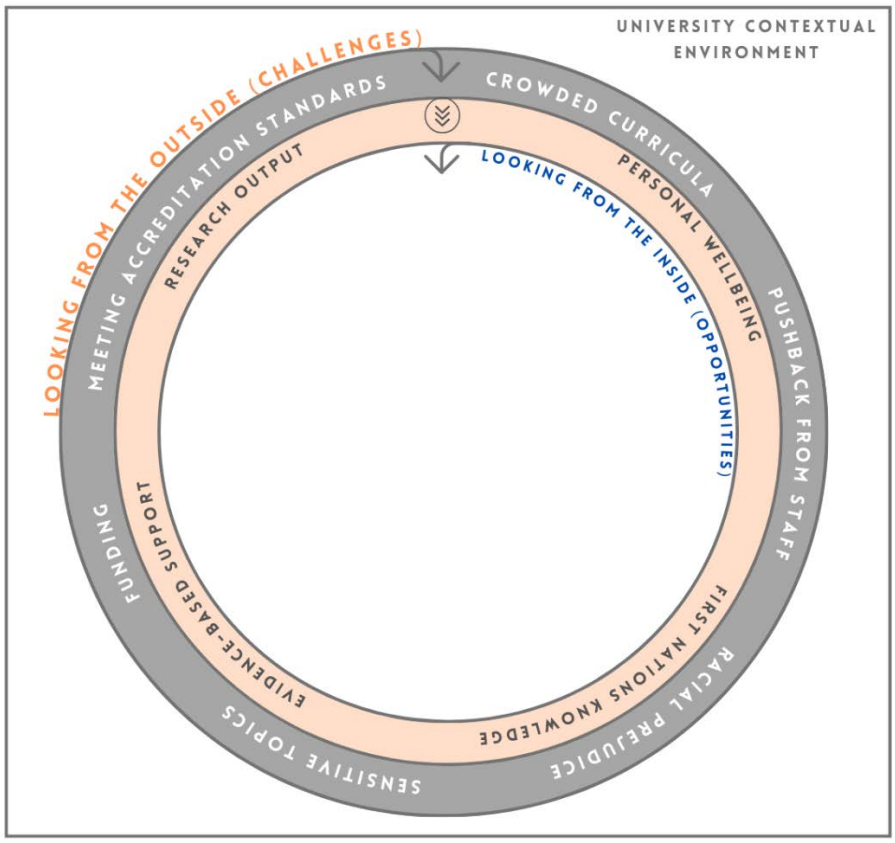
7.6 Looking from the Inside (Opportunities)

Educator's reluctance to integrate the FWB program stems fundamentally from their position *looking from the outside*, creating a constellation of challenges rooted in external perspective. However, there is a dynamic flow at play here. While people may naturally look from the outside, they can also *look from the inside* as they come to see some of the opportunities involved in integrating the program. This is why the challenges and opportunities are like two

sides of the same coin, always complementing each other towards the goal of getting people to experience the program. At one point, one may see the opportunities involved only to recognise the challenges that come with them, and on another occasion, one may see first the challenges involved and yet accentuate the opportunities that come with those challenges. This constant flow between challenges and opportunities depends on the standpoint from which one is looking. This is why this dynamic flow is best expressed as *looking from the outside* or *looking from the inside*.

Adopting an internal vantage point reveals the opportunities inherent in integrating the FWB program within the university environment, as illustrated in Figure 10. At this point, educators may decide to give it a trial in their curricula, at the core of which is *getting people to experience it.* These opportunities include enhancing *personal wellbeing, First Nations Knowledge, evidence-based support, and research output*. The following sections expound on these transformative opportunities within the university setting.

Figure 10
Opportunities Inherent in Looking from the Inside



7.6.1 Personal Wellbeing

Educators believed integrating the FWB program into university curricula could play a vital role in addressing the escalating mental distress among students, especially amidst the ongoing pandemic recovery and challenges like climate change. One educator emphasised its particular importance for students in health departments, who may overlook the program's significance within their studies:

> *You see across the profession that when you look at data from dentists and vets, the mental health statistics is big for those professions – the health professions. Surely, they need this kind of content in their curriculum so that their students can look after themselves while they're studying and navigating life challenges.* (Ada)

Past attempts to improve student wellbeing have often been perceived as add-ons, failing to capture students' attention and commitment. By integrating the FWB program as a core part of the curricula, students can enhance their mental wellbeing while pursuing academics, fostering a more holistic approach to mental health. This perspective encourages students to learn about one another's shared experiences and create a supportive community where they can collectively address common challenges. One educator stressed the importance of this approach by emphasising that students can connect, learn, and cope together, reducing isolation and improving overall wellbeing:

> *Well, obviously the issue it addresses most is mental health in terms of needs, I think, and the beauty of it is that it's a universal mental health thing rather than people thinking they have mental issues. And I think it is partly too because students learn about each other. We can all assume everybody else is coping really well and we're the only one that's not coping, and they learn about the vulnerabilities of other students and that they're not the only ones that have got these stresses. And maybe even then, they can work together. That hasn't really happened. But there no reason why if there was a particular issue that they're all sharing comes up, that they can't work then collectively to try to improve things that are stressing them.* (Alexandra)

Educators asserted that the FWB approach enables students to gain a clearer self-awareness and equips them with valuable skills to navigate life situations:

Students can learn about themselves more clearly from the FWB program; and also, they could learn how to deal with situations as FWB related. Such as how to deal with conflict and loss in life. (Olivia)

I say to people then that some key aspects of being a social worker are about being aware of who you are as a person because that's going to influence how you interact with the people that you're working with. And it's really important that you don't unconsciously impose some of your own values or what you take for granted because of your own past experiences on other people. This subject is a pretty safe way for you to have a space where you can start to explore those sorts of things. (Josephine)

Another educator underscored the importance of the FWB program as a specialised course in enhancing valuable soft skills, particularly within the current landscape where there is a scarcity of dedicated soft skills courses in universities geared towards promoting wellbeing:

I think the FWB program is very important as a course, because there are few special soft skills courses in universities at present. The soft skills courses will help college students find jobs in the future and also help them deal with various complicated problems in life and gain more success and happiness. (Isabella)

7.6.2 First Nations Knowledge

The First Nations FWB program, integrated into mainstream university curricula, represents a significant milestone in promoting First Nations Knowledge within the higher education system. By introducing students to the FWB model developed by First Nations communities, educators see how Australian universities promote a more comprehensive understanding of First Nations people and challenge the negative narrative often surrounding their experiences. This inclusive approach highlights the importance of learning from First Nations perspectives and ways of life and seeks to foster an open and respectful attitude in students from the outset of their educational journey:

I suppose the other kind of motivation for us was to say we wanted our social workforce to be more inclusive of First Nations Bridge. And you know the thing that can happen in a social work course is that discussion about what's happening with First Nations people can become very problem-focused, all very gloomy. I suppose

we felt, this is increasingly so clear, that there's so much that people who are not from First Nations can learn from First Nations people. And so, it was a really good way of saying right from the beginning of the course. Here you are. We're using this model. It's been developed by groups of First Nations people. It's been refined. We think it's so terrific and so useful that we think everybody should be having this, and that's why it's in the course. (Josephine)

One educator affirmed that the integration of FWB in undergraduate studies has the potential to provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of their chosen discipline, enriching their overall course experience. Moreover, it equips them with invaluable insights that can contribute to more nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches when working with diverse client groups, be it within First Nations communities or any other cultural context:

I think the FWB program should be taught as part of undergraduate studies as a subject. Trying to convince other people about that when they come from these disciplines, apart from social work, it's actually difficult because they might read the literature and the evidence base, and it doesn't actually resonate with them because of their own background and experiences. So, to have something in there like the FWB program as part of undergraduate studies, not only does it help them personally to deal with all these issues and where they're coming from, but of course, it's going to help them with whatever client group they're working with within the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander or any other cultural group. I think will just give them a richer experience in terms of their whole course experience along with their discipline teachings. (Nneka)

7.6.3 Evidence-Based Support

The FWB program's extensive evidence base, built on over two decades of research, serves as a compelling motivator for educators, challenging perceptions that it lacks empirical support. As one educator highlighted, it stands as one of the most evidence-based First Nations social and emotional wellbeing programs, potentially on an international scale:

In fact, in a First Nations context, this is the most evidence based or the most researched of any Australian First Nations social emotional wellbeing program. I actually think it's probably one of the most internationally because I've done some literature reviews internationally. (Alexandra)

Another educator emphasised using concrete examples or personal experiences to convey the FWB's value, enhancing its credibility:

> *I remember a saying that 'facts speak louder than words', and I would cite typical cases or my own experiences to explain the FWB plan, and I think it would be more convincing.* (Isabella)

7.6.4 Research Output

Educators discussed how integrating the FWB program enables research on its impact on student wellbeing and learning, contributing to enhancing the educational experience and implementing First Nations Knowledge in higher education. Educators recognised this as a chance to integrate research into their teaching responsibilities, a crucial aspect of academic life. They viewed research as vital for potentially securing funding, gaining insights into First Nations Knowledge, and enhancing the overall educational experience for students. An educator expressed how the FWB had led to research publications:

> *We've been doing some research. We've got two or three papers now that have provided student feedback as well with mental health surveys, qualitatively.* (Alexandra)

Educators discussed that participants expressed the intention to apply the knowledge gained from the program to inform their research endeavours:

> *I think the people were mainly doing some research. Some people in their evaluation said they were going to use what they've actually learned there to inform their research.* (Nneka)

These opportunities become evident when educators engage with the program from the inside through a process of 'getting people to experience it.'

7.7 Getting People to Experience It (Strategies)

Successfully getting people to experience the FWB program within university curricula involves pivotal strategies. These strategies, depicted in Figure 11, include *changing the lens, adopting a generic name, mapping subject interrelatedness, adapting teaching,* and *fitting accreditation standards*. Insights from educators who have previously integrated the FWB within curricula, framing and utilising the program through their experiences and evaluations, shape the sequence of these strategies. While educators often face initial resistance, a key

appeal lies in the transformative effect on those who experience the program. Having prior exposure through participation, literature, and materials equipped one educator with valuable insight to recognise relevance and fit aspects of the First Nations wellbeing program components into her subject while removing less essential content in her curriculum:

> *When I was integrating it into the subject myself, I had the advantage of having more insight into the program, having read the literature, been exposed to the project, done the session, and received all the provided materials. I could see where different parts would fit into my subject and recognise the relevance of the content. That helped me to replace what was no longer relevant in my subject with aspects of the FWB program.* (Ada)

Another educator firmly believed going through it as a participant is key to truly appreciating the programs' import:

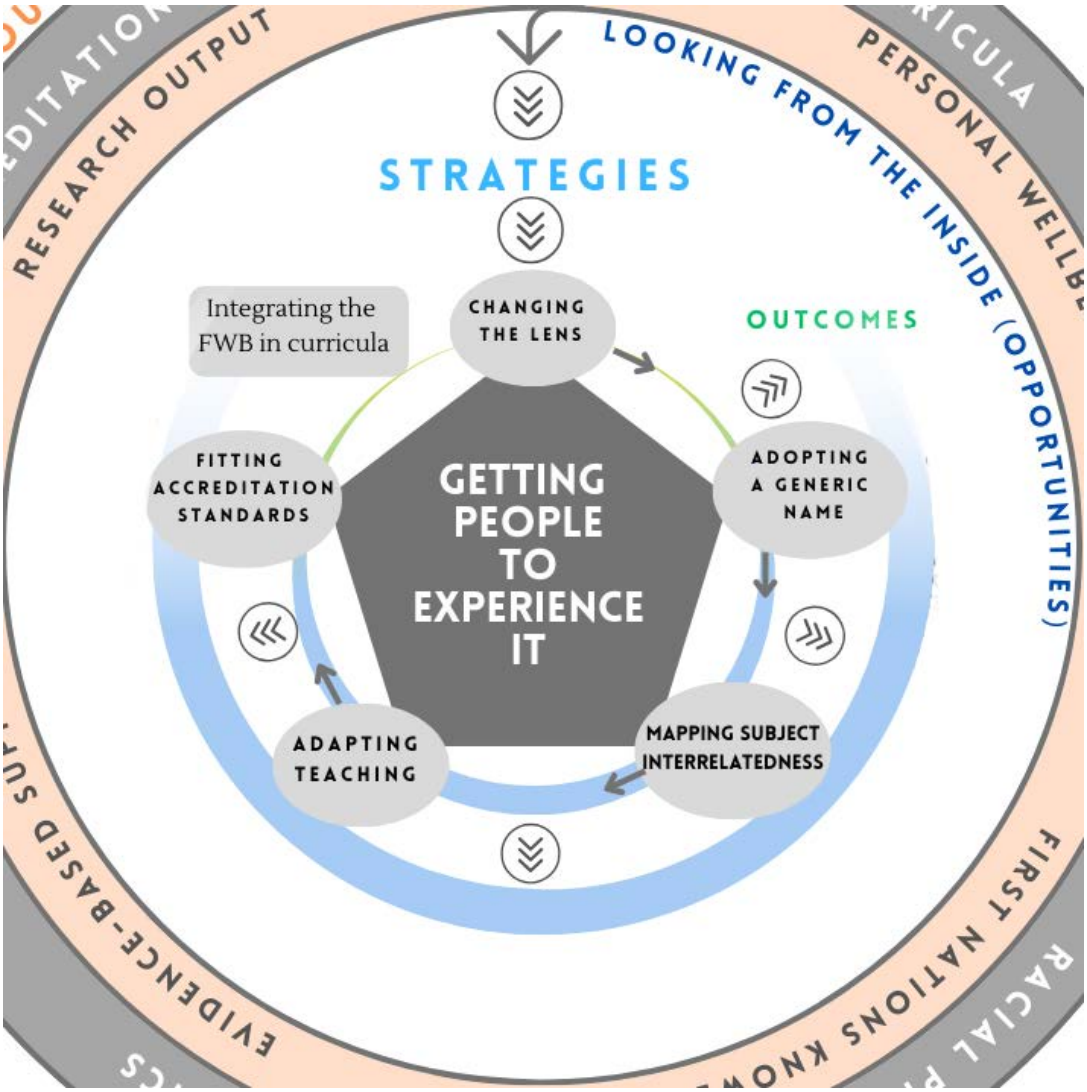
> *Yeah, I think the key is actually going through it as a participant.* (Nneka)

The process typically begins with a trial or pilot phase, providing educators and students with an opportunity to gain first-hand experience. This initial exposure allows them to comprehend the program's unique qualities, including its contribution to professional development, personal wellbeing, relationship building, and the enhancement of various soft skills competencies. Its value is best recognised through first-hand experience:

> *I think it makes it hard to get it in. But then the beauty is finding that chance to just pilot it; people don't really know what it is until they do it. And they don't really know what it feels like and what the experience is until they have a taste of it. And then generally once they've had that experience, they start to think then about where they would fit it in the curriculum. And that it really is relevant to every curriculum, as a professional development, personal wellbeing, relationship building. It ticks so many boxes, communication skills that often courses are running subjects on, and this often does it better. But people don't know that until they experience it.* (Alexandra)

Figure 11

Strategies for Getting People to Experience the FWB Program Within University Curricula



7.7.1 Changing the Lens

Educators used the approach of 'changing the lens' to offer a fresh perspective on the FWB program, shedding preconceived prejudices about its First Nations origins. This includes framing it as an opportunity for self-exploration, personal wellbeing, and reflecting on one's identity. Some highlight its history as a First Nations initiative that promotes wellbeing and empowerment. At one university, a holistic lifespan approach mirroring the First Nations cyclical view was used to sequence the program delivery, and this gradually shifted perspectives for students. The workshop aims to clear the lenses of students and to enhance emotional awareness, strengths, needs, relationships, and beliefs, making students more open to the program's content:

So, we had the three-day workshop first. And then that was followed by a 13-week curriculum. That really cemented the learnings that they got in the three-day workshop. But before delving into the curriculum, we want the students to change their glasses. So, the three-day workshop was about changing the lenses in your glasses. So that you don't continue to look at what we're going to be learning in the same way as you would if you just stepped into that door. We want you to understand your emotions, your strengths, recognising strengths in other people, your basic needs. (Maya)

Other educators emphasise the importance of establishing group agreements and expectations at the start, which creates a safe space for participation and ownership of the learning experience. This foundation empowers even initially shy students to fully engage with the subject:

But you know little things like doing the group agreement at the start of the class, yeah, the start of the whole course, it was a stop and pause moment for all of the students in that classroom and to articulate what they wanted from their class as a community. I suppose that's one of the things that I think happened as a result of taking that starting point. (Ada)

As much as some people might feel shy, they're not reluctant because they feel safe in the group that they've developed. (Emily)

I think it's probably the thing about setting up the culture, so it feels safe. And I suppose that's partly why we have the first three days where we're doing some of the more general theoretical things. In those three days, we would still have a lot of activities in the class, which are quite a lot around people getting to know each other and getting people to talk. So, if you think back to other times when you've been in a group or in an activity, what's helped you feel comfortable and able to share things with other people and then to think about doing so. (Maya)

7.7.2 Adopting a Generic Name

Educators used the strategic approach of adopting a generic name to increase the FWB program's relevance for students. Using a more generalised name allows the program to align with academic goals while enhancing accessibility:

> *There's not going to be the perfect name for every context. So, perhaps keeping something fairly generic because people know what it is. We don't have to have the perfect course, because then people can change it to fit what they think, and how they want to run it, and then they have a sense of ownership over it too.* (Alexandra)

Educators have used this tactic, employing an overall name to make the program more appealing. Altering the name to sound more generic helped increase student acceptance by making the program's connection to their academic pursuits clearer:

> *I was wondering how people will see this because all of a sudden, we have a new subject that's called the FWB program. To get the actual title, we renamed it to try and change all lenses about it. We had a full complement of students just ticking the box and taking it.* (Nneka)

> *I understand that FWB is a general course; it is suitable for all disciplines, so it can be taught in economics, but it is better to give different names to help students understand the course. For example, the naming of the FWB course in our 'economics and management' course was initially named 'leadership'. Later, I felt that our students' understanding of 'leadership' might not be consistent with that of Australian students. Later, on the advice of some facilitators and other educators, we finally named it 'soft skills'. On the one hand, it helps our students understand the FWB project, and on the other hand, it is consistent with our discipline of 'economics and management.'* (Isabella)

This shift in program naming reflects the potential to enhance students' acceptance of the FWB program by highlighting its connection to their future career prospects and personal development.

7.7.3 Mapping Subject Interrelatedness

Mapping the FWB program's interrelatedness within existing curriculum content is crucial for successful integration. Educators impressed the significance of the FWB program by identifying links between subjects, recognising their role as steppingstones in students' educational journey, and understanding how the program aligns with the broader course objectives:

> *The good thing about doing the new curriculum was there was much more mapping of how all the subjects were interrelated and how they were all stepping stones for each year. So, it has been carefully articulated as to what the actual attributes of the subject were, and how they do relate to the course as a whole.* (Alexandra)

In fields like nursing and public health, educators map the generic curricula content, then build upon students' foundational knowledge, entry behaviour, and professional experiences to explore FWB in a relevant context:

> *So, looking at the courses about what they were actually taught, the sort of general things that are taught across universities in terms of nursing, allied health professionals, public health, etcetera, and then actually building on that.* (Nneka)

Some educators selectively integrated relevant FWB elements into their subjects while being mindful of potential decontextualisation:

> *There's also a little bit of a pick and choose type like, 'Oh well, that's good. So, I'll pop that in.' And I worry about decontextualisation of the whole thing because I'm not sure how much people have to do from start to finish or how much we can just sort of take out and put in bits and pieces in different places.* (Ada)

Fundamentally, mapping exercises demonstrate how the FWB program harmoniously weaves into curricula, meeting subject demands while explicitly linking to students' overall learning experience and providing a holistic educational perspective.

7.7.4 Adapting Teaching

Adapting teaching for educators involves the practical details of integrating the FWB innovation within university curricula, and it encompasses addressing several challenges. They include *balancing class sizes, time, and age brackets of students; navigating group dynamics; differentiating lessons for inclusivity; and modifying sensitive topics.*

Firstly, *balancing class sizes, time allocation, and student age groups* is pivotal for active participation in the FWB program. Large classes with limited time can hinder engagement and pose pedagogical challenges:

> *One of the main challenges is that the class size is too large, making it difficult for students to engage in discussions and share their ideas. Due to the large number of students and limited class time, I combine the course content with the textbook, but I can't engage with the students as much as I'd like.* (Olivia)

Dividing larger classes into smaller groups could encourage active involvement:

> *Initially, we used to have up to 10 students in a class, but we devised a method of creating smaller groups with tables for brainstorming. We would focus on the specific questions raised at each table and then provide feedback. This allowed for active participation in smaller groups and a better balance between whole-group discussions, and small-group interactions, which significantly improved the learning experience.* (Maya)

Mixing different age groups fosters dynamic knowledge exchange. Younger students learn from older peers' life experiences, while mature students feel empowered imparting wisdom. This intergenerational synergy bridges gaps and enables mutual learning:

> *When I set up the groups, I try and distribute it in a way that is going to be older students and younger students…. [That way], both groups realise that they can actually learn a lot from the other group. The older students feeling empowered to teach the younger ones from their life experiences, the younger students learning about life from the older students.* (Emily)

However, classes with only younger students may lack exposure to potential future challenges without older peers' insights. Adapting topics and teaching methods for different age groups becomes necessary:

> *I think it's often easier for people who are slightly older, and because they have more life experience to look back on and it's more experiences to talk about. I think sometimes some of the younger students feel, 'Oh my goodness, nothing's happened to me, compared to you'. But of course, that's not always the case.* (Josephine)

Secondly, *group composition and dynamics* present challenges for FWB facilitators. Issues like shyness, immaturity, domineering students, and difficulty transitioning from social to academic

engagement can disrupt the learning environment. Reinforcing the group agreement on respecting others and avoiding judgement becomes essential to maintaining a productive space:

> *I think the only challenge really is who makes up the group to some degree. So, if you've got the whole group of shy people, it does make it tricky. We had ...students, ...and quite immature and one person who really wanted to dominate the group through humour and wanted to be the cool kid kind of thing. And so, it really changed the dynamics of what normally happens every year where there's this group bond and trust and enjoyment and where students sort of delve deep, but unfortunately, because of the maturity levels and this particular student, it kind of stayed a little bit more on surface level.* (Emily)

Differing pedagogical orientations across cultures also impact group dynamics. Student-centred learning prevalent in Australia contrasts with the didactic approach common in countries such as China. Educators must recognise these differences and their influences on student engagement. Supporting students' adaptation to unfamiliar teaching methods through differentiation is crucial:

> *It's challenging for the students in China. I've analysed some of their data because they're used to more didactic teaching models. And a bit the same with students from different cultural backgrounds in Australia too. They can find it very intimidating at first because they're not used to been asked their opinion or having a voice, and then I've got all these white students who are really comfortable with it and happy to talk to about it. And it can take them longer and you do need to be aware of that and support them with that too.* (Alexandra)

Consequently, navigating group makeups, behaviours, and varied pedagogical backgrounds requires strategies like reinforcing agreements, understanding cultural differences, and employing differentiated instruction to foster an effective learning experience.

Thirdly*, differentiating lessons* is crucial to address diverse student needs in contemporary classrooms. This involves contextualising teaching pedagogy, accommodating special needs students, balancing reading and assessments, incorporating fun activities/games, involving cultural experiences, mindfulness exercises, leveraging student skills, incorporating research components relevant to disciplines, and designing thematic activities aligned with student interests:

…what students came to enjoy was the one subject that did have less content because you know most subjects you have to read a lot. And they enjoyed having a subject that didn't have so much reading in it. So, we had to find just a balance in terms of having students to do some readings, and we had to find some relevant academic literature for it, which there's plenty of different things we could draw in, but we didn't want to overburden it. (Alexandra)

In terms of special needs, I think we had subjects where you have interpreters, and you have other people come. Actually, we did have a deaf student and we had interpreters come in and that added an extra dimension to it. But yeah, it's just about embracing all of that. (Alexandra)

I feel that for the students, they want the course to be more interesting. Therefore, I think we can try to design games or other activities related to the themes that students are interested in, so as to make the course easy and interesting and more popular among students. (Isabella)

I am focused on self-leadership training when I am teaching. And I usually use games to help students to be familiar first. (Olivia)

Differentiation through adapting teaching methods, content, and activities cater to various learning requirements, enhancing student engagement and meeting accreditation standards.

Fourthly, *modifying sensitive FWB topics* is crucial as they can evoke emotional responses from students' personal experiences. Educators have encountered situations where students felt unable to participate due to the topic's emotional proximity, like a mother who lost her daughter to suicide:

I did have a couple of times where students have asked not to participate in a particular topic because it's been a little bit close to home. For instance, one mum whose daughter had committed suicide, and she didn't want to come to one particular week. (Emily)

There's always and certainly in the groups in the community when someone's a bit upset. You know it happens, often nearly most years, at least one. There can be a bit of trauma around such feeling of being upset too, because often students come

in with traumatic backgrounds and it triggers things. Of course, these triggers might not be immediately apparent, but sometimes, they do carry an underlying sense of trauma. (Alexandra)

Building a safe environment that emphasises voluntary sharing and providing support is vital.

And we do have in the group of women, you don't have to share anything, you don't have to tell your deepest secret. And we really try to reinforce that. (Alexandra)

However, managing unpredictable emotional reactions remains challenging for some educators who feel ill-equipped:

Another thing is when it comes to sensitive topics, the content that was on grief. And that's where one of the lecturers said, I'm not comfortable talking about this. I don't feel like I can talk about this in my classroom, or I don't know how it's going to affect students. (Ada)

Cultural factors can influence perceptions of sensitivity, with some discomfort around openly discussing personal topics. Additionally, misconceptions around concepts like spirituality, often associated with religion, require clarification. Explaining spirituality's broader meaning of connection beyond religious connotations is key:

It's not easy to use FWB in my class because most of the topics are sensitive to people themselves. In Chinese culture, ...I dare not to talk about topics related to emotions, relationship, belief and so on, ...in public, as in a class. (Olivia)

Spirituality is traditionally very low among students. I think they're far too afraid to admit that they have any. But after in that one unit with the FWB, it just went way up. And it's not that they all became spiritual. Question is about whether you recognise your spirituality. Whether you see it in yourself. And because they were allowed to redefine what spirituality is, it's not going to church. It's actually your connection. And the way, that just went through the roof in only the FWB containing unit, ... It's just so huge. (Maya)

Adopting measures like group agreements, personal reflections, gradual sharing, and counselling support is essential for emotional wellbeing. Modifying sensitive content and comprehensive planning prepare educators to address potential emotional distress effectively:

But you know little things like doing the group agreement. At the start of the class, the start of the whole course. It was a stop and pause moment for all of the students in that classroom to articulate what they wanted from their class as a community. I suppose, that's one of the things that I think happened as a result of taking that starting point. (Ada)

7.7.5 Fitting Accreditation Standards

Meeting accreditation standards is crucial in evaluating how the FWB program adheres to curriculum demands. By examining the intended learning outcomes of their respective subjects, educators can tailor the FWB program to meet those demands and align it with the accreditation standards while striking a balance between meeting these standards and maintaining the program's experiential nature:

It was a first-year subject, we looked very carefully at what the learning outcomes for first year were and made sure it targeted it and fitted within the accreditation standards. And then, you to have so much assessment; you need to have so much academic literature. So, we just met all those criteria, but we tried not to go beyond that because we still wanted to keep the experiential nature of it. (Alexandra)

Consequently, fitting accreditation standards encompasses three key strategies: *fulfilling curricula requirements; creating practical assessments; and ensuring student satisfaction*.

Firstly, *fulfilling curricula demands* involves aligning the FWB program activities and assessment demands to fulfil accreditation standards and ensuring students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. Educators found the program aligned well with needs like reflective exploration, group dynamics, and core values of fields like social work – respect, integrity, and social justice:

It does align really clearly with social work values. This is because it's about group work, it's about communication, it's about those essential listening skills, and it's also a subject about reflection. So, it just fits beautifully. (Emily)

The material that was covered in the FWB program absolutely fitted with what our students needed to be exploring. And we thought right from the first year it would help them to start being able to be more reflective about where they were coming from and then we could keep going with that as a theme right through the course.

And we also really liked the way the FWB program is set up so that it's so much about people working in small groups, people sharing their stories and people learning from hearing each other's stories. Students really lapped it up. (Josephine)

Educators firmly endorsed integrating the FWB program as a subject due to its academic value and alignment with curricula. Even those not initially considering it found compelling connections to subjects like community development, counselling skills, and cultural diversity:

I didn't probably originally think of putting it into the curriculum, but when I was just teaching, I kept referring back to the FWB program. I was teaching 'community development' and I was teaching 'counselling skills' and 'cultural diversity' subjects, and I was thinking it would be really good to have FWB in this. Sometimes I would bring little bits of it in two different subjects. I just found myself seeing whatever I was teaching; I was thinking, the way FWB expresses this issue. Whether it's beliefs and attitudes or preventing family violence, I'd always find myself thinking back to topics in FWB, and how simply and eloquently they would address the topic without starting with a lot of theoretical texts. (Alexandra)

The seamless alignment sometimes made students unaware they were participating in FWB activities, showcasing successful organic integration:

...but then they didn't even perceive where it was happening almost. So, I think that was actually a big success of the bits that we did. (Ada)

Therefore, strategically tailoring FWB components to align with curricula requirements emerges as vital for accreditation.

Secondly, *creating practical assessments* allows educators to assess the FWB soft skills approach in a curriculum while meeting accreditation standards. One common method involves having students run programs themselves and write reflective reports about their experiences, fostering a sense of ownership and practical application of the skills. Reflective journals involving personal entries on topics, such as grief and loss, and analysing program components through the lens of social determinants of health and their own work can also be utilised. These reflective exercises aim to deepen subject understanding, encourage divergent thinking, and develop empathy valuable for students' professions:

We saw that as a way of empowering students to think differently and to bring that different thinking to their practice. We asked them to do our personal reflections on the different subjects, about grief and loss, and how that actually played out in their

own lives, but also how they could use that to assist their clients and families that are working to overcome grief and loss. In essence, they had to take components of the FWB program and analyse those in terms of the social determinants of health and their own work. And then the final report had a personal reflection in it, plus a learning reflection of the actual subject itself and how they would be applying that in their own situation from a learning perspective. So, it had three components to it. (Nneka)

An educator incorporated the online tool Padlet to have students reflect on the ethical and effective use of technology for learning:

So, part of the role of the subject is to introduce students to all of the technologies they're going to have to use at James Cook University (JCU). So, it's just about getting people familiar with online tools like Padlet as the student response platform that is used as part of 'learnJCU'. So rather than us all jotting it down on a piece of paper, we just use the technology to do it instead, and that's part of the learning outcomes for the subject. So, you can use learning technology ethically and effectively. (Ada)

While navigating the balance between soft and hard skills, imaginative assessments like group presentations, reflective journals, and academic reports requiring literature review have been introduced. Educators recognise the need to think creatively and tailor assessments without compromising academic rigour. Though challenging, they have found ways to incorporate assessment tasks that align with curriculum objectives and meet university standards. These innovative approaches demonstrate a commitment to preserving the program's integrity while empowering students through practical, self-reflective assessments.

Thirdly, *ensuring student satisfaction* is vital for integrating the FWB program into curricula while meeting required accreditation standards. This involves gathering student feedback through online journals and assessment tools to understand their satisfaction with the program and its alignment with the curriculum. Student feedback metrics, including informal feedback collected within classes and more formal evaluations, are pivotal in assessing teaching effectiveness and informing academic staff promotions. This feedback not only provides valuable insights for program enhancement but also underscores its significance in the university's evaluation process:

Through student feedback each year, we're required by the university to look at that and write a report on what we're going to do about it. And then we do informal feedback just within classes too and ask them how they're finding it and what do they like, and what they don't like? What would you change? Those sorts of questions you can have informally with students or with the student group, and then you do get it more formally through the student feedback on teaching processes. (Alexandra)

Furthermore, specific tools like the 'Growth and Empowerment Measure' (GEM)[3] and online journals such as the 'Wiki online journal' are used to monitor student progress and address any personal issues or concerns:

The GEM was deliberately developed to be part of the process of healing and empowerment. So, it has a dual purpose to measure, but also to help in the sense of, oh well, I'm here, but I could be there or to see a journey. (Maya)

The Wiki online journal was really good because we kept an eye on the journals for tutors at every few weeks. So, if any personal issue was coming up for students and it was in their journal, it was a flag to us to look. We were knowing a little bit more about the student learning journey and any problems they might be having through their journals. So that was helpful. (Alexandra)

These platforms offer educators a deeper understanding of students' experiences, learning journeys, and potential challenges, enabling more effective program development. By collecting and analysing this feedback, educators can ensure that the program meets accreditation standards and student satisfaction, ultimately enhancing its reputation as a valuable addition to the curriculum. Ensuring the program's alignment with accreditation standards is crucial for holding educators accountable and guaranteeing that the knowledge and skills imparted are essential for students' future careers and lives.

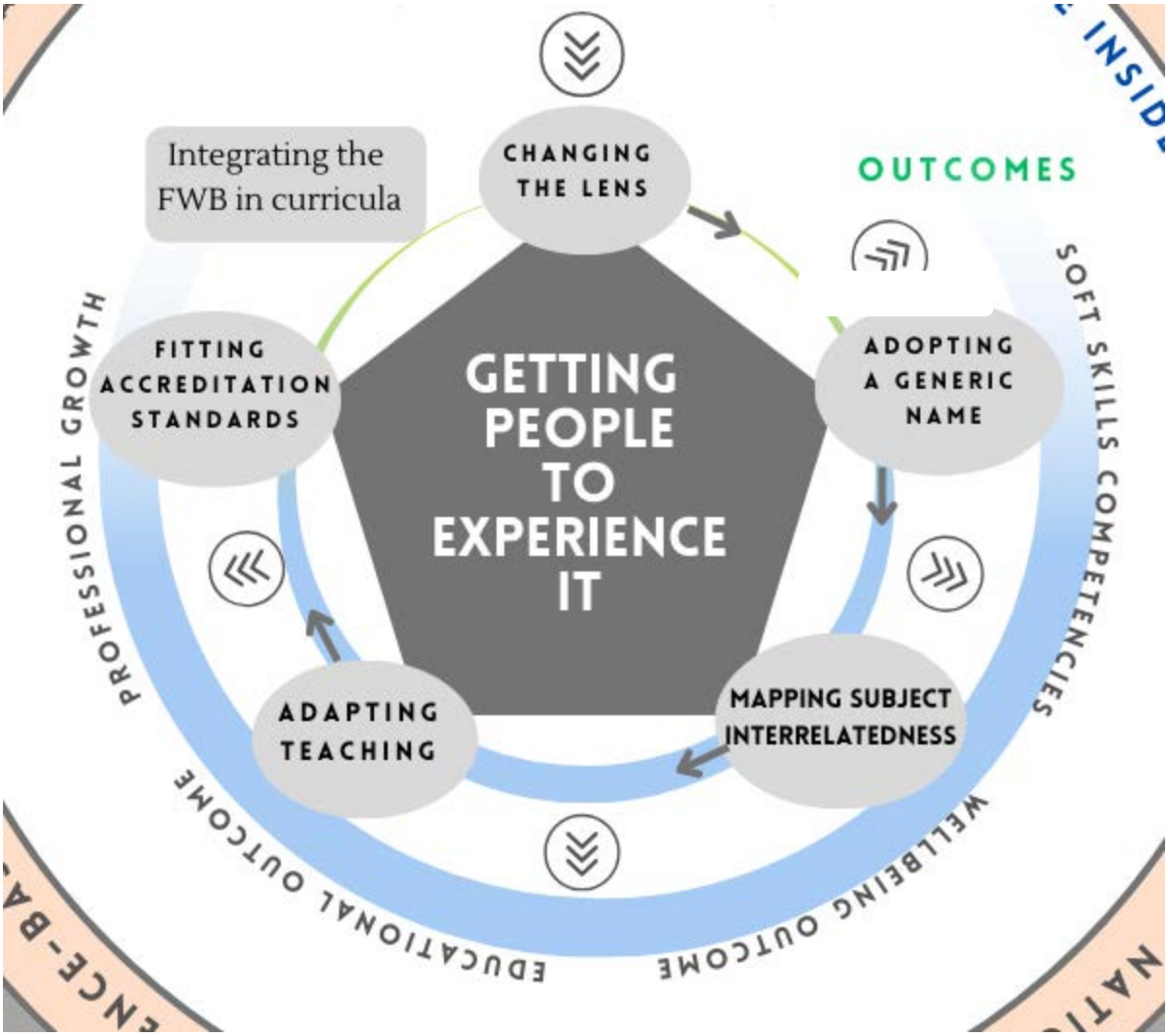
[3] The Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM), developed through Australian First Nations perspectives within the FWB program, uses a comprehensive assessment approach by integrating a 14-item Emotional Empowerment Scale, 12 contextually rich scenarios, and the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale, to provide a nuanced, culturally sensitive exploration of psychological and social empowerment processes and outcomes in Australian First Nations contexts (Haswell et al., 2010).

Having explored the challenges, opportunities and strategies involved in integrating the FWB program within university curricula, looking at the outcomes of this process on both educators and students becomes pertinent.

7.8 Outcomes

The implementation of the strategies aimed at enabling students and educators to fully engage with the FWB program within their curricula has yielded a range of significant outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 12. These outcomes encompass various aspects, including *soft skills competencies, wellbeing outcome*, *education outcomes*, and *professional growth*.

Figure 12
Outcomes from Using the FWB Program in University Curricula



7.8.1 Soft Skills Competencies

The First Nations FWB innovative program integrated into university curricula has proven to be a transformative platform for students and educators, offering a unique avenue to enhance crucial soft skills competencies. In this context, these soft skills benefits are discussed based on the outcome of *perceived soft skills benefits for students* and *perceived soft skills benefits for educators.*

Firstly, the FWB program has been highly effective in developing *critical soft skills among students*, according to educators. The group-based nature of the program creates a supportive environment for building competencies like communication, teamwork, leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence:

> *And we also teach them some skills around communication. We've had students tell us that it also helps with building relationships at home. You want these students who are going to be together for the next four years learning stuff, to form a good and trusting relationship where they learn from each other. And I think the FWB program helps foster that.* (Emily)

Students learn to navigate challenges, develop self-awareness, and foster positive mindsets:

> *The FWB program helps students learn to work in teams, better understand themselves, become more confident, discover the beauty of life, deeply understand interpersonal relationships, deal with interpersonal conflicts, deal with bad emotions, establish correct beliefs, hold a positive attitude, learn to better deal with crises, learn to care for themselves, deal with changes, and learn to plan for themselves*. (Isabella)

The program encourages shy individuals to step out of their comfort zones in a nurturing setting. Innovative assessments, such as facilitating FWB sessions with family or friends and reflective journaling, further bolster practical skills like public speaking, problem-solving, and self-reflection:

> *I think it's done in such a nice way that it's a group program and it also provides students who perhaps are a little bit shy and more reserved, and less comfortable speaking in public as social workers; that's a skill you need to develop. And so, it also just starts that process for them to feel, to push themselves out of their comfort zone a little bit and build those skills.* (Emily)

> *...students made the point that those problem-solving skills seem to be the key to assisting people to actually deal more effectively with their own issues. The key for them was that it opened their eyes in terms of the real world in people having to deal with colonisation and social determinants. And they saw the real value for themselves in actually learning about the problem-solving skills that FWB has to offer and being able to use those principles to assist their clients, families, communities, in actually doing that.* (Nneka)

Moreover, the FWB program fosters a sense of community and belonging among students, combating isolation common in university settings. The collaborative atmosphere bridges generational gaps and promotes camaraderie regardless of age or background.

> *And they used to just complain that the students were all laughing and making too much noise. The head of school would come in and it was such a good feeling.* (Maya)

As students build supportive relationships and develop deeper self-understanding, they become better equipped to navigate personal and professional domains. The program's emphasis on exploring interpersonal dynamics and societal contexts empowers students to approach relationships with empathy and insight, thereby cultivating a holistic growth mindset, enabling students to thrive academically and personally.

Secondly, the FWB program has proven to be highly *beneficial for educators in enhancing their own soft skills*. Educators reported substantial improvements in areas such as teamwork, communication, empowerment, self-awareness, resilience, relationship-building, problem-solving, positive attitude, conflict resolution, critical reflection, confidence, and compassion:

> *I feel that what resonates with me about the FWB program is that it can really help people improve their soft skills, because its' theme covers almost all aspects of people's lives; its' teaching method is both novel and scientific, which effectively improves the soft skills of teaching subjects.* (Isabella)

The program's innovative and scientific teaching methods resonated deeply, providing techniques to address conflicts and foster equality and independence in both personal and professional relationships. Additionally, educators highlighted the program's ability to cultivate compassion for oneself and others, creating more positive environments:

> *Something that keeps coming to mind too is that, for me anyway, it increases compassion – compassion for yourself and compassion for others. I've been able to*

frame this within the FWB program in the sense that a lot of students don't like doing group assignments. And it's easy to make assumptions that someone is just lazy. But let's have a think about what some of the other options might be and how you might approach it as opposed to just having these negative ideas about person. (Emily)

Astonishingly, the FWB program influenced teaching pedagogies, promoting adaptive approaches that focused on human qualities rather than shortcomings. Educators shifted towards reducing criticism and fostering a more supportive and understanding approach with students:

Before I got in touch with FWB, I usually paid attention to problems of myself and people around me. When I did the part of 'Basic Human Qualities' I realised that human qualities that people have, are for the protections of each person. This led me to change my teaching method and attitude. I try to keep an eye to reduce criticism about students, my relatives, and people around me. (Olivia)

The program reinforced the value of engaging with students' experiences, connecting theoretical concepts to real-life situations:

I would say it reinforced my belief in the value of teaching in a way that engages with students experience and then helps them to connect other ideas to that, and to learn from hearing from each other. (Josephine)

The cultural ideas underpinning the FWB gradually permeated other parts of the curriculum, leading to a more holistic and culturally informed approach to education. Furthermore, the program encouraged a more empathetic understanding of individual contributions in group assignments, prompting thoughtful consideration of various factors influencing participation rather than making assumptions.

7.8.2 Wellbeing Outcome

Educators and students engaged in the FWB program consistently perceived noticeable improvements in their personal wellbeing outcomes. Educators shared their experiences, affirming that the integration of the FWB initiative in their curricula not only enhanced their personal wellbeing but also positively impacted that of their students. Furthermore, educators noted that students, as part of their assessments, effectively applied the FWB program to enhance the wellbeing of their family and friends. This particular outcome served as a powerful

motivator for many educators to integrate the FWB initiative into their teaching curricula. These wellbeing outcomes are discussed under the following headings: *enhanced wellbeing outcomes among students* and *reported outcomes among educators*.

Firstly, the FWB program *enhanced wellbeing outcomes among students*. According to educators, some students expressed that the FWB sessions were the highlight of their week, underscoring the program's value in addressing extensive needs. Through small group interactions and sharing personal experiences, students experienced a shift from fearing judgement to embracing individual differences, and this fostered a sense of empowerment. The program prompted practices like meditation and life-enhancing activities that contributed to their personal growth:

> *So, it actually was really good for student wellbeing. I think the sense of wellbeing partly comes from starting to think more holistically about who I am as a person and how do I nurture all of the aspects of myself. We had some students who said, 'this is the thing I look forward to all week'. So, I think it would be a very timely thing to be promoting it now. Some people would say things in the evaluation that we did about how they decided to try and meditate more often or I'm going to do this activity that's really life enhancing for me more often*. (Josephine)

Specific topics, like relationships, positively influenced students' interactions with partners and children, extending the program's impact beyond the classroom into family dynamics:

> *In particular, students who I think struggle with anxiety, depression and other mental health issues have noted that it helped them mildly, not significantly or anything like that. The relationship topic in particular, I've had students comment that it's been beneficial for their relationships with partners and children. They'll often go home and have conversations about what they learned about that topic in particular; and how they might change the way they interact with each other in a more positive way. And that impacts on their wellbeing as well.* (Emily)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the FWB program emerged as a crucial avenue for human connection and meaningful discussions. Students eagerly anticipated FWB classes, as they provided a space to connect with peers, discuss important topics, and foster a sense of belonging, addressing their profound need for connection during lockdowns:

They really looked forward to coming to the class because they got to not only hang out with their peers but talk about things that they considered important while connecting at the same time. Like that connection and belonging that people weren't feeling during COVID-19, it became something they were looking forward to experiencing. (Emily)

It's a way of reconnecting and also thinking about how has the pandemic affected my wellbeing and how can I use my understanding of some of these different ideas to think about where am I now and what's happened to me? How has that changed because of the pandemic? And now what could I be doing differently about it? (Josephine)

The program facilitated student reflection, self-awareness, and collaboration, improving mental wellbeing. Remarkably, the program's integration into curricula helped destigmatise mental health challenges, making support more approachable for students within a classroom setting through collective learning and application of principles to individual needs:

So, the other box it ticked was that a lot of students don't like to go to counselling services or admit they've got issues. And by putting it into the curriculum, we were addressing student mental health through their curriculum. (Alexandra)

Secondly, the FWB program has proven to be a powerful catalyst for *enhancing personal wellbeing among educators*. Testimonies highlight the program's ability to foster a holistic approach to life, serving as a reminder to attend to all aspects, including the spiritual dimension:

Well, I think for me, doing the program, it kind of reminds you to pay attention to all of the aspects of your life, including the spiritual. It's kind of a reinforcement for me to say, 'You do better in all of your life, if you do more often, do X.' (Josephine)

Educators reported that the structured reflection process provided a valuable framework for learning from experiences, such as relationship breakdowns, ultimately contributing to their overall sense of wellbeing. The program's teachings on handling emotions and resolving conflicts have alleviated anxiety, fostering a sense of peace and inclusivity in their lives:

So, if I've had a relationship breakdown, then it's really going to help me reflect on what worked and learn from my experiences. It's a good reminder to reflect on particular things in particular ways. (Emily)

Furthermore, educators credited the FWB program for increased happiness, improved confidence, and more harmonious family dynamics. The emphasis on pursuing individual beliefs, seeing beauty in the world, and satisfying basic human needs aligned with their personal values, encouraging happiness and promoting a healthy lifestyle:

> *It has improved my friendships and helped me to communicate from the heart, and not in a way to exchange benefits. It has encouraged me to follow my own belief, to do things that make the world more beautiful, and to be satisfied with my own basic human needs. Generally, it has encouraged me to be happy and pursue a healthy lifestyle.* (Olivia)

Even initially sceptical educators found the program transformative, helping them become better versions of themselves through self-reflection and addressing personal experiences:

> *I must admit that when I first heard about the program, I was thinking, oh, what's this? Another really goody type? Because we know there's lots of those around. There wasn't much literature at the time about it, apart from one paper that was written. But doing it as a participant really changed my life. Basically, I consider myself a very confident, well-educated person. But going through that experience, really thinking about your life and what's happening in your experiences and how you deal with those things, really made me a better person.* (Nneka)

The theme of 'caring for oneself' prompted practices like listening to bodily needs, taking breaks, and engaging in nourishing activities, leading to spiritual rejuvenation and a sense of renewal.

> *In my life, I feel that I often use FWB skills. For example, when I feel tired at work, I will think of the theme of 'caring for myself' of FWB and take the following measures: listen to the needs of the body, stop working, go out and press massage, listen to music, watch movies, eat food, etc. to relax and nourish myself, so as to achieve spiritual rejuvenation; Try to balance my physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual needs.* (Isabella)

The comprehensive positive impact on educators' personal wellbeing underscores the program's effectiveness in fostering an all-encompassing growth and development.

7.8.3 Educational Outcome

Educators recognised that the integration of the FWB program into curricula has proven effective in improving students' wellbeing, and subsequently *boosting their academic achievements*, *preparing them for their future careers,* and *elevating their First Nations Knowledge threshold*.

Firstly, according to qualitative feedback from educators, the FWB program had a positive impact on *students' academic achievements*. Students reported increased self-awareness, confidence, and improved stress management skills, enabling them to manage the demands of daily life more effectively. Additionally, the program strengthened relationships among peers and provided knowledge relevant to their future professional pursuits, contributing to a more engaged approach to their university studies. While quantitative data is lacking, the qualitative feedback strongly suggests a positive correlation between the improved wellbeing fostered by the FWB program and academic success:

> *So, qualitatively, the main changes are, students felt that they got more self-awareness and confidence. They were more able to manage the stresses associated with day-to-day life, and they really appreciated strengthening their relationships with other students. And they could see they were gaining knowledge that was relevant to their future professional life. And these helped them to engage more fully with their university studies. Though we don't have hard data, but qualitatively, they felt that it was going to happen, that it actually linked to the academic success.* (Alexandra)

This observation highlights the importance of recognising how elevated wellbeing and developing soft skills can significantly contribute to academic achievements.

Secondly, the FWB program is vital in *preparing students for their future careers*, particularly in fields such as social work. It provides valuable insights into prospective careers, allowing students to develop essential skills necessary for their chosen professions. Within a digital literacy subject, the program's components on digital wellbeing and human qualities in relation to artificial intelligence sparked robust classroom conversations. Students were encouraged to reflect not only on their digital habits but also on their intrinsic human qualities, envisioning themselves as contributors to their future professions and blending the realms of technology and human aspects:

So, we were talking about digital wellbeing and then we got up to human qualities, and we were talking about human qualities in relation to artificial intelligence. So that's where that was integrated into. The technology support produced some really powerful classroom conversations just taking that bent of and looking at themselves. The students then started looking at themselves in the sense that this is more than wellbeing or even, it is wellbeing that carries into their professions like seeing themselves as, if I'm a social worker, what am I bringing as a human to my role? Rather than what is this computer technology bringing or what will this computer technology do? (Ada)

The program's emphasis on self-awareness and its practical components, such as counselling and group work, offer students a hands-on experience akin to a 'practice run,' effectively equipping them for the challenges and demands of their professional degrees:

So, it's sort of like a 'practice run'. For students, I think the thing they want is to feel that they're going to learn something useful that's going to equip them for their professional degree. Social workers come in thinking they're going to help others, but if they haven't really looked at themselves and built some self-awareness, then they're not ready to be helping others. So, it's preparedness. They were gaining knowledge that was relevant to their future professional life. And these helped them to engage more fully with their university studies. (Alexandra)

For social work students, in particular, the FWB serves as their first tangible encounter with the realities of their future careers, allowing them to gauge whether social work aligns with their aspirations and contribute to informed decisions about their professional paths:

I think that it really resonates with them, both personally and professionally. So, we get comments from students, from the professional aspect as a social work student, that it's kind of their first real taste into social work in a way. And so, it kind of helps them make a decision by examining, "Is this the career that I want to pursue?" (Emily)

The program's relevance to career preparation is further highlighted through its technical interventions, providing students with a hands-on experience of an intervention in their first year.

Students really want to learn something useful. And they tend to be more anxious about the technical aspects of their courses. But at least in social work, the FWB

program can be seen as a technical intervention. You can say here in first year you're getting a hands-on experience of an intervention. Plus, we get them to have a go at facilitating the topics. So, they might think it looks easy, but then when they try to run a small group facilitation, they suddenly get very anxious and they realise how hard it is, which is not a bad thing in first year to realise that actually, some of these things are more complicated to do than they sound. So generally, in social work, they might come in a bit sceptical and think it looks a bit not quite sophisticated enough. But then when they actually have a go at, both experiencing it and trying to do it, they actually realise it gives them an idea as to why they're going to learn the sets of skills they're going to learn through the course. Sort of counselling, group work, skills they're going to learn in more depth. (Alexandra)

By engaging in activities like facilitating topics and group work, students gain practical insights into the complexities of their future professions while recognising the immediate relevance of the knowledge they acquire, enhancing their engagement and interest in the educational experience.

Thirdly, the integration of the FWB program within curricula facilitated an *advancement of First Nations Knowledge threshold*. Students engaged with the FWB program in an enriching and respectful manner. The language used was adapted to align with new accreditation standards, emphasising the importance of comprehending First Nations Knowledge beyond addressing stereotypical issues. The unique approach aimed to foster cultural sensitivity and understanding of history, recognising the fluid and complex nature of culture:

Some of the language, we adapted a bit to better fit with the language that the new accreditation standards for curriculum acknowledges to better understand First Nations Knowledge. But we kind of liked it from that perspective too because it was rather than addressing First Nations issues typical in curriculums, it's about understanding history and cultural sensitivity. (Alexandra)

The positive framing of First Nations Knowledge within the FWB program allowed First Nations students to participate with a sense of pride, contributing to a more inclusive and empowering learning environment, as well as allowing students to have a unique understanding of spirituality that encompassed the entirety of their being:

And we did do some evaluation at one stage as part of our research thing and a couple of the students who were First Nation students said, "What a relief to come

to a class where I didn't have to do any of that. There was nothing that was negative about perceptions of First Nations people. It was framed in such a positive way, and I could just participate in it." So, I think was a really positive thing as well. Probably the other thing that stood out for me, which is partly reflective of my own interests, is because the FWB program is so explicit about spirituality being just a part of everything, and it thus encouraged it in students. (Josephine)

For postgraduate students, predominantly from health-related fields, the program expanded their First Nations Knowledge and prompted a shift in their perspectives, particularly in their work with First Nations communities:

And for some of them, they came from a very sort of narrow way of thinking about health and you can see they were there because they were wanting to find better ways to actually work with their clients, and FWB program from the evaluation at the time showed that they were able to think a bit differently about how they actually worked, particularly with Aboriginal Torres Striate Islander people as their clients and when they're actually doing work with communities as well. It gave them a different perspective on looking at how you could actually empower people to identify their own issues and also more importantly find solutions to those issues. (Nneka)

The program encouraged a departure from traditional, non-First Nations-developed programs, fostering an empowering approach that enabled people to identify their concerns and actively seek solutions. The evaluation highlighted that the FWB subject challenged students to reconsider their approaches to health and instilled a profound sense of empowerment in working collaboratively with clients, reinforcing its value as an integral component of their postgraduate studies.

7.8.4 Professional Growth

Integrating the FWB program into curricula was more than a pedagogical choice; it also transformed into a catalyst for research contributions in Indigenous studies, crystallising in the professional development of educators. Subsequently, the FWB program enhanced the professional prospects of educators in nuanced ways, offering them opportunities for *research outcomes* and *pedagogical shifts*.

Firstly, regarding *research outcomes*, many educators leveraged their experiences of integrating the FWB program into their curricula to contribute significantly to research in Indigenous studies, thereby enriching the knowledge base in this field. Their research papers, documents, and reports, play a pivotal role in advancing First Nations Knowledge across educational institutions, public health domains, and various organisations. The dissemination of these publications has proven instrumental in raising awareness and promoting the adoption of the FWB program, as it provides tangible resources for individuals interested in integrating First Nations perspectives into their teaching and learning practices:

> *I think the publications have helped. The more people write it up and publish it, the more people see that it's around and may take it. Otherwise, I think a lot of it's about personal communication, one-on-one to the fact that I was there, and I knew it and I had it. At a given time, a few factors came together to enable its uptake.* (Alexandra)

Several evidence-based studies have showcased the positive impact of the FWB program on participant wellbeing. One study evaluated the effectiveness of two innovative 13-week postgraduate public health electives in Australia, centred around First Nations health and wellbeing, using the GEM model. The results indicated that the GEM model emerged as a sensitive and promising tool for assessing postgraduate courses aimed at fostering transformative learning, enhancing wellbeing, and promoting cultural competence through empowerment:

> *So, the GEM was used in both of those classes. And that paper shows very clearly the impacts on social emotional wellbeing and empowerment. So, you see very different patterns of students coming into the one course and finishing and completing the GEM, and students doing the one with FWB, going through the course and completing the GEM; it's remarkable. That is an evidence-based result.* (Maya)

Another study used the GEM tool and the Australian Unity Personal Wellbeing Index, revealing significant improvements in mental health, particularly for students who were struggling at baseline:

> *…We used a questionnaire, pre and post that involved both the GEM and also the Australian Unity Personal Wellbeing Index, and some qualitative questions, and it showed us significant improvement in mental health. In fact, it was in an era where*

student mental health was a big thing. I mean, it wasn't a huge change, but it was a statistically significant change. (Alexandra)

These evidence-based outcomes underscore the tangible improvements in wellbeing among participants, reinforcing the positive impact of the FWB program within various academic contexts.

Secondly, the integration of the FWB program within curricula has catalysed significant *pedagogical shifts*. Educators have shared how integrating the FWB program has provided them with opportunities to emphasise to their students the exigency to recognise the complexity of issues and the interrelatedness of all aspects of life, reflecting a pedagogical shift towards a nuanced and holistic perspective:

I think it helps us to think in complexity too. I try to teach my students if I teach them anything, I think it's the ability to say, but that's not the whole picture; we need to think about this, too, because everything in our lives is interconnected. I am an analytical scientist, and I know that the parts don't add up to the whole, so you have to know the other side, too, to see the complete picture. (Maya)

Moreover, the FWB program's intersubjective nature and emphasis on personal stories and experiences have influenced educators' teaching styles. The program encourages educators to view students as experts in their own right, creating a collaborative atmosphere where both parties contribute to a shared pool of knowledge:

My style anyway, the first week I meet students, I always talk about that I get to learn from them. In particular, with that subject, you really get to embrace the idea that they're the experts in the room because they're sharing stuff about themselves, and so, we're all the experts of ourselves. (Emily)

Educators have found that these interactions, grounded in the 'Socratic Way' of learning, and enriched in mutual respect and openness, significantly enhance their teaching approaches. This approach, known as *participatory social learning method* of the FWB program, is characterised by brainstorming and collective sharing. It has been integrated into other courses, fostering an environment where students feel free to express themselves and generate innovative ideas:

The teaching method of FWB program, namely 'participatory social learning method', has opened my eyes, because this method does not directly tell the students what the answer to the question is. It is to let people recall their previous cognition and experience through brainstorming, and then to enlighten and think through

> *individual and collective sharing, so as to inspire people to explore creative solutions to problems. Through the experience of integrating FWB program, I use the method of 'brainstorming' in teaching other courses. I feel that people will speak freely, think actively, and fully express their opinions, often generating new ideas or stimulating innovative ideas.* (Isabella)

Additionally, the program has inspired educators to delve deeper into First Nations Knowledge and spirituality, leading to broader academic interests and outputs through research and publications:

> *I think what it's made me do differently is partly wanting to know more about other aspects of First Nations' ways of doing things. It had a big impact on me saying, 'Okay, I want to understand more about this, and I want to understand about how we could include this in the rest of our curriculum'. I think having those experiences around the spirituality made me think, 'Okay, I want to do more work on this', and so, I have written a book about spirituality into social work practices.* (Josephine)

The journey of getting people to experience the FWB program encapsulates the comprehensive process of integrating the program into curricula. It illuminates the *challenges* that coexist with valuable *opportunities*, resulting in positive benefits through the application of specified *strategies*. Participants gain a profound understanding of the program's depth and how it positively impacts their personal and professional lives. The model, with its highlighted *outcomes*, serves as an encouraging guide to assist educators in seamlessly integrating similar wellbeing programs into their curricula.

7.9 Summary

In this chapter, I have:

- explained the theoretical model of 'Getting people to experience it' to assist educators in integrating the FWB program into curricula
- given the contextual environment from which the theory emerged
- explored the process of 'Getting people to experience it' through the four main categories of *challenges, opportunities, strategies*, and *outcomes*

- described the attributes – *sub-categories* of each category with their accompanying data.

In the next chapter, I will:

- discuss the findings in relation to existing literature and implementation within the global educational underpinnings.

Chapter 8
Discussion

8.1 Chapter Outline

The purpose of this study was to explore the *process* of integrating the FWB into university curricula. This chapter presents a synthesis of the study's findings in relation to the existing body of literature. Cognisant of the research objectives, it elucidates the emergence of the grounded theory from the employed research methodology while delineating the practical application of the research method. The findings are discussed under the overarching theoretical constructs of *looking from the outside – challenges, looking from the inside – opportunities, getting people to experience it – strategies, and outcomes.* These collectively form the categories that underpin the theoretical model of integrating the FWB within university curricula, encapsulated in the process of 'Getting people to experience it'. The chapter discusses the utilisation of philosophical assumptions to interpret the findings within the frameworks of Rancière's philosophy of equality and emancipation, the Socratic Way, and Implementation Science theory. It then contextualises the findings within global educational goals and contemporary research by outlining the study's practical implications. Furthermore, it establishes the trustworthiness and quality of the research while acknowledging its limitations. This sets the stage for the subsequent chapter, which synthesises the outcome of the three studies of the entire project through the lens of the cultural interface, lending credence to the conclusion chapter involving recommendations for future research and practice.

8.2 Discussion of Findings

This chapter discusses the findings as related to the research question: *What are the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating an Australian First Nations wellbeing program in university curricula?*

'Getting people to experience it' is the theoretical model that emerged from the university contextual environment when examining the process of integrating the FWB within curricula. The model is multidimensional and comprises four categories, to wit: (a) *looking from the outside – challenges,* (b) *looking from the inside – opportunities,* (c) *getting people to experience it – strategies,* and (d) *outcomes*. The dynamic interplay between challenges and

opportunities functions as interwoven threads, working in tandem to facilitate the rich tapestry of experiencing the FWB program. When viewed from an external perspective, the challenges associated with integrating a wellbeing program into already crowded curricula can appear daunting. However, a deeper internal examination reveals the less conspicuous opportunities inherent in such an endeavour. This dichotomous lens of *looking from the outside (challenges)* and *looking from the inside (opportunities)* shapes the decision to pilot the FWB program within the curriculum. Through this lens, educators can *employ strategic* approaches to bring the implementation to fruition, ultimately achieving the inherent *outcomes* of integrating a wellbeing program into university curricula.

8.3 Interpretation of the Findings within Broader Literature

The dynamic interplay at work within the four categories of *looking from the outside (challenges), looking from the inside (opportunities), getting people to experience it (strategies),* and *outcomes* delineate the intricate processes associated with seamlessly integrating the FWB program as a core part of the curricula. The interpretation of these categories in relation to the broader literature, is discussed in detail below.

8.3.1 Looking from the Outside (Challenges)

The study findings suggest that, when considering the integration of a new program into existing curricula, educators often tend to *look from the outside*. This outsider's viewpoint is frequently accompanied by apprehension, as they focus primarily on the challenges that such innovation might pose to their current curriculum. This sense of unease often leads educators to cite the issue of crowded curricula as a primary reason for resisting the addition of new elements. This finding aligns with numerous literature, which identifies overcrowded curricula as a significant obstacle to curriculum reform and innovation (Hickey, 2021; Ho, 2016; Hunter, 2018; Maistry, 2020; Majoni, 2017; McPhail, 2012; OECD, 2020; Paynter, 2018; Pazol, 2011).

8.3.1.1 Crowded Curricula. Among the barriers to integrating social and emotional learning initiatives within established educational frameworks is the struggle to allocate time and space within already crowded curricula (Barry et al., 2017). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights key challenges curriculum designers face when addressing curriculum overcrowding, such as: "Is it real or perceived?";

"How can we accommodate new demands from society in an already crowded curriculum?"; and "How can we ensure breadth and depth of learning that are both achievable within the time allocated in a curriculum?" (OECD, 2020, p. 11). While these questions are valid, they inadvertently reflect a disregard for soft skills in the name of crowded curricula. The former Australian Minister of Education Dan Tehan, as reported by Hunter (2018) from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, unwittingly affirmed this when he said, "Teachers tell me that there is too much being taught and we should be concentrating on developing a deeper understanding of essential content" (para. 4). Tehan goes on to assert that "essential content" is comprised of discipline-specific knowledge which cannot be pushed aside by the growing weariness to incorporate cross-disciplinary general capabilities otherwise known as 'soft skills' (Hunter, 2018). For Tehan, "That is not to say there is not a role for developing skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity and teamwork, but those skills cannot be applied if someone doesn't have the basic skills of literacy and numeracy" (Hunter, 2018, para. 10). "Only deep, subject matter knowledge is the key to success. [Therefore], …our government will never support any change to our national curriculum that diverges from these priorities" (Hunter, 2018, para. 12).

Tehan's statement highlights how the issue of overcrowded curricula can sideline or devalue subjects that promote soft skills and enhance wellbeing. This understanding aligns with Barry et al. (2017), who argue that social and emotional learning programs (such as the FWB program) are often perceived as less important than traditional academic subjects, resulting in insufficient dedicated time, limited implementation support, and failure to integrate them across the curriculum. Amid the relentless focus on standards and performance, attention to wellbeing may be perceived as a distraction (Stirling & Emery, 2016). Here, the priority is on acquiring technical skills that are easily measurable to facilitate the showcasing of academic excellence at the expense of enhancing the soft skills essential for navigating the challenges of a complex world (Biesta, 2015; SDF, 2013). Zaphir (2019) opposes this reductionist trend regarding the purpose of education, asserting that the focus of education should be on nurturing the holistic development of people, encompassing not only their academic growth but also their capacity to engage as responsible and active citizens, regardless of any potential disagreement from current political leaders. If education is meant to be a transformative endeavour that encompasses the entirety of a person and prepares them for the complexities of life (Biesta, 2020; SDF, 2013), then it is paramount to see soft skills as tantamount in importance to hard skills. However, the recent emphasis on quantifying achievement via standardised testing,

propagated by organisations such as the OECD through the PISA tests, has undermined this balanced, holistic goal of education (Biesta, 2015). Despite the difficulty some may have in accepting this notion, Reid (2019) suggests that PISA results should not be equated with the overall quality of education. He captured this in the title of his article: "PISA doesn't define education quality, and knee-jerk policy proposals won't fix whatever is broken."

In a Late-Night Live podcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Radio National hosted by Philip Adams (2024), George Monbiot exposed the hidden mechanisms of neoliberalism. Monbiot describes how unacceptable ideologies are normalised and legitimised to serve the interests of the ultra-wealthy, often in direct opposition to the needs of the broader society. In a society where the wealthy are expected to exhibit a degree of noblesse oblige, Monbiot argues that people are instead being governed by what he terms 'psychopaths' (Adams, 2024). The lethality of this phenomenon is particularly evident in the education system. Monbiot opines that organisations funded by undisclosed sources, which claim to be independent academic institutes but actually function as lobby groups for wealthy interests, are driving genuine academic institutes to moot point (Adams, 2024). Consequently, this has led to the curricula being variegated into neoliberal contouring (Maistry, 2020). For example, in many countries, the technical skills subjects account for 53% of the curriculum, while 38% are for 'other' compulsory curriculum, and 9% for the flexible curriculum (OECD, 2020). This implies that technical skills subjects comprise the majority of the curriculum at 53%, while mandatory non-technical subjects account for 38%. The remaining 9% allows students to select elective courses aligned with their interests. While this might be reflective of school curricula, it is also comparable to university curricula that are heavily influenced by neoliberalism, serving to subjugate the poor to the vagaries of the market (Maistry, 2020). Consequently, subjects that do not generate profits are often being scaled back, marginalised, underfunded, or even eliminated because they are not in the echelons of courses deemed important (Giroux, 2002). This is evident with the university fee reforms under the Job-Ready Package in Australia, where certain courses are subjected to economic disincentives (Department of Education & Employment, 2020). Often, soft skills subjects that promote social and emotional wellbeing, personal growth, and positive psychology are the first casualties of this marginalisation.

Therefore, if the current educational curricula are not balanced in such a way that promotes both the acquisition of technical/hard skills and soft skills, then it would undermine efforts to

elevate the value of soft skills/wellbeing initiatives like the FWB soft skills approach integrated into the curricula. As often as universities amplify the need to operationalise soft skills that promote wellbeing in teaching, this could be actualised by making room for such wellbeing approaches within curricula. Neale Donald Walsch, adapted by Rohr (2020), famously stated:

> Yearning for a new way will not produce it. Only ending the old way can do that.
> You cannot hold onto the old all the while declaring that you want something new.
> The old will defy the new; the old will deny the new; the old will decry the new.
> There is only one way to bring in the new. You must make room for it. (p. xiii).

Holding on to the old way could imply holding on to the narrative of having a crowded curriculum. Such a positioning undermines the development of innovative ways of catering to the diverse needs of students in today's world. Making room for something new undoubtedly requires a decluttering of the curriculum and embracing new approaches that cater to the needs of students in an increasingly complex society. This aligns with Hickey (2021), who equated the phrase 'a crowded curriculum' with the complex nature of today's world in the title of his article: "A 'crowded curriculum'? Sure, it may be complex, but so is the world kids must engage with."

Hickey's (2021) framework offers potential solutions on how to accommodate new societal demands within an already crowded curriculum, and how to achieve both breadth and depth of learning within curricular time constraints. Hickey (2021) maintains that instead of joining the bandwagon on the chorus line of crowded curricula, the curriculum content could be cleared of structural uncertainty, which is the cause of educators' angst. According to Hickey (2021), the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) "…defends the current curriculum's breadth as necessary for preparing [students] for active citizenship in an increasingly complex world" (para. 24). The onus is on striking a balance between the competing demands for a 'back to basics' curriculum (technical skills) and the need for 'formative futures' (soft skills) – essential for effective personhood in an increasingly complex world (Hickey, 2021). While numeracy and literacy are crucial, Hickey (2021) argues that they alone are insufficient to prepare students to be active shapers of today's complex world. The curriculum is undoubtedly packed and requires regular updates and refinements. However, breadth should not be viewed as an adversary of depth, as a well-balanced curriculum possesses the power to impart a wide range of invaluable lessons (Hickey, 2021).

Instead of rehashing the familiar rhetoric about the overcrowded curriculum, Hickey (2021) proposes a shift in focus towards the quality of the learning experience to foster productive interactions between educators and students. This approach underlies connecting classroom content to real-world applications, making learning more relevant and meaningful. According to Eccles and Midgley (1989), when students perceive a sense of purpose in their classroom learning and recognise its relevance to real-life scenarios, they are more likely to feel motivated to learn and develop the competencies their educators aim to cultivate. Students may experience a heightened sense of relevance when the curriculum aligns more closely with real-world demands (OECD, 2020). With the current rise of mental ill-health among university students, especially at this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery, the importance of promoting wellbeing within curricula through soft skills approaches like the FWB program cannot be overemphasised (Sanders et al., 2024). When students recognise the FWB program's relevance to their personal and professional goals, especially in improving their wellbeing and soft skills to navigate the challenges of life (as the result of this study has indicated), their satisfaction increases, which in turn fosters the FWB program's uptake within core university curricula. This finding corroborates previous studies indicating that integrating futures education/soft skills and wellbeing initiatives into curricula, while demonstrating their real-world relevance, is essential for enhancing student wellbeing (Paynter, 2018; Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019).

8.3.1.2 Pushback from Staff. Following the issue of *crowded curricula* is *pushback from university staff* members who viewed the FWB program, as they term it, 'wishy-washy' and thereby lacking relevance to their curricula. Hart et al. (2012) note that First Nations Knowledge often struggles for validity, facing questions of racial and cultural authenticity, which hinders its central placement in educational systems, curricula, and pedagogies. Therefore, overcoming resistance and fostering a culture of openness to change is crucial for successful innovation, such as curriculum development (Hon et al., 2014). This could involve challenging Western notions of authentic or legitimate knowledge, vital for effectively teaching First Nations studies and incorporating First Nations Knowledge (Hart et al., 2012). According to Nakata (2007a), there is a need to acknowledge the cultural interface at which this is at play. The cultural interface is a complex, contested space where First Nations and Western knowledge systems intersect, shaped by various historical, political, and social factors, challenging simplistic categorisations and requiring careful consideration in educational and practical contexts (Nakata, 2007a). The inclusion (or exclusion) of First Nations Knowledge at

this cultural interface is vital for developing curricula that enable educators to explore, test, and create new knowledge and teaching approaches (Hart et al., 2012). This process ultimately supports First Nations self-determination through education and research (Horsthemke, 2021).

Battiste (2018) cites the *2014 Indigenous Education Protocol*, which recognises First Nations education as rooted in First Nations intellectual and cultural traditions. The protocol advocates for implementing these traditions in curricula, establishing First Nations-centred learning environments, and fostering relationships with First Nations communities. The emphasis on First Nations Knowledge serves multiple purposes aimed at empowering First Nations communities and their ways of knowing (Horsthemke, 2021). The goals include reclaiming cultural and traditional heritage, decolonising thought processes, supporting self-determined development, and safeguarding against further colonisation, exploitation, appropriation, or commercialisation of First Nations Knowledge (Horsthemke, 2021). Additionally, this focus seeks to legitimise and validate First Nations practices and worldviews while also critiquing or cautioning against its subjugation and the potential oppressiveness inherent in non-First Nations rationality, science, and technology (Horsthemke, 2021). Collectively, these efforts strive to restore balance and respect, and recognise First Nations Knowledge systems within broader societal and academic contexts (Horsthemke, 2021).

In best practice circumstances, Nakata (2007a) argues that curriculum designs ought to build on existing capacities and create opportunities for learners to achieve a balance of knowledge, skills, and processes for exploring disciplinary boundaries. This is particularly relevant in the context of the FWB program, which is a First Nations-developed program. The integration of the program was balanced and mapped out by educators as stepping stones to other subjects on what students are learning. Importantly, according to Nakata (2007a), educators need to develop their own scholarship in the contested knowledge spaces of the cultural interface to effectively engage students through the learning process. In this study, when educators question the relevance of FWB to their courses, as exemplified by a psychology course coordinator, it underscores Nakata's proposition that educators need to develop their understanding of the cultural interface to effectively engage students and link the FWB program to their curricula. This lays the groundwork for establishing First Nations education as a discipline with its own practices for engaging with and testing knowledge (Nakata, 2007a).

Carey and Prince (2015) draw on Nakata's scholarship to argue that the cultural interface provides a rationale for moving beyond the First Nations–Western binary in academic disciplines. Nakata's notion of standpoints encourages diverse, historically and politically informed scholarship while preparing students for the workforce with a sophisticated understanding of First Nations and non-First Nations relations, aligning with decolonial goals (Carey & Prince, 2015). Nakata's primary aim is to improve educational outcomes for First Nations students, rebuild First Nations communities, and foster diverse, rigorous First Nations scholarship (Carey & Prince, 2015). This aligns with the FWB program's intent to improve students' outcomes and promote synergy between First Nations and non-First Nations students regarding the value of First Nations Knowledge. The study shows that First Nations students felt pride in the FWB program's positive framing. Non-First Nations students and educators reported significant personal and professional impacts, particularly in preparing them for future engagement with First Nations people. This finding corresponds with Nakata's observation that many students in Indigenous Studies are non-First Nations, engaging with the discipline to gain a general understanding of First Nations cultures, histories, and contemporary issues, as well as to prepare for professional work and future interactions with First Nations Australians (Carey & Prince, 2015; Nakata et al., 2012).

8.3.1.3 Racial Prejudice. The issue of *pushbacks from staff* overflows to and resonates with *racial prejudice*. People *looking from the outside* and seeing the FWB program as a First Nations-developed wellbeing program sometimes judge it negatively based on its First Nations origin, as shown in Chapter 7 under 'racial prejudice'. This prejudice and racism are linked to broader issues concerning respect for and attitudes towards First Nations people and their knowledge within the Australian cultural landscape (Jones et al., 2024). In Australia, First Nations Knowledge is often maligned with inferiority, and its potential contributions to academic discourse and university platforms are often overlooked or undervalued. Existing literature highlights the perception of inferiority stemming from racism and the often negative and problem-focused perspective First Nations Knowledge is viewed from within mainstream curricula across countries (Aberdeen et al., 2013; Battiste, 1998, 2018; Hart et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2024; Nakata, 2001, 2002).

Centuries of colonisation have meant a long history of neglect and erosion of First Nations Knowledge systems in Australia (Nakata, 2002). This has resulted in First Nations people feeling exploited when their knowledge system is not used for their betterment (Bainbridge et

al., 2015; Tsey et al., 2016). In line with these sentiments, Battiste (2018) asserts that the tragic testimonies of First Nations peoples in Canada have consistently highlighted several key themes: assimilative government policies, discriminatory practices, societal assumptions of First Nations inferiority, racism, and both cognitive and physical violence and abuse. These abuses were perpetuated through the mismanagement of First Nations resources, control over First Nations lives through schooling and forced reservation living, and a persistent lack of corrective action even after these issues were brought to light, both historically and in the present day (Battiste, 2018). This resulted in various devastating consequences for some individuals and communities, including self-loathing, nihilism, internalised oppression, unfulfilling assimilation, and the erosion of First Nations languages and cultures (Battiste, 2018). Historically, racial prejudice has contributed to the disregard of First Nations Knowledges in academic settings and the persisting obstacles faced by First Nations peoples in asserting the significance of their knowledge systems (Nakata, 2002).

However, according to Nakata (2002), over the past decade, First Nations Knowledge has garnered increasing attention within formal education systems worldwide, particularly in developed countries pursuing social inclusion agendas. The drive towards more inclusive curricula has led to efforts to integrate First Nations perspectives across various subject areas (Nakata, 2002). This initiative has prompted the incorporation of elements from First Nations worldviews – including mathematical concepts, astronomical knowledge, storytelling, mythology, art, environmental wisdom, and religion – into existing curriculum frameworks (Nakata, 2002). While the implementation may vary, this movement has also gained traction in some Australian universities, at least in principle (Nakata, 2002). Notable evidence is the Australian educational policy of incorporating evidence-informed First Nations Knowledge in mainstream university curriculum (Whiteside et al., 2017); and this is exemplified in the James Cook University (JCU, 2022) curriculum model. The participation ratio in this study–seven non-First Nation educators to one First Nations educator–further reflects this growing academic interest in engaging with First Nations Knowledge.

On a basic level, overcoming racial prejudice and genuinely including First Nations perspectives in curricula requires more than superficial acknowledgment in self-proclaimed ‘post-racial’ institutions (Jones et al., 2024). Genuine inclusion involves recognising and appreciating the importance of a transformed curriculum that embraces the diversity of knowledge systems and fosters a consciousness that ensures First Nations sovereignty, self-

determination, and cultural rights are both respected and upheld (Battiste, 1998; Nakata, 2002). While universities claim to abandon historical exclusionary practices, true inclusion demands integrating First Nations Knowledges, worldviews, and perspectives within academic settings (Jones et al., 2024). Until First Nations expertise and lived experiences are genuinely valued and respected, Jones et al. (2024) maintain that First Nations scholars may seek alternative outlets for their intellectual pursuits, to academia's detriment.

8.3.1.4 Sensitive Topics. The sensitivity of certain topics in the FWB program is an issue that has spawned pushback from staff. These topics include *basic human needs, beliefs and attitudes, values and relationships, crisis and emotions, and grief and loss*. In academic settings, some educators consider these subjects too emotionally charged for classroom instruction. This resistance stems from concerns about potential repercussions on students, and educators' perceived lack of capacity to effectively teach such sensitive material. This finding aligns with existing literature on the challenges of teaching sensitive, controversial, or taboo topics in classrooms. Such subjects often expose students to perspectives and worldviews that may push them out of their comfort zones, potentially leading to cognitive dissonance or resistance. Educators may choose to avoid or downplay these topics due to their perceptions or beliefs regarding the sensitivity of the material (Evans et al., 2000; Kello, 2016; Miller et al., 2024).

While some of the topics of the FWB program are considered sensitive, they are often everyday issues that students encounter in their quotidian lives. A study by Cotton (2019) revealed that educators expressed a strong belief in avoiding any influence on students' attitudes or imposing a specific agenda on a given topic by choosing not to address certain subjects. However, educators ought not to avoid sensitive topics, as doing so would indicate their reluctance to promote such important discussions (Miller et al., 2024). Instead, they have to navigate these subjects while ensuring student safety and being prepared to offer support for any unforeseen emotional or mental triggers. This is why many educators used 'the group agreement' of the FWB program at the start of their class to ensure student safety by establishing discussion guidelines that prioritise everyone's wellbeing and prevent harmful words or actions. This strategy aligns with the Australian Curriculum teaching about mental health and wellbeing, which emphasises the need for intentional planning and explicit instruction to foster safe and inclusive learning environments (Australian Curriculum, 2024). The curriculum stresses the

importance of creating a space where students can ask questions and share ideas and opinions without fear of judgement or silencing (Australian Curriculum, 2024).

To achieve this, the curriculum recommends establishing classroom agreements that promote active listening and respectful language use (Australian Curriculum, 2024). The FWB program 'group agreement' also encourages students to share only what they feel comfortable with. Additionally, educators ensure that free professional help is available for students who may need it, and they seek appropriate training to effectively teach sensitive topics when necessary. This approach aligns with Australian Curriculum guidelines, which recognise that discussions about mental health and wellbeing can be personally challenging and potentially distressing for both educators and students (Australian Curriculum, 2024). The curriculum, therefore, emphasises the importance of respecting students' right to opt out of such discussions while highlighting that schools are expected to have established policies and procedures to support both students and educators when addressing sensitive topics (Australian Curriculum, 2024). In a broader context, it also aligns with pedagogical literature that advocates for open-ended, empathy-developing teaching methods and explicit instruction in discussion, self-reflection, and inquiry skills as effective ways to navigate sensitive topics (Hand & Levinson, 2012; Hess, 2009; Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Oulton et al., 2004). It is worth noting that while K–12 education typically follows structured curriculum guidelines and requirements, higher education institutions have more autonomy and variability in their curriculum design, resulting in more diffuse and less standardised approaches across universities and departments. This academic freedom allows university educators to exercise more discretion in course content and delivery, including the treatment of sensitive topics, while working within their institution's broader academic framework.

Evans et al. (2000) emphasise the importance of fully understanding the obstacles to issues-centred education before attempting to overcome them. In the context of this study, this requires recognising potential triggers for emotional distress before addressing such challenges. A specific example from the study illustrates this point: a participant was unable to engage with the sensitive topic of *loss and grief* due to the recent suicide of her daughter. In this instance, the student was given the option to skip the session, demonstrating the educator's commitment to ensuring student safety by pre-emptively addressing a potentially triggering situation. This proactive approach to handling sensitive topics, along with using the FWB program's 'group agreement' to establish a safe environment for students, aligns with strategies

recommended by Miller et al. (2024) for managing controversial subjects in the classroom. These strategies include proactively establishing community and safety, and connecting content to students' lived experiences, among others. These strategies help create a supportive atmosphere conducive to exploring sensitive topics related to mental health and wellbeing, ensuring that all students feel comfortable participating in these crucial discussions.

8.3.1.5 Funding. Funding poses significant challenges for educators integrating the FWB program within university curricula, particularly in meeting accreditation standards and hiring facilitators. There is concern about securing adequate funding for new initiatives perceived as non-essential or supplementary. This finding represents a recurring challenge in higher education, where funding is often performance-based, typically focusing on easily quantifiable metrics such as graduation rates, job placement rates, and standardised test scores (Alexander, 2000; Amsler & Shore, 2019; Dougherty et al., 2014; Hicks, 2012; Hillman et al., 2015; John & Parsons, 2005; Jones et al., 2017; Kelchen & Stedrak, 2016; Laudel, 2006). As a result, soft skills subjects often fall through the cracks because their impacts are more difficult to measure objectively and, therefore, may receive less attention in curricula designed to meet performance metrics.

In extrapolation, funding challenges in higher education can be further attributed to the influence of neoliberalism within universities (Amsler & Shore, 2019; Kidman & Chu, 2017; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Shore, 2010). The neoliberal education paradigm has reconfigured the roles of academics and their work to fit a 'public managerialism' discourse, placing knowledge production at the centre of a neoliberal regimen of measurement, audit, and performativity (Amsler & Shore, 2019; Kidman & Chu, 2017; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Hicks (2012) argues that while performance-based research funding systems (PRFSs) appear to distribute university research funding, their true impact lies in creating competition for prestige, which generates powerful incentives within university systems. Under certain conditions, PRFSs may enhance control by professional elites and, in their pursuit of excellence, potentially compromise other important values such as equity or diversity (Hicks, 2012). Notably, these systems may not effectively serve the goal of enhancing the economic relevance of research (Hicks, 2012).

As universities increasingly orient themselves towards external demands from policymakers, funding agencies, corporate sponsors, and industry partners, everyday academic governance has transitioned from localised, faculty-driven processes with substantial intellectual freedom

to centralised, corporate-style management structures that are more removed from day-to-day academic operations (Kidman & Chu, 2017). This shift represents a paradigm change from viewing universities as a public good to seeing higher education as an economic investment for an educated citizenry (Kidman & Chu, 2017; Shore, 2010). Within these managerialist regimes, universities and their internal groups compete for status, resources, and influence; concurrently, debates abound regarding the aims, purpose, and values of university education, as well as the means by which these will be implemented (Giroux, 2002; Kidman & Chu, 2017; Larner & Le Heron, 2005; Zaphir, 2019).

It is crucial, therefore, to assert opportunities for genuine social change and resist the neoliberal 'creep' of managerialism into academic life (Kidman & Chu, 2017). This assertion is particularly relevant for the FWB program, which has demonstrated effectiveness over two decades of implementation but faces funding challenges. Such difficulties align with the broader issue of allocating resources for curriculum innovations, especially amid financial constraints (Alexander, 2000). However, given the *students' satisfaction feedback*, evident in this study's results, the value of the FWB program to the academic body could be recognised. Consequently, funding such a program to become a core part of university curricula ought to be appraised and considered, in line with the universities' mandate to promote First Nations Knowledges within mainstream curricula, as enshrined in Australian Education Policy (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023b; The University of Melbourne, 2024).

8.3.1.6 Meeting Accreditation Standards. Accreditation in higher education is an external quality review process used to scrutinise colleges, universities, and programs for quality assurance and improvement (Eaton, 2015; Gupta et al., 2021; Kafaji, 2020; Reddy et al., 2023). The sector is increasingly driven by internal and external standards that describe quality expectations for curriculum, teaching, delivery, content, skills, and attitudes to support graduate outcomes (Kafaji, 2020; Wood et al., 2019). This process aims to enhance student achievement, improve academic motivation, and offer job possibilities (Kafaji, 2020). In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) is responsible for ensuring the quality of higher education by using various standards to measure the quality of student learning, experience, teaching, administration, and achievement (Wood et al., 2019). Australian universities must also adhere to accreditation requirements set by professional bodies, which are reflected in course profiles and have become more formalised over time

(Wood et al., 2019). These requirements serve as crucial reference points in curriculum design processes and drive professional accreditation, ensuring graduates' employability in their respective fields (Wood et al., 2019). For nearly a decade, the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) has steered the design, governance, and delivery of courses throughout Australia, establishing a comprehensive set of quality indicators and benchmarks that all higher education institutions are required to meet (Wood et al., 2019).

The relationship between accreditation and government is heterogeneous, especially in the context of higher education funding (Eaton, 2015). This is evident in how accreditation is used to ensure educational quality, inform government decisions on public resource allocation, direct private sector investments, and streamline credit transfer processes between institutions (Eaton, 2015). As a flow-on effect of funding challenges, some educators face challenges in meeting accreditation standards when considering the integration of programs like FWB into curricula. When viewed from an external perspective, educators often express scepticism about the FWB program's nature and its compatibility with existing accreditation standards. This finding aligns with the common concern in higher education regarding meeting accreditation standards and ensuring that new initiatives align with prescribed learning outcomes and competencies (Gupta et al., 2021; Lagrosen, 2017; Reddy et al., 2024; Wilkerson, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). Developing a curriculum that meets these standards while maintaining academic quality is crucial for program legitimacy and effectiveness (Reddy et al., 2022; Reddy et al., 2024). In the case of the FWB program, this involves the complex task of balancing academic integration without compromising its transformative nature for students. Educators must carefully consider how to strike the right balance between assessment requirements and the program's holistic nature as they work to integrate it into university curricula.

According to Wood et al. (2019), the process of meeting accreditation requirements is complicated by the lack of a clear definition of quality in higher education. For many years, the assessment of quality has shifted towards using frameworks and standards that establish benchmark expectations, allowing institutions to demonstrate quality through a checklist approach (Wood et al., 2019). Adhering to these standards has significant implications for an institution's reputation, funding opportunities, marketing effectiveness, and student enrolment numbers (Wood et al., 2019). In a way, achieving accreditation often bolsters an institution's reputation for quality, attracting more students, faculty, partners, and corporate connections (Kundu, 2020). The accreditation process aims to foster a quality-conscious higher education

system that ensures excellence, market relevance, and stakeholder engagement (Reddy et al., 2023; Sinha & Subramanian, 2013). However, Wood et al. (2019) raise critical questions about the implications of these standards: Does adherence to accreditation requirements potentially compromise quality learning? What might be sacrificed when course leaders prioritise meeting stakeholder needs? Does the interplay between accreditation requirements and learning design aspirations genuinely ensure quality, or does it instead promote a compliance-focused approach where merely checking boxes becomes the primary concern?

These questions bring to the fore the conundrum of measuring quality learning, particularly when integrating soft skills approaches like the FWB program into mainstream university curricula. Educators often struggle to convince curriculum bodies of the merit of new subjects, needing to justify their introduction and provide case studies to demonstrate their value. However, this challenge offers an opportunity to demonstrate the FWB program's academic worth and quality, as evidenced by educators' testimonies in this study. Once recognised, the FWB program uptake is typically strong due to evidence-based quality reports on participant outcomes. This aligns with Wood et al.'s (2019) recommendation that curriculum designers should use their expertise, skills, and integrity to create intentional programs that enable students to both consume and produce knowledge that drives change. Such programs aspire to transform students beyond providing basic information, ensuring they can make a meaningful difference in the world – a hallmark of quality learning (Wood et al., 2019). This corroborates Gert Biesta (2015, 2020, 2021) and Alain de Botton's goal of education, which encourages the fostering of personal growth and making a societal impact (SDF, 2013).

8.3.2 Looking from the Inside (Opportunities)

Examining the FWB program from an internal perspective reveals numerous opportunities for integrating it into university curricula, allowing educators to fully appreciate its potential benefits. This insider view often transforms initial scepticism into recognising the program's value. Both external and internal perspectives work together to deepen understanding of the program's potential. Depending on one's viewpoint, the program may present either opportunities with associated challenges or challenges with hidden opportunities. Moving beyond surface-level concerns through experiential understanding uncovers the program's true potential, highlighting valuable opportunities such as enhancing *personal wellbeing*, advancing

First Nations Knowledge, utilising the program's *evidence-based support*, and enabling *research output*.

8.3.2.1 Personal Wellbeing. The potential benefit of integrating the FWB program includes the improvement of personal wellbeing. Wellbeing has been noted to be of utmost importance to students achieving their academic goals. Research demonstrates that high levels of mental health correlate with enhanced learning, creativity, and productivity, as well as more positive social behaviour and relationships, improved physical health, and increased life expectancy (Beyond Blue, n.d.). A recent national survey reported by ABC News (2023) highlights the urgency of addressing student wellbeing as it affects their academic outcome. Teachers identified poor mental wellbeing as the primary challenge facing young people, closely followed by excessive screen time driven by social media and smartphones (ABC News, 2023). Emma Grant, a wellbeing specialist and schoolteacher, emphasises this connection:

> If a student is well, they're going to learn well. If a student is overwhelmed, anxious, stressed, whatever term you want to use, their mind shuts down [and] they're not going to learn. [Therefore,] it's every teacher's job in the school to look after the wellbeing of our young people within every classroom. (ABC News, 2023, para. 25–6)

While Grant's observations focus on school-age students, similar challenges apply to university students. Partridge et al. (2018) note that young adulthood, particularly during higher education, is a critical transition period associated with specific risks to wellbeing. As young adults enter tertiary education, they often face financial insecurity and experience worse mental and physical health compared to their adolescent years (Partridge et al., 2018). Several factors contribute to this mental health decline, including a lack of awareness about mental health's importance in social and economic development, insufficient attention to mental health promotion across sectors, severe stigma and discrimination creating barriers to mental health care, growing global challenges like climate change, and increasing inequality (Patel et al., 2018). Recognising these challenges, tertiary education providers have begun to prioritise student wellbeing as a means to optimise the student experience and improve overall outcomes (Partridge et al., 2018).

However, many university wellbeing initiatives struggle to gain traction because they are not integrated into core curricula. This situation calls for innovative approaches to deliver mental health interventions (Patel et al., 2018). Some of these innovative ways include making wellbeing promotion pronounced within curricula (Australian Curriculum, 2024). This study's findings, based on educator testimonies, suggest that integrating the FWB program into university curricula offers a significant opportunity to address universal mental health among students. This approach aligns with ACARA's recent move to embed wellbeing into school curricula, which aims to destigmatise mental illness in the community and make wellbeing a core part of the curriculum (Australian Curriculum, 2024). As ACARA's curriculum director Sharon Foster notes, "We don't want students to think the only time we're talking about the importance of mental health and wellbeing is when they walk into a class and timetable that has health and physical education on it," (ABC News, 2023, para. 20). The Australian Mental Health and Wellbeing Curriculum connection demonstrates how content from various learning areas, capabilities, and cross-curriculum priorities can be organised to develop comprehensive mental health and wellbeing education programs (Australian Curriculum, 2024). Evidence supports this holistic approach, showing that a whole learning community approach to wellbeing achieves the best outcomes (Patel et al., 2018).

ACARA's new approach integrates mental wellbeing lessons into subjects like English and humanities to enhance student outcomes (ABC News, 2023). This strategy aligns with higher education initiatives, such as integrating the FWB program into social work undergraduate courses. These initiatives have shown positive results in maintaining student wellbeing, both before and during the challenges of COVID-19 (Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017). The FWB program, backed by years of proven impact, offers a holistic approach to universal student wellbeing within curricula. Unlike traditional methods, it does not stigmatise mental health issues, instead allowing students to improve their mental wellbeing as part of their regular studies. This approach is particularly beneficial for students who might be deterred by the stigma associated with seeking mental health support. Given these findings, it is crucial to promote a holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing education to cultivate positive, inclusive, and resilient individuals, as well as learning communities where students can reach their full potential, experience fulfilling relationships, and effectively cope with challenges of life (National Mental Health Commission, 2023). This is the goal motivating the integration of the FWB program within curricula, thereby advancing its opportunity within university settings.

8.3.2.2 First Nations Knowledge. The integration of First Nations Knowledge into educational curricula serves multiple purposes. It increases the visibility of this knowledge, which in turn can boost self-esteem and academic engagement among students (Nakata, 2002). In Australia, this inclusion is viewed as a critical step towards national improvement (The University of Melbourne, 2024). By implementing the FWB program, developed by First Nations communities, Australian universities are fostering a more nuanced understanding of First Nations people. This approach challenges prevailing negative narratives about First Nations experiences. This finding is consistent with a growing body of research emphasising the importance of inclusivity and recognising the transformative potential of First Nations Knowledge in education (Battiste, 1998, 2018; Carey & Prince, 2015; Jones et al., 2024; Nakata, 2001, 2002, 2007a; Nakata et al., 2012).

However, the practicalities of employing diverse approaches to integrate First Nations Knowledge into formal education are intricate and arduous (Nakata, 2002). This is why it is worth noting the heterogeneity of First Nations/Indigenous Knowledge. According to Nakata (2002), the realm of Indigenous Knowledge is laden with complexities and controversies. It grapples with questions ranging from defining what qualifies as 'Indigenous' to identifying the underlying motivations behind documenting such knowledge. Within this domain, a web of contradictions, conflicting sectorial interests, the interplay of local and global politics, instances of ignorance, and aspirations for the future coexist, creating a nuanced landscape that demands careful consideration (Nakata, 2002).

In light of these factors, Indigenous Knowledge is understood as the distinctive, traditional, and community-specific knowledge shaped through generations of close interaction with the environment and natural resources (Nakata, 2002). It forms a knowledge system distinct from mainstream 'science' (Nakata, 2002). Indigenous Knowledge varies across locations and individuals, leading to ongoing debates about its defining characteristics (Nakata, 2002). Nevertheless, it is progressively recognised universally as a valuable commodity, subject to discussions about value addition, exchange, trade, appropriation, preservation, excavation, and mining (Nakata, 2002).

When it comes to projects seeking to contribute to First Nations Knowledge production, it is paramount to acknowledge the importance of First Nations leadership. According to Nakata

(2002), First Nations peoples must exercise control over the research process, ensuring that the research is conducted in a manner that upholds the rights, cultures, and traditions of First Nations communities. Full engagement of First Nations peoples is necessary across all stages of the research, traversing from the formulation of research questions to the communication of research outcomes. This inclusive approach is indispensable to guarantee that the research is culturally sensitive, pertinent, and beneficial to First Nations communities (Nakata, 2002).

The FWB empowerment program, developed by First Nations communities, significantly acknowledges First Nations leadership in its facilitation (Whiteside et al., 2017). Grounded in the values of First Nations communities, both at its core and throughout the implementation process, the FWB, as an evidence-based program, promotes First Nations Knowledge. It amplifies participants' agency and accountability for their physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing by empowering them to engage in self-reflection, problem-solving, and assuming greater control of their circumstances, regardless of the difficulties or challenges they may face (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019; Tsey, 2015; Whiteside et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2014). Its outcomes transcend individual participants, influencing their capacity to collaborate with others who share similar goals, leading to impactful changes at organisational and community levels (Monson-Wilbraham, 2014; Tsey, 2015). Consequently, there has been a notable surge in awareness, interest, and requests for the FWB program not only within Australia but also internationally (Monson-Wilbraham, 2014; Tsey, 2015).

This growing interest in the FWB program has prompted its integration into university curricula by recognising its potential to enhance social competencies crucial for navigating an increasingly uncertain world (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019; Whiteside et al., 2017). This study's findings reveal that educators who have integrated the FWB program into mainstream university curricula have become strong advocates for its continued inclusion. These educators observed the program's impact on their own lives and received positive feedback from their students about its influence on their personal and professional lives. In a deep way, it corroborates the position of Nakata (2002), who maintains that integrating Indigenous subjects into academic curricula is most effective when it arises from students' individual interests. Such could serve as a catalyst for their academic growth and the enhancement of essential competencies, whether for success in a global context or for a deeper understanding of their own environment. However, Nakata (2002) emphasises that this process must ensure that the inclusion of Indigenous subjects is culturally appropriate, relevant, and beneficial to First

Nations communities. Furthermore, it should be seamlessly woven within the broader framework of Western knowledge, a direction that the integration of the FWB program has taken.

8.3.2.3 Evidence-Based Support. The robust evidence-base supporting the FWB program, developed through years of research and implementation, is a compelling rationale for some educators advocating its integration into university curricula. This finding resonates with a substantial body of literature that emphasises the importance of evidence-based research in academia (Brownson et al., 2018; Cordingley, 2008; Groccia & Buskist, 2011; Levin, 2013; Rousseau & Gunia, 2016; Satterfield et al., 2009; Slavin, 2002). However, this drive towards evidence-based practices is not without its critics and challenges. Scholars such as Biesta (2007), Cain (2016), Hammersley (2013), and Pirrie (2001) have raised important questions about the limitations and potential pitfalls of an overly technocratic and evidence-based approach to education.

While literature affirms the evidence-based nature of the First Nations-developed FWB program (see Bainbridge et al., 2015; Kitau et al., 2016; McCalman et al., 2012; Tsey et al., 2016; Whiteside et al., 2014), First Nations Knowledge often receives less credence in academic circles. This disparity was highlighted by an educator interviewed, who noted that colleagues unfamiliar with the FWB program tended to downplay its rigour and evidence-based status due to its First Nations origins. Hart et al. (2012) observe that First Nations Knowledge frequently struggles for legitimacy within academic discourse, facing challenges to its authenticity that impede its integration into educational systems, curricula, and pedagogies. Nakata (2002) corroborates this view, noting that while First Nations Knowledge is increasingly recognised globally as valuable, it remains subject to debates about value addition, exchange, appropriation, preservation, and utilisation. The evidence-based background of the FWB program thus illuminates the complex landscape surrounding evidence-based discussions in academia, particularly when it comes to First Nations Knowledge.

Biesta (2007) examines the debate surrounding evidence-based practice in education, highlighting the arguments of proponents like Slavin (2002). These advocates, according to Biesta (2007), argue that educational research should emulate the systematic, evidence-driven progress seen in fields such as medicine, agriculture, and technology throughout the 20th century. They emphasise the importance of rigorous experimental methods, particularly

randomised controlled trials, in establishing the effectiveness of educational practices (Biesta, 2007). Slavin (2002) contends that this focus on evidence-based approaches is crucial for building credibility among policymakers and educators, asserting that children deserve educational programs based on the most rigorous evidence available. Some proponents, as Biesta (2007) notes, go further, suggesting that practices not grounded in scientific knowledge are inferior and should be phased out. The Evidence-Based Education (EBE) Network's Manifesto, as cited by Biesta (2007), strongly advocates for valuing evidence over opinion in educational decision-making. It criticises the implementation of educational practices based on unfounded opinions of politicians, teachers, or researchers, arguing that this approach is 'pre-scientific' and detrimental to educational progress.

Critics of evidence-based education have raised numerous concerns about its appropriateness in the educational field, as summarised by Biesta (2007). These critiques span several key areas. Scholars such as Davies (2012), Pirrie (2001), and Nutley et al. (2002) question the validity of comparing education to medicine, highlighting the different meanings of 'evidence' in these fields. Pirrie (2001) argues that the crisis of legitimation in educational research has led to an uncritical adoption of a biomedical model of evidence-based practice. Researchers such as Atkinson (2000), Elliott (2001), and St. Pierre (2002) challenge the positivistic assumptions and narrow research conception underlying evidence-based education, with Erickson and Gutierrez (2002) advocating for the value of qualitative research, which is pertinent to this study's methodology. They assert that evidence-careful descriptive research, conducted through sustained first-hand observation and interviewing, can significantly contribute to educational research. They argue that such careful descriptive research rightfully belongs within the spectrum of scientific methods in education (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002). Many scholars, including Burton and Underwood (2000), Willinsky (2002), and Sanderson (2003), object to the lack of acknowledgment of the crucial role that values play in educational research and practice. According to Biesta (2007), these critiques highlight the complex nature of education and the challenges in applying a purely evidence-based approach to this field.

Biesta (2007) argues that the evidence-based approach in education, while seemingly progressive, presents significant limitations and potential threats to democratic educational practices. He contends that the focus on 'what works' narrows the scope of educational decision-making to questions of effectiveness, neglecting crucial normative and political considerations about what is educationally desirable. This approach, Biesta argues, restricts the

role of educational professionals in making context-sensitive judgements and limits participation in educational decision-making. He emphasises that education is a moral and political practice that requires ongoing democratic deliberation, not just technical solutions. Biesta calls for a broader understanding of the relationship between research, policy, and practice in education – one that allows for critical inquiry into the goals of education alongside questions of effectiveness. He suggests that the extent to which a society encourages this broader approach may be indicative of its democratic quality. Biesta concludes that an exclusive focus on evidence-based practice and 'what works' is insufficient for truly improving education and may even pose a threat to democracy itself.

The FWB program, when viewed through the lens of Biesta's argument, exemplifies both an evidence-based approach and an educationally desirable program. Its holistic approach, incorporating different research types, overcomes the often unproductive methodological debates within disciplines, particularly those pitting quantitative against qualitative research (Tsey, 2015). Originating from First Nations Australians' need to regain control over their lives in the face of ongoing colonial impacts (McCalman et al., 2012; Nolan et al., 2024), the FWB program embodies the moral and political dimensions that Biesta argues require continuous democratic deliberation in education. It addresses the question of what is educationally desirable, particularly in the context of First Nations Knowledge systems. In terms of effectiveness, the FWB program has significantly impacted over 5000 participants across various sectors, including education, over the past two decades (Perera et al., 2022). This proven effectiveness addresses the 'what works' question central to evidence-based approaches. Thus, the program satisfies both the technical requirements of evidence-based practice and the broader considerations of what is educationally desirable in our current societal context, thereby advancing its adoption.

The FWB program's dual focus on technical and soft skills reflects Biesta's argument for a more comprehensive understanding of education. As the systematic review (Orih et al., 2024) conducted for this project reveals, complex social interventions such as soft skills programs like the FWB may not always be adequately evaluated through randomised controlled trials (RCTs) alone, despite their status as the gold standard. The nuanced nature of these programs requires alternative evaluation approaches, including continuous quality improvement studies that employ mixed methods (Orih et al., 2024). This understanding allows for critical inquiry into educational goals while also addressing questions of effectiveness. It is consistent with

Biesta's (2007, 2015, 2020, 2021) call for a broader approach to education that goes beyond mere technical solutions. The FWB program's value is not always immediately apparent to those viewing it from the outside (exemplified by one course coordinator's dismissal of the program's relevance); superficial assessments can miss its potential contributions. In contrast, those who engage more deeply with the FWB program by looking from the inside often recognise its significance and see its integration as an opportunity, with some describing it as the most evidence-based, First Nations-developed social and emotional wellbeing program available. This underscores the importance of thorough evaluation and engagement with educational programs, particularly those rooted in First Nations Knowledge systems, to fully appreciate their potential contributions to curricula and student development.

8.3.2.4 Research Output. Integrating the FWB program into curricula provides significant research opportunities for improving wellbeing, enhancing soft skills, and advancing First Nations Knowledge. Many educators who have implemented FWB have contributed to the growing body of research in this field (for instance, Kitau et al., 2011; McCalman et al., 2012; Sanders et al., 2024; Tsey et al., 2018; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). For most educators involved with the FWB program, this integration has allowed them to research their own teaching practices. This opportunity comes amid growing concerns about balancing increasing teaching loads with the expectation to research and publish. This pressure stems from the long-standing 'publish or perish' culture in academia, traced by Garfield (1996) to sociologist Wilson (2017), as documented by Van Dalen and Henkens (2012). According to Van Dalen and Henkens (2012), publication pressure has become increasingly visible in academia, manifesting in various practices. The primary source of this pressure is often faculty members themselves, motivated by desires to enhance their professional reputation, make lasting contributions to their field, and improve their salary and job prospects (Miller et al., 2011). However, this pressure to publish may conflict with research objectivity and integrity (Van Dalen & Henkens, 2012). Miller et al. (2011) share the same sentiment, suggesting that the effects of this pressure include increased stress levels, the marginalisation of teaching, and research that may lack relevance, creativity, and innovation.

While the pressure to publish is not always detrimental, Miller et al. (2011) suggest ways to mitigate its negative effects. These include networking with productive researchers in related disciplines to form research alliances, setting reasonable expectations for teaching and research commitments, prioritising family time, exercising regularly, and utilising semester breaks

effectively. These strategies align with the National Centre for Family Wellbeing (NCFWB) research agenda, which emphasises the importance of collaboration among researchers through networking. The FWB program, with its emphasis on work-life balance, has enabled educators engaged to prioritise their own wellbeing while meeting their research obligations. The evidence-based nature of the FWB program, spanning over 20 years (see Perera et al., 2022), has attracted educators to its research-oriented implementation. Many saw this as an opportunity to combine teaching with research, especially in environments with high teaching loads and limited research time. This is evidenced by a substantial body of literature produced across various tertiary settings in Australia (Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017), Papua New Guinea (Kitau et al., 2011), and China (Yan et al., 2019). These publications have, in turn, attracted research funding, supporting further implementation in community settings. For example, the initial publication of Kitau et al. (2011) on curricular implementation was followed by a community study (Kitau et al., 2016), similar to Whiteside et al. (2017). The latter resulted in funding to address wellbeing needs in rural Victoria, Australia (see Whiteside et al., 2018).

The internationalisation of FWB research has been another attractive feature for educators, who have become part of a global network of FWB researchers. A research impact study by Tsey et al. (2019) highlights this network through a research collaboration analysis, demonstrating the extent of collaboration between universities and elevating the profiles of involved researchers. To assess First Nations and industry partner engagement in FWB research, the authors employed a co-author network analysis. They analysed data from 48 peer-reviewed FWB publications as a proxy measure of this engagement. The underlying premise is that increased engagement with research users, such as through co-authorships, increases the likelihood of research outputs influencing decisions, thereby leading to research impact (Tsey et al., 2019). The co-author network analysis revealed a high level of collaboration between researchers from different universities, as well as between researchers and industry partners. The authors formed a connected network with an average of 5.969 collaborators per researcher (Tsey et al., 2019). Although the majority of authors were affiliated with universities, Tsey et al. (2019) report that 34% came from industry sectors, and 57% of these industry-based authors identified as First Nations.

8.3.3 Getting People to Experience It (Strategies)

Integrating the FWB program into curricula requires strategic approaches to help educators overcome initial resistance and recognise its value. Once educators decide to integrate the FWB program within their curricula, these sets of strategies become available for them to embrace. They include *changing the lens*, *adopting a generic name*, *mapping subject interrelatedness*, *adapting teaching*, and *fitting accreditation standards.*

8.3.3.1 Changing the Lens. The first step in integrating the FWB program into curricula involves *changing the lens* through which people view the program as a First Nations-developed program. Due to the often negative or dismissive attitudes towards wellbeing programs, particularly the FWB with First Nations origins, educators find it crucial to confront and dispel prejudices before fully engaging participants. This approach allows individuals to view the program in a new light, enhancing their receptiveness to its potential personal and professional impacts. This process of 'changing the lens' is consistent with current literature advocating for a shift in perspective on First Nations Knowledge systems, culture, and identity. Rather than viewing these through a negative, problem-focused lens, scholars propose reframing them in a positive light that highlights skills, talents, and nous (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Dudgeon et al., 2017; Fogarty et al., 2018). This reorientation towards a strengths-based perspective not only challenges existing prejudices but also opens up possibilities for a more optimistic and empowering future.

Changing the lens according to educators' testimonies has often helped to clear preconceived prejudices about the FWB program's First Nations origins among students and focus on strengths. Research approaches based on strengths rather than deficits tend to foster a sense of empowerment (McEwan et al., 2010; Tsey, 2010, 2019; Whiteside et al., 2006). This aligns with findings from Murrup-Stewart et al. (2019), who note from their systematic review that participants in First Nations social and emotional wellbeing programs emphasise the importance of interventions that are "Aboriginal designed, governed, lead, and owned" (p. 183). While participants initially experienced negative emotions such as fear, shame, stigmatisation, loss, and grief, engagement with these programs ultimately led to positive emotional outcomes, including empowerment, hopefulness, and calmness (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2019). This transformation in emotional experience underscores the potential of strength-based, culturally appropriate interventions like the FWB program to not only address

challenges but also to foster positive psychological states and a sense of agency among participants (McCalman et al., 2012; McEwan et al., 2010; Nolan et al., 2024; Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2005). The emphasis on First Nations leadership and ownership in the FWB program underscores the empowering nature of approaches that are developed by First Nations people themselves. This approach recognises and builds upon the inherent strengths of First Nations Knowledge systems and cultural practices (see McCalman et al., 2012; McEwan et al., 2010; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022; Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2005; Whiteside et al., 2006; Yan et al., 2019).

The strategy of building from strength maximises outcomes by leveraging what works (Tsey, 2010). An educator in this study reported that the 'clearing the lens' workshop aims to help students understand their emotions and strengths, thereby enabling them to recognise strengths in others. Strength-based approaches to research intervention are increasingly valued, especially for First Nations communities and their knowledge systems. Fogarty et al. (2018) note that there are increasing calls to consider alternative ways of viewing First Nations' health and wellbeing; and the most accepted approach is the 'strengths-based' approach, which moves away from problem-based paradigms by offering different language and solutions to tackle an issue. This approach is not a set of policies or programs but a conceptual framework for undertaking development and interventions (Fogarty et al., 2018). Working to enhance First Nations peoples' wellbeing, practitioners and policymakers could prioritise strengthening capacities at the individual, family, and community levels across all relevant domains (Dudgeon et al., 2017). The Lowitja Institute (2020) affirms this with the '2019 Close the Gap Report,' using narratives from First Nations people to provide a strengths-based analysis of their health and wellbeing, recognising the hard work, resilience, and aspirations of Australia's First Nations peoples. By engaging students in 'clearing the lens' activities before delving into the full FWB program, educators position students to focus on what is working in their lives and see their fellow students in that light. This approach encourages positive engagement with the FWB program, acknowledging hard work, resilience, respect, support, empathy, self-awareness, and other positive attributes that the FWB program enhances.

8.3.3.2 Adopting a Generic Name. Adopting a more generalised name for the FWB program within the curriculum allows it to align with students' academic goals while enhancing its accessibility and appeal to them. Following the 'changing the lens' approach, educators have employed this strategy to increase the program's relevance to students' educational outcomes.

This naming modification has helped boost student acceptance by clarifying the program's connection to their academic pursuits. The practice of using a more generalised name for the FWB program to make it accessible to diverse student groups and relevant to their studies is consistent with current literature on adaptive strategies regarding culturally responsive education and the integration of First Nations content into mainstream curricula (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2018; Sleeter, 2011).

Gay (2018) and Sleeter (2011) underscore the importance of making culturally responsive and ethnically specific programs more accessible and relevant to diverse student populations. Such programs, when integrated into curricula designed for diverse student groups, help learners engage with multiple perspectives and unlock their higher learning potential while simultaneously cultivating students' academic and psychological abilities that leads to higher levels of thinking (Gay, 2018; Sleeter, 2011). Similarly, Banks and Banks (2019), Ladson-Billings (2014), and Grant and Sleeter (2008) discuss the need for adaptive strategies in multicultural and culturally responsive education, and this resonates with culturally sustaining pedagogy, which engages students within the diverse cultural landscapes of modern classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In the context of First Nations education, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) emphasise the importance of making First Nations educational content accessible in mainstream settings, allowing it to be more approachable for non-First Nations students while preserving its core values. The renaming strategy used for the FWB program reflects these principles, aiming to increase students' acceptance and clarify the program's connection to broader academic goals. Castagno and Brayboy (2008) further argue that culturally responsive educational approaches should incorporate self-determination when it comes to First Nations Knowledge. They assert that tribal communities desire education that is both culturally responsive and consistent with their goals of self-determination. The FWB program aligns with this objective, as self-determination is central to its principles and operationalisation (Tsey et al., 2010).

8.3.3.3 Mapping Subject Interrelatedness. Establishing the FWB program's interconnectedness within existing curriculum content is essential for its effective integration. Building on the strategy of 'generalising the subject name' to highlight its relevance, educators further illustrate the FWB program's significance within existing curricula by identifying connections between subjects, acknowledging the program's role as a stepping stone in

students' educational journey, and demonstrating how it aligns with broader course objectives. These mapping exercises reveal how the FWB program seamlessly integrates into the curriculum, fulfilling subject requirements while explicitly connecting to students' overall learning experience. This approach ensures that the program is not perceived as an isolated entity but as an integral part of the educational framework that contributes to students' holistic development.

The mapping exercise is consistent with literature stressing the importance of demonstrating subject interrelatedness to showcase connections and relevance to students' overall learning goals within their curricula (Arafeh, 2016; Barradell et al., 2018; Harden, 2001; Hubball & Burt, 2004; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). Such mapping practices are vital for developing coherent and interconnected curricula in higher education (Arafeh, 2016; Barnett & Coate, 2004) and effectively integrating new programs like FWB into existing educational frameworks (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This underscores the FWB program's relevance to students' educational journey and future professional aspirations.

Harden (2001) argues that curriculum mapping benefits both staff and students by clearly illustrating the curriculum's key elements and their interrelationships. This approach allows students to identify *what, when, where, and how* they can learn, while staff gain clarity about their role within the larger educational framework (Harden, 2001). The process explicitly outlines the scope and sequence of student learning, clarifies links with assessment, and enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of curriculum planning (Harden, 2001), as exemplified in the FWB program mapping. Consequently, the curriculum becomes more transparent to all stakeholders, including educators, students, curriculum developers, managers, the public, and researchers (Harden, 2001). This perspective aligns with Barradell et al. (2018), who assert that curriculum should be understood in a comprehensive and dynamic sense. They propose that it should encompass purpose, content, alignment, scale, learning activities, assessment, physical environments, and learning collaborators.

Hubball and Burt (2004) argue that developing a well-designed and cohesive program across various sub-disciplines requires specific attention to both *vertical* and *horizontal* curriculum integration. Vertical integration ensures that course streams align with program years, and outcomes are integrated with learning experiences and assessment strategies within each sub-disciplinary field (Hubball & Burt, 2004). Horizontal integration, on the other hand, connects

knowledge and skills across disciplines, providing students with opportunities to apply and synthesise their learning from individual disciplinary streams to solve multidisciplinary cases and problems (Hubball & Burt, 2004). This integrated approach draws upon the expertise and issues of the sub-disciplines and builds progressively throughout the program (Hubball & Burt, 2004). As a result, students can acquire, integrate, and apply knowledge, abilities, and skills in a manner that is pedagogically grounded and adheres to best practices (Hubball & Burt, 2004).

Educators ought to recognise that curriculum mapping serves as the essential connective tissue for the curriculum, operationalising outcome-based education (Harden, 2001). Mapping illustrates how individual units fit into a larger, more coherent framework of courses and programs structured around key concepts, essential questions, and core assessment tasks (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). This approach engages students in inquiry that promotes the transfer of learning and provides a conceptual framework for making sense of discrete facts and skills, uncovering the big ideas within the content (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The outcomes of mapping process yields valuable evaluative information for course and program improvement regarding policy, content, and instruction (Arafeh, 2016).

When mapped, educators can demonstrate how the FWB program's outcomes connect to students' academic goals and resonate with their personal and professional aspirations. The mapping approach of the FWB program integrates activities and assessments into the broader context of soft skills development and personal wellbeing enhancement, complementing the acquisition of hard skills. These outcomes align with Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre's (2018) recommendations that all education providers, both university and non-university, along with their discipline groups, should make graduate attributes/soft skills more visible. This can be achieved by consistently embedding these attributes in assessed curricula, ensuring explicit assessment, and repeatedly communicating and explaining these attributes throughout the course (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). This approach supports Barradell et al.'s (2018) suggestion that curriculum design should extend beyond individual subjects to adopt a 'bigger picture' perspective on learning. In an era focused on quality assurance and academic standards, curriculum mapping is crucial in determining whether the curriculum meets specified standards and corresponds with expected learning outcomes, thereby fulfilling accreditation requirements (Harden, 2001).

8.3.3.4 Adapting Teaching. The next step is the vital strategy of adapting teaching pedagogy. This is the core part of the strategies because it involves the practicalities of teaching the FWB in a subject. Pedagogy, understood as the art of teaching or the science of how students learn (Sankey, 2021), is fundamental to achieving successful teaching outcomes. Improving pedagogical practices is, therefore, central to becoming an effective educator. A skilled educator significantly influences students' ability to flourish by providing a supportive scaffolding structure. As Biesta (2020) articulates, "…the point of education is never that students simply learn – they can do that anywhere, including, nowadays, on the Internet – but that they learn *something*, that they learn it *for a reason*, and that they learn it *from someone"* (p. 91). This underscores the critical role of an adept educator in shaping a student's educational journey. According to Abrantes et al. (2007), students' perceived learning is directly influenced by factors such as their interest, the quality of pedagogical delivery, and their learning performance. Effective pedagogy, therefore, significantly shapes students' learning experiences, with strong pedagogical practices having a positive impact on student outcomes. The ultimate goal of the pedagogical adaptation is to open up *existential possibilities* for students to exist *in* and *with* the world in a *grown-up* way – which, according to Biesta (2021), is the goal of education and, by extension, resonates with the principles of the FWB program (Tsey, 2015, 2019; Tsey et al., 2005). Through thoughtful pedagogical strategies, educators can create an environment that fosters personal growth, critical thinking, and the development of life skills central to the FWB program's objectives.

Operationalising the FWB program within curricula necessitates adapting teaching pedagogy to address various challenges. These include managing diverse class sizes, time constraints, and student age ranges; navigating complex group dynamics; ensuring inclusive lesson differentiation; and modifying sensitive topics. Educators have employed a range of strategies to meet these challenges, such as subdividing large classes, integrating diverse age groups to promote dynamic knowledge exchange, reinforcing group agreements, implementing differentiated instruction, thoughtfully adapting sensitive FWB program content, and utilising contextualised teaching methods to address diverse student needs. These approaches are consistent with a broad spectrum of educational literature, spanning from foundational works on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023), effective teaching strategies (Biggs et al., 2022; Hattie, 2008), and multicultural education (Banks, 2015; Banks & Banks, 2019), to research on evidence-based teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), higher education curriculum development (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019), and inclusive

pedagogy (Arday et al., 2021). The implementation strategies of the FWB program are further supported by research on classroom group work (Blatchford et al., 2003), facilitating discussions on sensitive topics and establishing ground rules (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012), enhancing adult learning motivation (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017), and adaptive teaching strategies (Rapanta et al., 2020). These sources collectively emphasise the importance of addressing diverse student needs through contextualised teaching methods and fostering student engagement. As Kahu and Nelson (2018) highlight, student engagement is enhanced when the delivery style aligns with personal preferences and the content resonates with individual interests. This engagement ultimately facilitates successful transitions into the workforce (Brennan & Dempsey, 2018). The rich tapestry of literature provides a robust theoretical and practical foundation for the adaptive strategies employed by educators in integrating the FWB program, ensuring its effectiveness across diverse educational contexts.

Adapting teaching pedagogy fundamentally revolves around differentiation. In education, differentiation serves as a method to address student diversity while balancing individual student needs with the broader vision of the learning institution (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). In other words, through differentiation, educators offer a range of authentic and relevant activities that engage and motivate students with differing academic abilities and learning styles (Bushie, 2015). A systematic review by Eikeland and Ohna (2022) identified four distinct approaches to differentiation: *differentiation as individualisation, differentiation as adaptation to specific groups, differentiation as adaptations within diverse classrooms,* and *differentiation in a system perspective*. Despite these varied approaches, a common thread is the necessity to adapt teaching methods to meet diverse student needs while aligning with an institution's educational goals. According to Tomlinson (2014), educators in differentiated classrooms are flexible time managers who employ a range of instructional strategies and partner with their students to shape both the content and the learning environment. These educators resist forcing students into a standardised mould; instead, they function as diagnosticians who prescribe optimal instruction based on their content knowledge and evolving understanding of student progress. They are, in essence, students of their students. Furthermore, Tomlinson (2014) likens these educators to artists who skilfully use their craft to address students' needs. They eschew standardised, mass-produced lessons, and recognise that each student is an individual requiring a personalised approach. Their primary objective is to foster student learning and satisfaction in the learning process rather than merely covering curriculum content (Tomlinson, 2014). This approach to differentiation resonates closely with

the principles of the FWB program, which emphasises personalised learning experiences and the development of individual strengths (Tsey et al., 2005).

Tomlinson's (2014) explication of differentiation aligns closely with Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2020) discussion on evidence-based practices for effective teaching and learning. They advocate for classrooms that function as physically and psychologically safe, personalised learning communities. In such environments, students feel a sense of belonging, and educators employ practices that enable them to know their students intimately, allowing them to respond to their specific needs, interests, learning readiness, and growth opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This approach is consistent with the work of Su and Wood (2012), who maintain that students flourish when they are in a space that allows them to engage meaningfully in their learning, knowing that they are being supported in their difficulties and mistakes. The best educators strive to cultivate a naturally critical learning environment characterised by intellectual rigour and a strong support system (Bain, 2004; Su & Wood, 2012). Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2020) emphasis on the importance of creating small learning communities within larger educational structures allows staff and students to collaborate in smaller units that function as close-knit communities, facilitating the development of shared norms and practices. This approach resonates with Blatchford et al.'s (2003) observation that classrooms naturally foster various student 'groupings' for diverse purposes. These groupings, often initiated by educators, are structured and utilised to serve specific learning objectives. The authors argue that when the interplay between group size, interaction dynamics, and learning tasks is strategically planned, it significantly enhances the effectiveness of learning experiences. This strategic approach to group formation and management aligns closely with the adaptive teaching strategies employed in the FWB program, including managing class size, facilitating group work, addressing diverse student needs, and the strategies of Brookfield and Preskill (2012) on modifying sensitive topics and navigating group dynamics. They highlight the importance of thoughtful, purpose-driven classroom organisation to maximise student engagement and learning outcomes and ensure a safe space for students to be active participants in their educational journey. In extrapolation, the approach is supported by an expanding body of research indicating that the classroom environment is instrumental in fostering positive and supportive conditions conducive to effective teaching and learning processes (Freiberg et al., 2009).

As Tomlinson (2014) affirms, educators in differentiated classrooms begin with a robust understanding of what constitutes powerful curriculum and engaging instruction. They then consider how to modify these elements to ensure each learner acquires the necessary knowledge, understanding, and skills for their next learning phase. These educators acknowledge and plan for both the commonalities and essential differences that make learners unique individuals. As per Tomlinson (2014), differentiated classrooms embody practical wisdom; the logical progression in such a classroom is as follows. A nurturing environment fosters learning; quality curriculum requires clear, compelling learning goals that engage students' minds and lead to understanding; persistent formative assessment guides both teachers and students towards essential objectives; instruction is most effective when carefully tailored with content goals to address needs indicated by both formal and informal formative assessments; and classroom management must balance predictability and flexibility to allow a diverse range of students to achieve key goals (Tomlinson, 2014). When educators strategically differentiate their teaching, students are engaged throughout the learning process, facilitating a deeper appreciation of the FWB program. This approach corresponds with the strategy observed by McKendrick-Calder and Choate (2024), where educators supported student wellbeing by adapting their teaching methods. A pilot study with high school First Nations students demonstrated how the adult teaching approach of the FWB program was also adapted through differentiation to meet individual needs (Tsey et al., 2005). A key strength of the FWB teaching method lies in its participatory social learning approach. This method engages students of all ages through brainstorming and collective sharing, creating an environment where students feel free to express themselves and generate new ideas. This participatory learning-by-doing approach is crucial for developing essential problem-solving skills, independent thinking, and the ability to become confident, have self-esteem and a sense of mastery (Tsey et al., 2005).

Adapting the FWB program's teaching pedagogy to meet diverse student needs not only reflects the inclusive pedagogy necessary for navigating today's multicultural learning environments but also underscores the importance of making a collective effort to include First Nations perspectives in mainstream curricula. Arday et al. (2021) emphasise that a collective effort is required to redesign curricula to engage inclusively and recognise that diverse knowledge systems are essential for successful navigation in a truly multicultural global society. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2023) further assert that all educators, staff, and relevant stakeholders have a responsibility to support the shift towards student-focused instruction,

ensuring that learning spaces are efficiently crafted to teach the diverse learners who populate them. In discussing the importance of inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum, Arday et al. (2021) concur that the effectiveness of such a powerful approach is predicated on a sound rationale for crafting a curriculum that exposes students to a rich diversity of viewpoints and knowledge systems. By and large, these scholarly works demonstrate that the strategies employed in operationalising the FWB program are firmly grounded in recent educational research and best practices. They lend credibility to the approaches used and illustrate that the FWB program aligns with current thinking in higher education pedagogy while advocating for a collective effort to make it a core part of university curricula.

8.3.3.5 Fitting Accreditation Standards. The final step in integrating the FWB within curricula involves fitting accreditation standards. This study's findings indicate that educators successfully met these standards by fulfilling curriculum requirements through creating practical assessments, and ensuring student satisfaction. Educators employed various assessment techniques, such as having students run the FWB program with family or friends and write reflective reports, fostering practical application and ownership of program skills. They also collected and analysed student feedback through multiple channels, including online journals and formal evaluations. This approach not only ensured the FWB program met accreditation standards and student expectations but also informed teaching practices. These steps align with literature emphasising the importance of systematically collecting data about student learning through assessment and using this information to improve student outcomes (Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Kuh et al., 2015). Suskie (2018) corroborates this by stressing that the best assessment practices are those whose results inform meaningful, important decisions. The approach also resonates with the concept of student feedback literacy by Carless and Boud (2018), which refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and apply feedback to improve learning strategies. Building on this, Boud and Molloy (2013) and Carless and Boud (2018) stress the need to reconsider traditional feedback models and cultivate students' feedback literacy to ensure effective engagement with and applying feedback. Furthermore, Winstone and Carless (2019) advocate for learning-focused feedback processes, which they argue are crucial in crafting assessments that promote deep learning while adhering to accreditation standards. These studies collectively illuminate the intricate relationship between feedback in ensuring student satisfaction and fulfilling accreditation requirements.

Assessment plays a crucial role in higher education, profoundly impacting students' experiences and behaviours, perhaps even more so than instruction itself (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). This significance becomes particularly apparent when evaluating soft skills programs like FWB, which pose unique challenges compared to the more straightforward assessment of hard skills subjects. Escolà-Gascón and Gallifa (2022) maintain that assessing soft skills is crucial, as these competencies serve as indicators of students' potential career trajectories and professional development. However, Balcar (2016) observes that the subjective nature of soft skills makes them difficult to measure objectively. Despite this perceived difficulty, educators integrating the FWB program within their curricula considered innovative ways to develop practical assessment methods to measure student progress while meeting accreditation requirements effectively. On some occasions, the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM) tool (see Haswell et al., 2010) has been used by some educators, and its effectiveness has been evidenced in studies such as Fitzpatrick et al. (2019) and Whiteside et al. (2017). To shed light on creating practical assessments, Biggs et al. (2022) advocate for a holistic assessment approach that incorporates practical methods such as presentations, interviews, projects, and reflective journals. These methods aim to evaluate real-life skills, communication abilities, interactive responses, reflection, application, research capabilities, professional competencies, and creativity (Biggs et al., 2022). This is consistent with the notion of reframing assessment research through a practice perspective by Boud et al. (2018), which offers insights into creating authentic assessments that reflect real-world applications. The approach is further reinforced by Tai et al. (2018) on developing evaluative judgement in students, which can enhance their ability to assess their own work and that of peers, a crucial skill in the reflective practices often employed in FWB assessments.

Biggs et al. (2022) argue that when assessment requirements align with the curriculum, students naturally learn what they are intended to learn. Suskie (2018) supports this view, emphasising that effective assessments should be clear to all stakeholders – students, faculty, and staff. Medland (2019) also shares this view, stating that transparency must be ensured in the accreditation process. Suskie (2018) stresses that quality assessments depend on their appropriate use and alignment with learning goals rather than sacrificing validity for reliability. For instance, a test designed for computational skills cannot effectively assess critical thinking, regardless of its apparent suitability (Suskie, 2018). This perspective justifies the practical and innovative assessment strategies educators employ in the FWB program. By clearly defining learning objectives and devising creative yet rigorous assessment methods, they ensure the

achievement of required outcomes while maintaining student satisfaction and meeting accreditation standards. In the context of quality assurance through assessments, effective practices have become crucial for meeting accreditation requirements. Meeting accreditation standards is fundamental to maintaining educational quality (Medland, 2019). While the tension between assessment, accountability, and improvement abounds (Ewell, 2009), meeting accreditation demands proffers a framework for continuous evaluation and enhancement of the assessment process (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Schoepp & Benson, 2016). By extension, aligning student needs and meeting accreditation standards foster a cycle of ongoing improvement in higher education assessment practices.

8.3.4 Outcomes

The FWB program has yielded transformative outcomes for students and educators, extending beyond personal growth to professional development. For instance, while integrating the FWB program into their curricula to benefit students, educators reported unexpectedly experiencing positive impacts themselves. This dual effect highlights the program's potency, demonstrating that engagement with the FWB program, whether as a participant or facilitator, often leads to meaningful change. Key outcomes observed for both groups, albeit in distinct ways, include enhanced *soft skills competencies* for both students and educators, improved *personal wellbeing* for both students and educators, *educational outcomes* for students, and *professional growth* for educators. These findings underscore the program's wide-reaching influence, surpassing its initial student-focused objectives.

8.3.4.1 Soft Skills Competencies. Educators who participated in this study reported that the FWB program fostered essential soft skills among students, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence through collaborative activities, reflective journaling, and public speaking. These outcomes align with current literature emphasising the importance of enhancing soft skills for graduate employability and personal fulfilment (Brennan & Dempsey, 2018; Cinque, 2016, 2021; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). In today's globalised knowledge economy, employers prioritise graduates' abilities to communicate effectively, demonstrate self-efficacy, build relationships in diverse teams, and adapt to changing contexts (Succi & Canovi, 2020). The FWB program's focus on these competencies prepares students to navigate life's complexities and enhances their professional prospects. Brennan and

Dempsey (2018) note that desirable employability attributes now include workplace functionality, effective communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and adaptability. In response to pressure from policymakers and employers, higher education institutions are integrating skill-based learning outcomes into degree programs (Clarke, 2018; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Succi & Canovi, 2020). University staff are adopting new pedagogical tools to help students acquire transferable skills (Archer & Davison, 2008; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Companies seek a more skilled workforce, emphasising soft skills such as entrepreneurship, creative problem-solving, learning agility, teamwork, clear communication, cultural adaptability, conflict management, and stress resilience (Succi & Canovi, 2020). These competencies are crucial for graduates' successful transition from education to the labour market (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

In Australia, soft skills are considered essential competencies that graduates must master to prepare for the workforce. The current Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) by the Department of Education (2021) mandates that students demonstrate mastery of specified learning outcomes upon program completion, evaluated at unit level, course level, or both. These outcomes must include subject-specific knowledge and also broadly applicable skills valuable for employment and further study. Students are expected to develop independent and critical thinking abilities for lifelong learning (Department of Education, 2021). The FWB program's integration into university curricula, resulting in enhanced soft skills competencies among students, aligns with these national requirements. It is consistent with Clarke's (2018) assertion that university integrations of various transferable skill-based learning objectives into their degree programs are designed to enhance graduates' employability and, consequently, improve their prospects in the job market. Effectively preparing students for workforce demands and, potentially, furthering academic pursuits to meet the Australian Government stipulations for higher education outcomes.

The way educators operationalised the FWB program attributes in their subject activities and clearly communicated their learning goals while employing creative assessment measures corresponds with the recommendations by Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre (2018). Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre (2018) stipulate that higher education institutions should clearly articulate and publish the skills attributes they prioritise, ensuring alignment with student needs and institutional goals. The authors emphasise that while attention is given to developing global citizenship, teamwork, and communication, such attention should also be accorded to students'

independent, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Assessment of these attributes should incorporate objective measures and stakeholder surveys, with regular reviews ensuring relevance in the evolving educational and professional landscape (Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). Furthermore, the FWB program's ability to foster a sense of community and belonging, bridging generational gaps and empowering students in personal and professional domains echoes Strayhorn's (2018) research on the importance of belonging in educational success and the work of Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) on the impact of campus climate on educational outcomes.

Educators have also reaped substantial benefits from the FWB program, reporting improvements in teamwork, communication, empowerment, self-awareness, resilience, relationship-building, problem-solving, positive attitude, conflict resolution, critical reflection, confidence, and compassion. While these outcomes were surprising, based on the program being tailored for the students, it aligns with the findings of Avalos (2011) on the positive impacts of professional development programs, where educators are both subjects and objects of learning and development. While integrating the FWB program for their students' benefit, educators unexpectedly became both facilitators and beneficiaries of the learning process. This dual role positioned them simultaneously as subjects of learning and development, and objects of professional development.

The program's innovative and scientific teaching methods resonated deeply among educators, providing techniques to address conflicts and foster equality in both personal and professional relationships. This approach is consistent with Hattie (2012), who highlights the importance of visible learning that emphasises ongoing evaluation of teaching impact and subsequent methodological adjustments. Hattie (2012) argues that academic achievement improves when teaching and learning processes are transparent to both educators and students. Similarly, it resonates with Biggs, Tang and Kennedy's (2022) focus on quality learning in higher education, which advocates for optimising instructional methods to enhance teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, the FWB program's enhancement of pedagogical techniques aligns with Shulman's (1986) concept of pedagogical content knowledge. This concept involves educators using diverse representational methods to make subjects comprehensible, drawing from both research and practical experience (Shulman, 1986). Grossman et al. (2009) corroborate this approach, advocating for a reimagined teacher education that incorporates pedagogies of enactment alongside existing reflective and investigative practices. They

propose organising professional education around core practices that develop knowledge, skills, and professional identity through practical application. This approach ultimately fosters more effective and empathetic educational practices.

While the FWB program demonstrates significant soft skills benefits, it is important to highlight some of the criticisms of soft skills-focused initiatives in higher education. Some scholars argue that emphasising soft skills may compromise core academic competencies. For instance, Wheelahan (2015) suggests that focusing on generic skills in vocational education could dilute disciplinary knowledge, potentially disadvantaging students long-term. Similarly, Allais (2014) critiques the commodification of education through skills-based approaches, arguing that an excessive focus on competencies and skills over knowledge acquisition may lead to an oversimplification of intricate educational processes that could potentially compromise student development and learning outcomes. Critics such as Cappelli (2015) contend that employers should play a larger role in developing job-specific soft skills, challenging the notion that universities should be the primary arena for such development. These contrasting viewpoints highlight the complexity of integrating soft skills programs like the FWB program into higher education today and raise questions about the need to balance academic knowledge that maintains rigour while fostering practical soft skills in higher education curricula. This study advocates for such balance, aligning with the recommendations of Balcar (2016) and Cimatti (2016) on the need to prepare students for employability by harmonising soft skills enhancement with hard skills acquisition in university learning.

8.3.4.2 Personal Wellbeing Outcomes. Wellbeing improvement stands out as one of the FWB program's impacts for both students and educators. According to educators, students reported that the FWB sessions were the highlight of their week, emphasising how the program addressed their holistic needs through practices such as meditation and life-enhancing activities. These practices enable students to experience personal growth, improve interactions with their peers, educators, partners, and children, and foster a sense of empowerment in their personal and professional lives. This aligns with the findings of Baik et al. (2019), Sanders et al. (2024), and Zhu et al. (2021), who observed that regular interaction with peers and educators – informing relationships and interconnectedness, along with collaborative learning, plays a crucial role in addressing students' wellbeing. It also aligns with evidence-based strategies in literature for a wellbeing curriculum identified by McKendrick-Calder and Choate (2024), which include establishing clear course expectations, balancing academic workloads, offering

flexible assessments, promoting inclusive peer relationships, employing emotionally intelligent teaching methods, implementing initiatives that foster a sense of belonging, and making connections to real-world applications. The wellbeing outcomes experienced by students in the FWB program are consistent with a growing body of research emphasising the importance of integrating wellbeing programs within curricula to enhance students' overall wellbeing. Such studies (for example, Sanders et al., 2024; Travia et al., 2022; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019; Zhu & Shek, 2021) collectively underscore the significant positive impact of integrated wellbeing initiatives on student outcomes. These findings highlight the effectiveness of approaches like the FWB program in promoting student wellbeing through curriculum-integrated strategies, reinforcing the value of such programs in higher education settings.

Sanders et al. (2024) investigated the impact of the FWB program, integrated into a social work subject, on students' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program, which aligned with the subject's focus on self-awareness and critical reflection, was delivered online due to pandemic restrictions. According to Sanders et al. (2024), previous research by Whiteside et al. (2017) demonstrates the program's effectiveness in enhancing students' life satisfaction, personal wellbeing, and social competence. Similar positive outcomes were reported in studies conducted in various contexts, including health managers in Timor-Leste (Tsey et al., 2018), university students in China (Yan et al., 2019), and young Aboriginal men in Australia (Whiteside et al., 2016). Sanders et al.'s (2024) study sought to determine if these benefits would persist during a major crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed an overwhelmingly positive response to the subject, with students emphasising its benefits to their everyday experiences, transcending pandemic-related concerns. The results affirm the value of the subject and the relationally-based FWB program in helping students develop and maintain wellbeing during challenging and unpredictable times, thereby demonstrating its resilience and effectiveness even in the face of significant adversity (Sanders et al., 2024).

The invaluable impact of wellbeing on student outcomes is why Baik et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of a collaborative approach involving students, educators, and university administrators in addressing student wellbeing. They argue that demonstrating care and concern from educators and staff can significantly alter the university student experience, ultimately leading to improved mental wellbeing. This is consistent with the findings of this study, which highlight how its interactive, collaborative, and participatory nature transformed students' expectations of a typical university course. Educators interviewed in this study

reported that, unlike content-heavy subjects, the FWB-integrated course enabled students to focus on practical aspects of their daily lives. This approach exemplifies the care and concern that Baik et al. (2019) advocate for, effectively changing students' university experience. As a result, students looked forward to the FWB sessions, thus demonstrating how a well-designed wellbeing program can positively impact the overall student experience and, consequently, their mental wellbeing.

Conley et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of universal mental health prevention programs in higher education, finding that skill-training programs with supervised practice were significantly more effective than those without supervision or psychoeducational programs alone. These programs showed improvements in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and general psychological distress while enhancing social-emotional skills, self-perceptions, and academic performance. This is consistent with the findings of this study in which educators, through the FWB program's holistic approach, incorporated supervised practice within the subject. Students engage in supervised learning activities and online journaling with feedback and are encouraged to facilitate the program with family and friends. This method promotes intersubjective reflection, enhancing wellbeing while acknowledging students' active role in their own emancipation, as emphasised by Jacques Rancière (see Bingham et al., 2010; Rancière, 1991, 2004, 2008; Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). Furthermore, it reflects the 'Socratic Way' of teaching inherent in the FWB program, as expounded in my work (see Orih, 2022), or 'Both Ways' of learning approach in First Nations parlance (see Hall & Wilkes, 2015). Both these philosophical approaches underpin the theoretical frameworks of this project, reinforcing the effectiveness of the FWB program's comprehensive and participatory nature in promoting student wellbeing.

The holistic approach of the FWB program, particularly the ways it encouraged practices like meditation among students, is supported by research on the import of mindfulness practices to enhance wellbeing. Galante et al. (2018) found that mindfulness-based interventions significantly increased stress resilience among university students, suggesting that such training could be an effective component of broader student mental health strategies. Similarly, Dvořáková et al. (2019) emphasise the crucial role of mindfulness and compassion skills in students' coping and wellbeing, especially during the transition to college. A meta-analysis by Dawson et al. (2020) further corroborates these findings, revealing that mindfulness-based interventions for university students significantly reduce distress and state of anxiety. These

studies collectively underscore the importance of meditation practices encouraged by the FWB program, aligning with its focus on personal growth and empowerment.

Usher and Curran (2019) synthesised research on university student mental health and wellbeing, recommending a comprehensive approach that acknowledges multiple factors influencing student behaviours. They emphasise the need to understand the interrelationship between personal, home, university, and community domains, arguing that interventions targeting multiple components of the socio-ecological model are more likely to succeed. The authors stress the importance of implementing student mental health policies and initiatives that address each domain, ensuring a holistic approach to social and emotional wellbeing. This aligns with the community-oriented nature of the FWB program, which embraces a multidimensional concept of wellbeing that involves connection to land, spirituality, culture, family, ancestry, and community while exploring empowerment at personal/family, group/organisational and community/structural levels (Tsey et al., 2007). Through its learning activities, participants are empowered to take control over conditions affecting their lives (see McCalman et al., 2012; Nolan et al., 2024; Tsey, 2008, 2015; Tsey et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2005; Tsey et al., 2010; Whiteside et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2016; Yan et al., 2019). Henning et al. (2018) further support this multifaceted approach, advocating for cultivating a healthy learning environment as key to sustaining wellbeing in higher education settings. These studies collectively provide evidence for the effectiveness of comprehensive wellbeing programs in educational settings, corroborating the positive wellbeing outcomes observed among students in this study.

For educators, the FWB program has unexpectedly emerged as a powerful approach for enhancing their personal wellbeing, despite its integration within curricula initially being tailored for their students. Educators reported that the program's structured reflection process provided a valuable framework for learning from experiences. At the same time, teachings on emotional management and conflict resolution alleviated anxiety and fostered peace and inclusivity in both personal and professional spheres. These outcomes correspond with research by Lomas et al. (2017) and Hwang et al. (2017), who demonstrated the significant impact of mindfulness interventions on educators' wellbeing and performance. Furthermore, the structured reflection component of the FWB program resonates with the work of Beshai et al. (2016), which addressed the endemic concern of educators' stress through mindfulness-based interventions. Their study showed promising results in reducing stress and increasing wellbeing

by cultivating mindfulness and self-compassion among educators (Beshai et al., 2016). These findings collectively suggest that customised wellbeing programs, such as the FWB program, offer a promising approach to improving educators' overall wellbeing and professional effectiveness.

In light of professional effectiveness, educators credited the FWB program for increased happiness, improved confidence, and more harmonious family dynamics, which overflew to their professional domain. It impacts both their personal and professional lives. These outcomes align with several studies highlighting the multifaceted benefits of wellbeing programs for educators, which ultimately translate to improved student outcomes. For instance, Jennings et al. (2019) reported sustained enhancements in educators' self-reported social and emotional competence and wellbeing following participation in a wellbeing program. In the same vein, de Carvalho et al. (2021) found that mindfulness-based social-emotional competency (SEC) interventions reduce educator burnout, cultivate SEC and wellbeing, promote a nurturing learning climate, and enhance students' SEC and wellbeing. Hwang et al. (2019) observed that mindfulness and self-compassion training can function as self-help skills, elucidate educator-student interconnectivity, and promote person-centred teaching practices. Almaguer-Botero et al. (2023) extended these positive outcomes to include improved job satisfaction among educators. These studies collectively demonstrate consistent positive effects of wellbeing programs on educators' wellbeing and stress reduction as it translates to their teaching profession, mirroring the experiences reported by educators in the FWB program.

8.3.4.3 Educational Outcomes. The integration of the FWB program into curricula has shown significant academic benefits for students by enhancing their academic achievements, career readiness, and First Nations Knowledge threshold. Extensive literature highlights how programs such as the FWB, when integrated into curricula, can improve academic outcomes, employability, and First Nations cultural understanding (Clarke, 2018; Conley et al., 2015; Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Miller et al., 2013; Nakata, 2002, 2007a; Nakata et al., 2012; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Phan et al., 2016; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). According to educators, students reported increased self-awareness, confidence, and stress management skills, leading to better daily life management and academic engagement. These outcomes are supported by meta-analyses (see Conley et al., 2015; Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Regehr et al., 2013) that confirm the positive impact of wellbeing interventions on academic performance. Based

on these findings, Regehr et al. (2013) advocate for widespread implementation of such programs in universities.

The FWB program's focus on career preparation aligns with universities' efforts to enhance graduate employability through embedded generic skill-based learning programs (Clarke, 2018; Healy et al., 2022). Jackson and Tomlinson's (2020) research reveals that students' perceptions of the labour market influence their self-perceived employability, sense of career control, and engagement in career planning. This highlights the importance of universities and career practitioners in guiding students' career strategies, particularly in the challenging job markets, and underscores the potential impact of programs like FWB on students' career readiness and planning (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). In the Australian context, this effort is consistent with current Australian Government priorities such as the 'Closing the Gap' policy, which emphasises the importance of culturally appropriate career preparation for First Nations students (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a). First Nations students often face challenges resulting from the ongoing impacts of colonisation, including intergenerational trauma, cultural and linguistic erosion, and socio-economic disparities (Nakata, 2002, 2007a; Tsey et al., 2010; Yip & Chakma, 2024). The National Agreement on Closing the Gap aims to improve outcomes for First Nations peoples through four Priority Reforms and 17 socio-economic targets. Five of these targets focus on education, ranging from early childhood to youth employment, and require investment in new and existing initiatives by the Australian Government to support these goals (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a).

The 'Closing the Gap' initiatives, entrenched in years of advocacy for self-determination and cultural recognition, represent a significant shift towards community-led, culturally informed solutions to First Nations disadvantage and underscore the critical role of education and wellbeing programs in addressing disparities faced by First Nations Australians (Calma et al., 2017). However, Bishop and Vass (2021) argue that in the Australian context, where First Nations students are consistently confronted with deficit-focused government policies and 'close the gap' rhetoric, there is a need for a collaborative, culturally responsive approach to embedding First Nations Knowledge systems in teaching and learning. This perspective aligns with the FWB program's methodology, which employs culturally responsive educational practices that also involve First Nations leadership in its operationalisation, as testified by educators. These practices have been instrumental in the program's success in enhancing

academic outcomes and preparing students for future careers (see Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). In extrapolation, it aligns with the recommendation of Yip and Chakma (2024) that educational programs (such as the FWB) should foster stronger connections with First Nations communities and ensure that First Nations Knowledge is taught by educators who have received training in consultation with First Nations Knowledge keepers.

The advancement of First Nations Knowledge, facilitated by the FWB program is consistent with best practices in First Nations research and education. Synot et al. (2021) emphasise the need for meaningful integration of First Nations Knowledge and methodologies in higher education beyond tokenistic approaches. Similarly, Thaman (2006) advocates for including Pacific First Nations Knowledge systems in higher education discourse, particularly in Oceania. Yip and Chakma (2024) argue that incorporating First Nations perspectives into curricula and creating culturally respectful learning environments prepares students to work effectively with First Nations communities. These positions are consistent with the result of this study, which underscores the invaluableness of the FWB program. According to testimonies from some educators, participation in the FWB program equips students in social work, nursing, and allied health fields with skills for working effectively in First Nations communities while simultaneously promoting a more inclusive educational environment. A study by Williamson et al. (2023) found that exposure to the FWB program was associated with a significant increase in year 12 or higher educational attainment among participants compared to non-participants. This finding adds to the benefit of participating in the FWB program and demonstrates that the program not only prepares students to work in First Nations communities but also supports First Nations students in completing their studies by reducing attrition rates.

8.3.4.4 Professional Growth. Educators who have integrated the FWB program have leveraged their experiences to contribute significantly to research in Indigenous studies, hence enriching the knowledge base through publications and evidence-based studies. Bainbridge et al. (2014) highlight the importance of First Nations-focused programs generating increased research and rigorous evaluation publications, especially in the face of the preponderance of descriptive research in the field. These contributions have proven instrumental in raising awareness and promoting the adoption of the FWB program across educational institutions (see Kitau et al., 2011; Sanders et al., 2024; Tsey et al., 2005; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019), public health domains (see Kitau et al., 2016; Tsey et al., 2003; Whiteside et al., 2014),

and various organisations or local communities (see Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2010; Tsey et al., 2007; Whiteside et al., 2016; Whiteside et al., 2006; Williamson et al., 2023), while also advancing educators professionally. McCalman et al. (2018) demonstrate how such First Nations-focused programs can be effectively adopted across different settings, thereby underlining their broader impact (see also McCalman, 2013).

In addendum, integrating the FWB program within curricula has led to a pedagogical shift among educators. Its intersubjective nature and emphasis on personal stories have influenced teaching styles among educators and, consequently, fostered a collaborative atmosphere where students are viewed as experts in their own right. This is not only consistent with the 'Socratic Way' of teaching (Assiter, 2013; Orih, 2022), but it resonates with Nakata's (2007a) work on the 'cultural interface', which provides a framework for understanding the intersubjective nature of teaching in cross-cultural contexts. According to an educator testimony, some educators have adopted the participatory social learning method engrained in FWB operationalisation to teach other courses. Tsey et al. (2007) discuss the participatory nature of the FWB program and its impact on teaching and learning, highlighting the equal role it fosters between facilitators and learners and supporting this observed pedagogical shift. Not to be belabouring, this pedagogical evolution aligns with literature emphasising the importance of educators continually refining their teaching methods to suit today's dynamic multicultural environments (Gay, 2018; Grant & Sleeter, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2014). The FWB program's influence on teaching pedagogy exemplifies how its operationalisation *in situ* embraces the multicultural dimensions of today's learning spaces.

8.4 Theoretical and Research Implications

In Chapter 5, I outlined three theoretical frameworks underpinning this study: Jacque Rancière's philosophy of emancipation and equality, the 'Socratic Way', and implementation science theory. In the same chapter, I also engaged with the philosophical concepts of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. I used a constructivist grounded theory lens to facilitate a deep understanding of educators' experiences in integrating the FWB program into their curricula. The following section demonstrates how the generated theoretical model aligns with these frameworks and concepts.

8.4.1 Rancière's Philosophy of Emancipation and Equality

The philosophy of emancipation and equality challenges traditional power dynamics in emancipation processes by maintaining that true emancipation must stem from a place of equality where the emancipated play an active role alongside the emancipator (Bingham et al., 2010; Rancière, 1991, 2004, 2008; Skarpenes & Sæverot, 2018). With the need to facilitate a learning environment in which social inequities are reduced, this philosophy aligns with the FWB program's principles, which empower participants to take control over the factors affecting their lives and position educators as facilitators while enabling participants to actively engage in their own emancipation from a stance of equality.

The study's theoretical model, 'Getting people to experience it', aligns with and extends Rancière's philosophy of emancipation and equality. The 'changing the lens' strategy, to eschew preconceived biases about the FWB program, framed it in a positive light. Educators reported that this positive framing resulted in an elevated appreciation of the program from both First Nations and non-First Nations students. Consequently, it optimised First Nations students' sense of pride and placed them on an equal, strength-based footing with their non-First Nations peers. This approach is particularly significant given the prevalence of negative or deficit-based framing of First Nations Knowledge systems (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Dudgeon et al., 2017; Fogarty et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2024). This aligns with Rancière's democratisation of the sensual, which, according to Skarpenes and Sæverot (2018), occurs when all individuals are given the opportunity to use their skills to express their experiences as equals. Students vivified this by actively participating in their own emancipation by providing feedback and suggestions to improve the FWB program's integration into curricula. This active involvement resulted in several strategic approaches, such as generalising subject names to show relevance to students course requirements, adapting teaching methods through differentiation to include fun activities and games, modifying sensitive topics to ensure collaboration, designing thematic activities that aligned with student interests, and ensuring student satisfaction in line with accreditation standards. These strategies demonstrate how the model enables students to shape their learning experience, thereby embodying the principles of emancipation and equality central to Rancière's philosophy.

While supporting Rancière's philosophy, this model further contributes to the idea that equality and emancipation thrive in a collaborative environment. It emphasises the necessity of a

healthy, cooperative learning atmosphere that empowers students to operate from a position of equality. Educators constantly emphasised how the collaborative learning environment they created enhanced the active participation of their students. This collaborative aspect enriches the understanding of emancipation in educational settings, bridging Rancière's ideas with practical implementation. The philosophy of emancipation and equality, as explored in this study, naturally transitions into the 'Socratic Way'.

8.4.2 The 'Socratic Way' Philosophy

The philosophy of emancipation and the 'Socratic Way' are somewhat intertwined in the operationalisation of the FWB program *in situ*. The 'Socratic Way' philosophy is rooted in the ancient Greek concept of love as a mutual process of growth and learning, where individuals educate each other in pursuit of the highest good (Orih, 2022; Sydney Opera House, 2020). This philosophy, emphasising the interchangeability of teacher and student roles, aligns with the collaborative approach of the FWB program, where all participants teach and learn from one another (Assiter, 2013). The 'Socratic Way' informs the theoretical model of this study, reflecting the FWB program's 'Two Ways' learning and collaborative problem-solving methods aimed at promoting student wellbeing through a soft skills approach.

The FWB program's teaching pedagogy is grounded in the participatory learning-by-doing method, as vividly demonstrated when students are empowered to facilitate the program with their families and friends. This approach creates a dynamic where students transition into the role of educators, only to have this role reversed when they receive feedback from their academic assessors. This cyclical exchange of roles between teacher and student embodies the essence of the 'Socratic Way'. While aligning with the 'Socratic Way' principle, this study's findings suggest that this philosophy operates most effectively within a framework of empowerment. Drawing on Whiteside et al.'s (2011) exploration of 'empowerment' in First Nations contexts, the study recognises it as a multifaceted concept encompassing interconnected elements that enable individuals to assume control over their lives, even in the face of persistent social constraints. The findings of this study build upon existing evidence of empowerment, highlighting its significance through the lens of the 'Socratic Way'. This perspective complements Rancière's philosophy of emancipation and equality by emphasising student agency in the emancipatory process. It underscores the importance of students actively

participating in and shaping the conditions that affect their lives, thus bridging theoretical concepts with practical application in educational settings.

8.4.3 Implementation Science Theory

Implementation science studies methods of promoting the systematic adoption of evidence-based practices by employing theoretical frameworks to understand success factors and ensure a good 'fit' between the proposed innovation, implementation process, and context (including structural conditions, organisational settings, and involved individuals) to improve service quality and effectiveness (Eccles & Mittman, 2006; McCalman, 2013; Nilsen, 2015). When implementing a First Nations-developed program, the transfer process should involve an episode-by-episode, demand-responsive approach rather than a top-down dissemination strategy (McCalman, 2013). This involves making the program available and accessible to new settings through interactive engagement, co-produced by program providers to effect change and facilitate uptake within new organisations (McCalman, 2013). Understanding the context, transfer process, and specific needs of the target population is crucial for successful implementation (McCalman, 2013).

The theoretical model of this study incorporates McCalman's (2013) approach to implementing First Nations-developed programs. It emphasises the importance of gradual, episodic transfer, as exemplified by the 'changing the lens' pre-workshop period that precedes the full FWB program engagement throughout the semester. This model recognises that the FWB program's adoption stems from educators' demands after experiencing its potential benefits rather than top-down dissemination. The model underlines the collaborative interaction among educators, students, and program providers throughout the integration process. This cooperative approach aims to effect positive change by improving participant outcomes within their specific context and addressing their unique needs.

This study's theoretical model is also consistent with the recommendations of Reed et al. (2018), who propose three strategic principles for knowledge translation, known as SHIFT-Evidence. The first principle, 'act scientifically and pragmatically,' involves combining existing evidence with knowledge of a system's unique initial conditions and adapting interventions based on the complex system's unpredictable effects. The second principle, 'embrace complexity,' recognises that evidence-based interventions are only effective when

related practices and processes within a complex system are functional and that successful evidence translation efforts identify and address issues affecting the system's normal operations. The third principle, 'engage and empower,' emphasises the importance of involving staff and beneficiaries with local system knowledge in operationalising evidence translation and ensuring that changes align with their motivations and concerns.

This study's theoretical model applies these SHIFT-Evidence principles. The first principle is implemented by engaging educators in integrating the FWB program and mapping its interrelations with other subjects. This process allows educators to develop a deep understanding of the FWB program's learning approach and its connections to various subjects used for integration. Consequently, they implemented relevant interventions tailored to their students' needs. The second principle is addressed by educators gaining a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum structure and how the FWB program can address student wellbeing issues, considering interdependent factors. This is reflected in the model's representation of 'challenges' in integrating FWB within curricula while also recognising the 'opportunities' for integration within the complex, often busy, university curricula. The third principle ensures engagement with FWB program coordinators, subject education teams, and students, incorporating their insights into the integration process and ensuring changes reflect their unique motivations and concerns. This is evidenced by student satisfaction feedback and efforts to meet accreditation standards. Fundamentally, this theoretical model builds upon existing evidence from McCalman (2013) and Reed et al. (2018), emphasising that successful implementation relies on collaboration among various stakeholders involved in the implementation strategy.

8.4.4 Philosophical Research Concepts

Qualitative research explores the complex meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences by employing philosophical assumptions, theoretical frameworks and specific methodologies, such as grounded theory, to investigate social issues (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Jackson et al., 2007). This approach is particularly valuable for addressing complex problems where existing theories fall short or for developing new theories, thereby valuing rich participant experiences and adapting as new insights emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, the qualitative approach facilitated the use of ontological, epistemological, and axiological concepts to examine the challenges and opportunities of integrating the FWB program into curricula,

utilising constructivist grounded theory methodology to develop a data-grounded theoretical model.

This study's theoretical model adopts a critical realist ontology to comprehend the broader context of educators' experiences. Critical realism seeks to explain phenomena by examining them within changing societal and organisational structures, uncovering hidden factors that shape social order (Brinkmann, 2017; Saunders et al., 2009). It recognises that reality's depiction is influenced by linguistic constructs, interpretation processes, and social environments (Oliver, 2012). Educators' experiences vary across different university settings, cultures, and countries, affecting their teaching pedagogy and what is considered acceptable practice within their specific contexts. The theoretical model interconnects these diverse experiences of integrating the FWB program, addressing sensitive topics, adopting appropriate teaching methods, mitigating curriculum constraints, and ascertaining the program's relevance within various university environments. This aligns with Cheer's (2019) assertion that individuals' multiple cultural memberships and social identities influence their values and behaviours according to contextual environments.

Epistemologically, this study adopts social constructionism to examine how social factors shape collective reality processing. This approach recognises that social factors such as cultural norms, education systems, religious beliefs, economic conditions, race, ethnicity, gender roles, and social class significantly influence knowledge construction and legitimacy (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Saunders et al., 2009). For educators, this manifested in determining 'knowledge-worthy' content, resulting in varied responses to integrating the FWB program into curricula. Some educators pushed back, while others mapped appropriate FWB learning approaches into existing subjects. It also affected educators' comfort levels in sharing certain topics within university settings. Students' responses were influenced by their religious and belief systems, with some welcoming discussions on spirituality while others questioned its relevance. However, many ultimately recognised the broader concept of spirituality in First Nations Knowledge systems and its importance to holistic First Nations wellbeing. The study's theoretical model addresses these factors by emphasising the FWB program's evidence-based nature, mapping its learning approaches to meet accreditation standards, and modifying sensitive topics to enhance relevance and encourage student participation.

The transition of educators and students from initial apprehension to gradually appreciating the 'kavod' (weight, respect, importance) of the FWB program is emblematic of a journey akin to Ricoeur's (1967) concept of moving from *first epistemic naiveté* to *second epistemic naiveté*. The first naiveté represents an uncritical acceptance of things at face value, analogous to a pre-critical construction stage, without questioning or deeper analysis. This often evolves into a critical deconstruction phase, where things are questioned, potentially leading to what Ricoeur (1967) terms a 'desert of criticism'. Progressing beyond this, one may reach a post-critical reconstruction stage. Here, a more nuanced, reflective, respectful, and symbolic understanding emerges, known as the second epistemic naiveté. This second naiveté illuminates familiar concepts with newfound depth and complexity, transforming something that once was black and white to all of a sudden having different hues of colours. The second naiveté could be likened to the way of understanding the 'cultural interface' of Nakata (2002), where First Nations and Western knowledge systems intersect. This more respectful, post-critical understanding views the 'cultural interface' as a space of tension and negotiation that offers opportunities for open, exploratory, and creative inquiry, potentially leading to richer analysis and novel solutions (Nakata, 2007a). In this space, the pre-critical oversimplification of First Nations and Western knowledge as separate entities is challenged. Through critical deconstruction, a post-critical second naiveté emerges, welcoming the creative possibilities of the 'cultural interface' for deeper analysis.

The FWB program's integration within mainstream curricula exemplifies the potential of Nakata's 'cultural interface' by bridging First Nations and Western knowledge systems. This study's theoretical model examines the challenges of integrating a First Nations wellbeing-focused program into Western educational frameworks, including curricular constraints, staff resistance, racial biases, sensitive topics, funding issues, and accreditation requirements. It proposes a solution-oriented approach to navigate these obstacles through strategies such as changing the lens, adopting a generic name, mapping subject interrelatedness, adapting teaching, and fitting accreditation standards. The model highlights opportunities inherent in the program's evidence-based nature, First Nations Knowledge integration, personal wellbeing focus, and research potential. Outcomes include enhanced wellbeing, improved soft skills, better student educational outcomes, and professional growth for educators. This approach navigates the tensions and negotiations within the cultural interface while fostering open, creative inquiry, ultimately offering actionable possibilities for both students and educators to experience a First Nations wellbeing-centric program within their curricula.

Axiologically, a researcher's core beliefs about reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) shape how they view and value social phenomena, fundamentally influencing their research approach (Grix, 2002). Consequently, this theoretical model is axiologically grounded in values of empowerment, emancipation, wellbeing, love, being human, growth, learning, and equality. These values are evident in the diverse ways students and educators expressed empowerment in their learning and professional contexts. The model's axiological foundation is further demonstrated by reports of students' experiences of collaboration, joy, camaraderie, and enhanced mutual understanding, as observed by their educators. These core values guided the integration of the FWB program, informing strategies aimed at fostering direct participant experience. This approach aligns with First Nations holistic concepts of health and wellbeing, encompassing the entire person and underpinning the FWB program's fundamental purpose: empowering individuals to take control of the factors influencing their lives (Tsey et al., 2010).

8.5 Practical Implications

Grounded theory rarely aims to generate knowledge solely for its own sake. Instead, theories developed through grounded theory methods seek to provide insights into phenomena that can directly inform practical applications within a specific field (Birks & Mills, 2015). This section explores the practical implications of this study's grounded theory for education, supporting the case for an educational approach that equips students to navigate life's complexities.

The ongoing commercialisation of education and its reduction to a mere 'production' process has alarmed many scholars, prompting calls for a return to education's fundamental purpose. Alain de Botton criticises the modern focus on technical skills for job acquisition, which neglects the soft skills crucial for navigating life's uncertainties (SDF, 2013). Similarly, Gert Biesta (2015, 2020, 2021) argues that education has been reduced to its 'productive' capacity, advocating instead for a tripartite approach encompassing qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. This study's results support a holistic educational approach that values soft skills equally with hard skills, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts to integrate programs like the FWB into core curricula. Such integration would foster a nuanced understanding of educational complexities and counter the overemphasis on hard skills acquisition alone, which has undercurrents of neoliberalism. The effects of neoliberalism on

current educational practices are evident in the pursuit of degrees promising only lucrative job opportunities to the detriment of acquiring the skills to navigate life complexities. However, implementing this theoretical model even in those prioritised subjects could bridge the gap between hard and soft skills development. Students could thus acquire both technical proficiency and the soft skills necessary for long-term career success, fulfilling the complementary roles of hard and soft skills in professional aspirations.

Promoting students' wellbeing is an area that could benefit from a balanced understanding of hard and soft skills development in educational settings. Despite its essential role in student flourishing, wellbeing often receives inadequate attention. Both students and some educators may dismiss its' promotion by considering it peripheral to core academic pursuits. This attitude particularly undermines efforts to integrate wellbeing programs, including First Nations initiatives like the FWB program, into curricula. However, this study's results suggest that attitudinal shifts are possible if educators and students approach the FWB program with a 'second naiveté', engaging in the 'cultural interface' of tension and negotiation to realise deeper benefits in both their personal and professional spheres. McKendrick-Calder and Choate (2024) found in their study that educators across disciplines felt obliged to support student wellbeing, even without formal training in mental health. This support, while well-intentioned, often strained educators, adding to their workload and causing self-doubt. To mitigate this strain, educators modified their teaching methods but lacked evidence-based guidance on how to adapt effectively. Integrating wellbeing programs into mainstream university curricula could address this issue, providing a structured approach to wellbeing promotion and soft skills development that universities have struggled to operationalise. This integration would elevate wellbeing and soft skills from perceived 'add-ons' to core educational components, aligning with de Botton's emphasis on preparing students for life's challenges. Integrating programs, such as the FWB program, also addresses the current imbalance between hard and soft skills development in education while alleviating the burden on educators who previously struggled to provide ad hoc wellbeing support. By making wellbeing an inherent part of the educational process, this approach ensures that student mental health is addressed universally, systematically, and consistently throughout their academic journey, as affirmed by the educators in this study.

Moreover, the universal approach to wellbeing promotion inherent in the FWB program creates a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, normalising the importance of mental

health and reducing the stigma often associated with seeking individual support. This is particularly important as McKendrick-Calder and Choate (2024) note that people with mental health issues may not seek formal assistance or disclose their conditions. By integrating wellbeing initiatives into the curriculum for all students, institutions can provide support to those who might otherwise not receive it. The study's theoretical model offers a framework for operationalising wellbeing initiatives as integral parts of curricula, addressing the lack of specific guidance on adapting curricula to support student wellbeing as noted by McKendrick-Calder and Choate (2024). This approach not only optimises students' overall experience and mental health but also provides a strategy for educators to incorporate wellbeing support without overextending themselves. This is particularly beneficial for educators with less job security, who may feel pressured to over-invest in student support due to the influence of student evaluations on career progression (McKendrick-Calder & Choate, 2024).

Finally, integrating the FWB program as a core curricular component addresses concerns about the teachability, adaptability, assessability, and practicability of soft skills approaches in mainstream university curricula. Scepticism about the ambiguous nature of soft skills and their compatibility with formal educational settings and accreditation standards has been prevalent. However, the systematic review conducted for this study has appraised these concerns, outlining various methods for teaching, measuring, and ensuring beneficial outcomes of soft skills for students (see Orih et al., 2024). The operationalisation of the FWB program and this study's results further demonstrate how such concerns can be addressed through the implementation of the proposed theoretical model. Assessment challenges have been overcome by educators in this study using various measures, including the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM) model, which informs the strategic aspect of this theoretical model. The practicability of the FWB program within curricula, often challenged by the rhetoric of overcrowded curricula, can be achieved through thoughtful curriculum design that ensures meaningful integration rather than mere addition, allowing for both depth in key areas and essential breadth. This approach is exemplified by educators' efforts to map subject interrelatedness with FWB program learning approaches, effectively integrating soft skills development into existing academic frameworks.

The implications drawn from this study suggest that the proposed theoretical model can be effectively integrated into university curricula, especially by educators who are at the coalface of 'cultural interface' bridging First Nations and Western knowledge systems. The model's

practical applicability is supported by the research findings as well as implementation science theory and addresses key concerns in contemporary education. To fully understand the model's potential impact and reliability, it is essential to examine the quality of research underpinning its development. The following section delves into the validation processes that inform this theoretical model, providing an understanding of its assessment and robustness to educational practice.

8.6 Research Quality Assurance

In qualitative research, the notion of quality assurance and reliability are complex and often debated, as traditional objective measures are not considered apposite to their nature (Golafshani, 2003; Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019; Willig, 2013). In this regard, Mårtensson et al. (2016) pose a fundamental question applicable to both academic and organisational contexts: "What constitutes good or high-quality research practice?" (p. 593). The challenge lies in determining appropriate evaluation methods for research in specific fields, as well as in adapting existing evaluation models across different domains, areas, or regions (Mårtensson et al., 2016). There is a surprising lack of widely acknowledged or specific criteria for evaluating quality standards in research practice, particularly in qualitative research (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Mårtensson et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2004). Despite these difficulties, developing effective quality assurance measures remains crucial for increasing awareness of a study's status and standing (Mårtensson et al., 2016). However, these measures must be tailored to suit the unique characteristics and goals of qualitative research methodologies (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

The lack of explicitly agreed standards in qualitative research can be attributed to its rise over the last three decades, resulting in demanding interest in quality assurance (Bryman et al., 2008). Additionally, the multiplicity of qualitative research traditions rooted in various ontological and epistemological beliefs also contributes to this lack of criteria for assuring quality standards (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The debate extends to whether social science research meets the quality criteria of natural sciences in terms of clear terminology, quantifiability, controlled conditions, reproducibility, and predictability (Berezow & Hartsfield, 2012; Mårtensson et al., 2016). Despite these challenges, grounded theorists can meet quality markers through thorough studies, and there is an increasing emphasis on

transparency and reflexivity as criteria for quality in qualitative research (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) discuss the historical debate regarding research quality between qualitative and quantitative researchers. They note that Glaser and Strauss rejected criticisms of qualitative inquiry as unsystematic and biased, arguing instead that qualitative research should be evaluated on its own merits. Glaser and Strauss contended that inductive qualitative research with rich first-hand data could lead to rigorous theory construction, emphasising direct knowledge of the studied phenomenon as crucial for high-quality research (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). This debate led to the development of frameworks for evaluating quality in qualitative research, such as Spencer et al.'s (2004) four guiding principles: research should be contributory, defensible in design, rigorous in conduct, and credible in claim. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) further argue that grounded theory requires its own set of quality evaluation criteria due to its unique features, while acknowledging the importance of general guidelines for data-gathering methods.

Within a constructivist grounded theory approach, Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) provide guidelines for beginners. They include:

- Develop methodological self-consciousness by reflecting on your choice of topic, methodology, and methods.
- Thoroughly learn your chosen qualitative approach and work with a knowledgeable mentor if possible.
- Review existing literature critically to establish a rationale and increase theoretical sensitivity, while treating it as provisional.
- Gather rich data, aiming to understand diverse experiences.
- Maintain transparency in describing your research process and justifying choices.
- Iterate between data collection and analysis to refine your focus and develop categories.
- Tolerate ambiguity as you familiarise yourself with the empirical world.
- Ask progressively focused questions to develop your analysis.
- Explore multiple theoretical explanations for your data.
- Collect sufficient data for robust comparisons and category development.
- Interrogate your categories for properties, connections, and theoretical significance.
- Treat all aspects of your analysis as provisional and open to revision.

- After completing your analysis, compare it with relevant literature to show how your work fits, extends, or challenges existing ideas in the field.

As a novice in grounded theory, I found these guidelines instrumental in undertaking this research study. They emphasise reflexivity, critical engagement with literature, rigorous data collection and analysis, and the importance of theoretical development in constructivist grounded theory research. These approaches informed my practices that were enumerated in Chapter 6 (the research method of this study), under the tutelage of my primary advisor and the mentorships of Whiteside (2009) and Cheer (2019). They highlight the anfractuous journey of conducting this grounded theory. With this constructivist grounded theory study, I employed the four main criteria proposed by Charmaz: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). *Credibility* involves gathering sufficient relevant data, conducting systematic comparisons, and developing thorough analyses while maintaining strong reflexivity throughout the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). *Originality* refers to offering new insights, fresh conceptualisations, or establishing the significance of the analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). *Resonance* demonstrates that the constructed concepts represent participants' experiences and provide insight to others, achieved through appropriate data-gathering strategies (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). *Usefulness* encompasses elucidating participants' understanding of their everyday lives, informing policy and practice, contributing to new research directions, and revealing pervasive processes (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). These criteria collectively ensure that constructivist grounded theory studies are rigorous, innovative, meaningful, and applicable in both academic and practical contexts. These practices informed this qualitative research and ensured the quality of this study. Their application in the context of this study is represented in Table 7.

Table 7
Quality Assurance in this Study

Quality assurance as per Charmaz's criteria	Application in this study
Credibility – *(gathering sufficient relevant data, systematic comparisons, thorough analysis, and reflexivity)*	This study's theory was developed based on extensive interview data gathered from experienced educators who integrated the FWB program across universities in three countries. The research process involved systematic comparisons through purposive and theoretical sampling, until reaching data saturation. The analysis was enhanced by my reflexivity as the researcher, memoing, and feedback on the developing theory. My immersion in FWB workshops, literature review, and discussion of findings in relation to existing literature further strengthened the study. These steps are detailed in Chapter 6 and in this discussion chapter of the thesis. The robust data generated provides evidence for the claims of the study's theoretical model, demonstrating the interdependency of dimensions, attributes, and the core category emerging from comparative analysis of rich and extensive data.
Originality – *(offering new insights, fresh conceptualisations, or establishing the significance of the analysis)*	The study's data analysis yielded a conceptual theoretical model that explains the challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes associated with integrating the First Nations-developed FWB program into university curricula. The findings demonstrate how educators successfully navigated integration challenges by focusing on opportunities and employing effective strategies, resulting in positive outcomes for both their students and themselves. This grounded theory contributes to the limited knowledge base on integrating First Nations wellbeing programs as a soft skills approach within curricula, offering busy educators a model to operationalise wellbeing initiatives as core components rather than optional add-ons. The process of 'Getting people to experience it' provides a practical approach to implementing broader frameworks that position wellbeing as an integral part of students' educational journey.

Resonance – *(demonstrating constructed concept is of participants' experiences, and providing insight to others, achieved through appropriate data-gathering strategies)*	Follow-up interviews and participants feedback confirmed that the emerging concepts accurately represented educators' experiences. This process expanded the concepts, contributing to the construction of the grounded theory. The study's findings provide insights into both educators' and students' engagement with the FWB program within curricula, linking individual and collective factors to inform the theoretical model from the perspective of educators. Experiencing the FWB program emerged as the central strategy for shifting perspectives from 'looking from the outside' to 'looking from the inside' to achieve desired outcomes. Consultations with the advisory team and experienced grounded theory scholars helped authenticate key findings and theoretical concepts. The use of quotations to present educators' experiences resonated with both participants and scholars reviewing the analysis, further validating the study's conclusions.
Usefulness – *(clarifying participants' understanding of their everyday lives, informing policy and practice, contributing to new research directions, and revealing pervasive processes and practices)*	This study's findings are useful in seamlessly integrating the FWB program into curricula, potentially addressing the challenge of overcrowded curricula. The research outcomes offer potential for making a First Nations wellbeing initiative a core part of curricula, promoting soft skills development to help students navigate life's complexities rather than being an optional add-on. The emerged theory, grounded in implementation science, can be adopted across universities by educators working at the coalface of cultural interface, bridging First Nations and Western knowledge systems, and thus, contributing to the implementation strategy of the NCFWB. The study reveals opportunities for future research, including exploring effective methods for training and supporting educators in integrating the FWB program within their curricula. Also, investigating how educators' job security and career progression concerns influence their willingness to adopt and implement this theoretical model, given the growing interest to promote students' wellbeing; as well as exploring the

	adaptability of this theoretical model for primary and secondary education levels to promote their wellbeing, revealed as a need for these cohorts of students through the systematic review conducted for this study. The research provides new insights into systematically integrating the FWB program in curricula by fostering holistic student preparation through incorporating multidimensional wellbeing concepts inherent in the FWB program, including connections to land, spirituality, culture, family, ancestry, and community, across personal, organisational, and structural levels, while revealing pervasive processes and practices in such wise.

Charmaz's four criteria also aligned with the triangulation approach used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Trustworthiness informs findings of a study that are true and certain in a way that is backed by evidence (Guion et al., 2011). This study was informed by three types of triangulation. Data triangulation involved synthesising participants' perspectives to gain comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Investigator triangulation involved the advisory team engaging with the data to identify emerging theories and narratives. This process included personal reflexivity and punctilious epistemological analysis, such as regular debriefing sessions and feedback exchanges. Finally, methodological triangulation involved the integration of literature reviews with grounded theorising of educators' experiences. These approaches were complemented through feedback on my research findings by my mentors experienced in grounded theory methodology, as well as my presentations at conferences. These, all together, determined the robustness and reliability of this qualitative research.

8.7 Limitations of the Study

Limitations abound in any research. Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) propose that a comprehensive presentation of study limitations should describe the potential limitation, explain its implications, suggest possible alternative approaches, and outline steps taken to mitigate the limitation. This approach ensures that research findings are placed within their proper context, preventing readers from overemphasising or minimising results. A thorough

discussion of limitations enhances readers' understanding and supports future investigations (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019).

A significant limitation in qualitative research is the challenge of generalising results to a broader population due to the typically small number of participants despite the depth of detail offered (Jackson et al., 2007; Polit & Beck, 2010). This study's relatively small sample of educators, although providing rich data to the point of saturation, limits the generalisability of the findings. Rather, it provides insight into the broader context of integrating the FWB program within university curricula. The credibility of the educators' insights is strengthened by their substantial teaching experience, with three of them having taught for 6–10 years and five having over a decade of teaching experience. Their academic ranks – with five holding positions at the Associate Professor or Professor level and three at the Lecturer or Senior Lecturer level – combined with their dual teaching and research roles suggest they possess both the practical teaching expertise and theoretical knowledge necessary to provide reliable insights into curriculum integration processes. This understanding aligns with Polit and Beck's (2010) assertion that qualitative research primarily aims to provide a rich, contextualised understanding of human experience through an in-depth examination of specific cases. To address the limitation of small sample size and expand the scope of findings, future research could adopt a mixed-methods design, as suggested by Creswell and Clark (2017). Such an approach would combine the nuanced insights of qualitative data with the broader reach of quantitative methods, potentially capturing a broader picture. Additionally, a longitudinal study involving a larger cohort of educators could provide valuable temporal insights and enhance the representativeness of the findings. This strategy would allow for tracking changes over time and potentially reveal patterns or trends that may not be apparent in this study.

This study relies on educators' perspectives of their own experiences and interpretations of student experiences rather than direct student accounts. This indirect representation of student experiences presents a limitation in data interpretation. Drawing on insights from Wubbels et al. (1992) and Fielding (2004), there is a considerable risk that educators' accounts of student experiences may be shaped by their own ideals, perceptions, and social location, leading to a misalignment between their reports and students' actual experiences, thereby potentially misrepresenting the realities and interests of the students in favour of the educators' own perspectives. However, the reliance on educators' perspectives was strategic in determining what approaches worked for them, what challenges they faced, and how they achieved their

desired outcomes. The study clearly acknowledges that reported student outcomes are based on educator perspectives. Moreover, as a matter of necessity, previous FWB program research has focused primarily on student perspectives and outcomes, leaving educator perspective as a gap this study set out to fill. A potential avenue for future research could be a comparative analysis examining the differential impacts of the FWB program on educators versus students when integrated into curricula.

Coincidently, this study's participants were exclusively female educators from geographically diverse institutions with varying resources and policies. While this diversity offers breadth, the study design did not allow for a detailed comparison of these contexts, presenting a limitation. Given the universal nature of student wellbeing challenges in higher education (Henning et al., 2018), future research could benefit from a more comprehensive contextual analysis from a global perspective. Furthermore, the reliance on interview data alone limits the ability to compare participants' reported behaviours with their actual practices. To address this limitation, future studies, as per Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019), could employ observational methods to examine both verbal and nonverbal interactions between educators and students. This approach would allow for more robust testing and validation of the grounded theory developed in this study, potentially revealing discrepancies between reported and observed behaviours and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the FWB program's implementation in practice.

Lastly, despite efforts to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process, my views, beliefs, values, and experiences as a novice in grounded theory may have influenced data interpretation. My position as a PhD scholar within the NCFWB and as a non-First Nations person investigating the integration of a First Nations-developed FWB program within mainstream university curricula presents potential sources of bias. These risks were mitigated through strategies ensuring trustworthiness, including critical review by the advisory team and experienced mentors in grounded theory research, as suggested by Charmaz and Thornberg (2021). Additionally, engagement with First Nations scholars familiar with the FWB program aligned with principles of culturally responsive research methodologies, in line with Chilisa (2019) and the cultural interface of Nakata (2002) involving tension and negotiations that opens up possibilities for future practice. However, my position as a non-First Nations person could also be viewed as a source of strength because it enabled evaluation of the FWB program from the perspective of a neutral scholar interested in the positive impact of the First Nations FWB

program, underscoring the ultimate aim to promote the program and ensure better outcomes for participants. Nevertheless, to further validate the grounded theory, future research could employ quantitative methods such as structural equation modelling, as suggested by Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019). Examining the transferability of the theory to contexts outside universities would also be valuable. While these limitations are important to acknowledge, they do not negate the study's findings but, instead, provide context for interpretation and offer directions for future research (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019).

8.8 Summary

In this chapter, I have

- presented a synthesis of the study's findings in relation to existing literature, organised under four main theoretical constructs: looking from the outside – *challenges*, looking from the inside – *opportunities*, getting people to experience it – *strategies*, and *outcomes*
- discussed findings in relation to their implications for theoretical frameworks, including Rancière's philosophy of equality and emancipation, the Socratic Way, and implementation science theory
- discussed the use of philosophical assumptions to interpret findings
- contextualised findings within global educational goals and contemporary research by drawing practical implications
- established the validity and quality of the research
- acknowledged limitations of the study.

In the next and final chapter, I will

- present a synthesis of the entire research project
- discuss the implication within the lens of the cultural interface.

Part Four
Synthesis and Future Directions

Overview

Part Four, comprising two chapters (9 and 10), synthesises the entire project findings through the lens of the cultural interface and presents key conclusions to guide future educational practice and research. Chapter 9 integrates the outcomes of the studies from Parts One, Two, and Three by examining how universities can effectively implement wellbeing initiatives at the cultural interface while maintaining a balance between technical skills and holistic student development. Chapter 10 concludes the thesis by demonstrating how the research questions have been addressed and the new knowledge contributions of this project while offering recommendations for future research and practice. Together, these chapters transform the theoretical and methodological foundations of the earlier parts into actionable insights, making significant contributions to the field of wellbeing promotion in higher education. By presenting a clear trajectory from research problems, findings, discussion, and implications to future directions, Part Four concludes the thesis, opening new avenues for research and practice in the integration of wellbeing programs within university curricula.

Chapter 9
Project Outcomes through the Lens of the Cultural Interface

9.1 Chapter Outline

As established in Chapter 1, this thesis includes published studies that have been integrated into a cohesive body of research. This chapter synthesises the study's outcomes by exploring the space of tension and negotiation of the cultural interface, illuminating their broader implications for education.

9.2 Study Conceptualisation within the Framework of the Cultural Interface

The nascent stage of the conceptualisation of this study was to respond to the need to promote holistic education that balances both technical skills and soft competencies in student development. Biesta (2015) criticises the current overemphasis on technical skills as reflecting a narrow view of education's purpose, one that reduces learning to standardised measurements like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests in select academic domains. Similarly, Alain de Botton argues that educational systems prioritise technical job skills while neglecting essential non-technical competencies needed for navigating life's complexities (SDF, 2013). In extrapolation, this constrained perspective on education's purpose and goals is emblematic of the influence of neoliberalism in academia, creating tension about what education is. Within this contested space of tension regarding what education is about, Nakata's (2007a) cultural interface comes into focus.

As previously discussed, Nakata (2007a) envisions education as a dynamic and collaborative process that embraces cultural diversity, critical thinking, knowledge systems, and students' lived experiences. Central to his educational philosophy is the concept of the 'cultural interface', a complex space where First Nations and Western knowledge systems intersect (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b). This interface is not simply a meeting point of opposing systems but rather a "multi-layered and multidimensional" space encompassing "intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation" (Nakata, 2007b, p. 199). Nakata argues against viewing this space through a purely structuralist lens or as a simple clash of cultural differences. Instead, he conceptualises

it as an intricate entanglement of concepts, theories, and meanings (Nakata, 2006). The cultural interface is characterised by shifting intersections between diverse peoples with distinct histories, experiences, languages, agendas, and aspirations (Anderson, 2009; Nakata, 2007b). While this space can foster cohesive and cooperative social practices, it simultaneously harbours contradictions, ambiguities, and contested meanings that emerge from these various intersections (Nakata, 2007b). Ultimately, Nakata (2007b) sees this cultural interface as a crucial element in supporting First Nations self-determination through education and research.

If education involves this cultural space that accounts for the multifaceted nature of human development and the diverse challenges students face in their personal and professional lives, then it invariably brings to light the importance of an education that promotes both technical and soft skills. This was the motivating factor that informed my positionality in this research. During my experience teaching in a remote secondary school, as expounded in Orih (2022), I observed how educational spaces could serve as cultural interfaces that address both the personal and professional challenges students face. This observation prompted a fundamental question: Can there be a recourse to a philosophy of love in education? This question was intended to facilitate the exploration of how good pedagogies could help cultivate not only technical competencies but also essential soft skills that empower students in their educational journey. Through intersubjective reflection, I began navigating how educators could integrate soft skills development into their teaching philosophy to create learning environments that prepare students to navigate the world with maturity and confidence. This questioning ultimately became the foundation for this research project, leading me to engage with the FWB research network to explore the development of soft skills in educational settings.

My engagement with the FWB program, particularly its roots in Australian First Nations self-determination, revealed new perspectives on the role of love in pedagogy. Through understanding the multidimensional nature of the cultural interface and its dynamic approach to self-determination, I began to see my narrative paper on love in pedagogy through a fresh lens. In a way, the cultural interface deepened my perspective, revealing the inescapable nature of love in pedagogy. The discourse around love in pedagogy often falls into two extreme positions. Some academics completely reject the place of love in education, viewing it through a dualistic lens as something extraneous to our being. Others take a superficial approach that diminishes love's profound impact on shared human experiences, particularly in moments of difficulty, failing to recognise how love creates possibilities even in times of suffering. These

polarised views have serious implications for education; they either make love seem too dangerous to discuss in educational contexts or dismiss those who do address it as being overly sentimental or 'mushy.' However, there exists a third, unitive approach that bridges these extremes, as I argued in Orih (2022). This perspective sees love as inherent to human nature, encompassing all aspects of our being rather than standing in opposition to pedagogy. If education's fundamental purpose is to serve the good of others, then love becomes not just relevant but essential to education – because love is *for the good of the other*. This understanding distinguishes authentic love from manipulation, which has historically caused harm under the guise of love and contributed to love's contested status in educational discourse.

From the lens of the cultural interface, *willing the good of the other for the other* translates to the varied ways of supporting students' self-determination and flourishing for their *own sake* while acknowledging the complex nature of their development. This approach acknowledges the diverse knowledge systems and experiences that students bring to the learning environment, fostering a more inclusive and effective educational experience. It encompasses the development of students' emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of their being, which the First Nations-developed FWB program enhances (Tsey et al., 2018). This motivated my partnership with the National Centre for Family Wellbeing (NCFWB). In a deeper way, the cultural interface sheds light on how *willing the good of the other for the other* involves empowering students to flourish despite various oppressive forces – cultural, historical, political, social, systemic, and temporal. This aligns with Paulo Freire's (2005) concept of *conscientização* (critical consciousness), where students become active agents in transforming their oppressive conditions. As Freire (2005) argues, "the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (p. 54), fulfilling their 'ontological vocation' to be subjects who transform their world and move towards richer individual and collective possibilities.

Nakata's (2007a) conception of the cultural interface complements this transformative vision. While acknowledging it as a space of tension and negotiation, Nakata sees it as a site of possibility where First Nations people and their interlocutors can exercise agency and autonomy, even against dominant epistemic frameworks (McGloin, 2009). This interface becomes a productive space where praxis and reflection can challenge colonial power structures within universities. As McGloin (2009) notes, it serves as a starting point for making sense of the seemingly nonsensical and for understanding daily struggles around the erosion of valuable knowledge systems, cultural practices, traditions, and wonted structures.

Freire (2005) maintains that every human being, regardless of their educational background or how deeply embedded they may be in the 'culture of silence,' has the capacity for critical engagement with the world through dialogical encounters. Given appropriate tools and opportunities, individuals can develop a critical awareness of their personal and social reality, including its contradictions, and learn to engage with these realities meaningfully (Freire, 2005). This process necessarily transforms the traditional, hierarchical teacher-student relationship (Freire, 2005). This perspective aligns with two of the key theoretical frameworks of this study: the Socratic Way and Rancière's philosophy of equality and emancipation. Together, these approaches envision education as a relational process where learning occurs through mutual dialogue, empowerment, and emancipation rather than one-directional knowledge transmission. This reconceptualisation challenges conventional educational power structures, suggesting that education's true purpose is liberation – enabling people to recognise and act upon their capacity to understand and transform their world (Freire, 2005).

The dialogical nature of this approach sheds light on the contested space of the cultural interface. As McGloin (2009) describes, this interface serves as both a real and symbolic domain where First Nations and non-First Nations interlocutors engage daily. Here, battles are waged, subjectivities are reconceptualised, and everyday struggles become not just sites of repression but potential sources of productive agency (McGloin, 2009). This framework aligns with Gert Biesta's (2020) tripartite functions of education – qualification, socialisation, and subjectification – which create existential possibilities for people to engage with the world in a mature way. It also reinforces Alain de Botton's call for an education that prepares students for life's complexities (SDF, 2013). When people are provided with appropriate opportunities and methods, as Freire (2005) argues, they can develop a deeper awareness of their personal reality and the broader social context, including its contradictions. This understanding serves as the foundation for exploring the integration of soft skills within curricula.

9.3 Exploring the Contested Space of Soft Skills within Curricula

This research began with a vision to enhance education through soft skills development to prepare students for life's complexities. To understand how soft skills have been integrated into curricula across primary, secondary, and university levels, I conducted a systematic review, detailed in Chapter 4 of this thesis. The review revealed that soft skills programs

enhanced several key areas: employability, career planning, social-emotional learning, and academic performance, while also reducing negative behaviours like violence and bullying (Orih et al., 2024). Although only three studies met the criteria for 'best practice' based on quality appraisal standards that favour randomised controlled trials (RCTs), it is important to note that the gold standard of RCTs may not always be the most appropriate method for evaluating complex social interventions like soft skills programs (Dopp et al., 2019; Leir & Parkhurst, 2016; Onnis et al., 2018). A substantial body of literature suggests that complex social and behavioural interventions, with their context-dependent nature and multiple interacting components, often cannot be effectively evaluated through RCTs alone (Bonell et al., 2012; Dopp et al., 2019; Glasgow et al., 1999; Graham Moore et al., 2015; Leir & Parkhurst, 2016; Onnis et al., 2018; Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wandersman et al., 2016). Instead, scholars recommend alternative approaches. Patton's (2010) developmental evaluation framework and Graham Moore et al.'s (2015) guidance for complex interventions align with the emphasis of Dopp et al. (2019) on the importance of continuous quality improvement. This perspective is reinforced by Wandersman et al. (2016) and Chambers et al. (2013). Scholars from implementation science like Damschroder et al. (2009) and Peters et al. (2013) also provide relevant support, altogether emphasising the importance of ongoing adaptation and refinement of social interventions. These findings highlight the need for more robust, culturally appropriate evaluation methods that can capture the nuanced impacts of soft skills programs. The FWB program, one of the few Australian interventions identified in the systematic review, demonstrates how complex interventions can be meaningfully evaluated by examining both its prescribed outcomes and the critical mechanisms behind its success (Onnis et al., 2018; Tsey et al., 2016; Tsey et al., 2019). Its success, both within Australia and internationally, is evidenced by its positive outcomes and strong participant engagement (Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019).

The systematic review's findings highlight the complexity of evaluating soft skills interventions and the need for diverse, context-sensitive approaches to both implementation and assessment in educational settings. This raises important questions about what constitutes evidence-based practice, particularly when traditional evaluation measures fail to capture the nuances of complex interventions. Despite the growing recognition of soft skills' importance, their integration into curricula remains contentious. Within this contested space of tension and negotiation, especially regarding its worthiness within core curricula, these rumbling questions emerge: Who has the authority to determine curriculum content? What criteria are being used

to determine what is relevant and important for inclusion within curricula? Do these criteria align with education's holistic goals and purposes? Are these evaluation methods appropriate for assessing complex, often ambiguous soft skills interventions? And to what extent are curricula decisions being influenced by neoliberal, market-driven precedencies that prioritise workforce preparation and economic productivity? Although the implications of these questions have been discussed in the previous chapter, they depict the challenges involved in integrating soft skills within curricula, which demands negotiating within the cultural interface for the possibility of advancing holistic education.

While concerns about the narrow focus on technical skills and measurable outcomes are valid, this does not diminish the importance of technical/hard skills. Rather, the goal should be to achieve a balanced approach that promotes both soft and hard skills to prepare students for life's complexities. Research increasingly demonstrates that while technical skills are crucial for specific job functions, soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and critical thinking are equally valuable in both professional and personal contexts (Robles, 2012). The case for integrating soft skills into mainstream curricula is particularly relevant in the Australian context, where the FWB program stands out as one of the few locally developed interventions. Within the cultural interface framework, Nakata (2007b) emphasises that institutional practices are key sites for change and transformation. This creates an opportunity to implement transformative change by integrating the First Nations-developed, FWB-centric soft skills approach into curricula. This approach positions soft skills not merely as complementary to hard skills but as a core component within the contested space of university curricula. The implications of this integration within the cultural interface warrant further discussion, particularly in terms of how it challenges and reshapes traditional educational paradigms.

9.4 Operationalising the Family Wellbeing Program within the Cultural Interface of University Curricula

The cultural interface helps in understanding education as a complex intersection of diverse knowledge systems (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). In the context of this grounded theory study, this interface manifests in the integration of the First Nations-developed FWB program within Western educational paradigms in mainstream curricula. Integrating First Nations Knowledge at this cultural interface is crucial for developing curricula

that allow educators to probe, test, and create new knowledge and teaching pedagogies (Nakata, 2007a). As Nakata (2007b) explains, this interface is where "people discard and take up different ways of understanding, being and acting in a complex and changing environment" (p. 208). This demands a fundamental shift in thinking, moving away from deficit logic and stimulus-response teaching approaches to embrace sophisticated First Nations ways of knowing (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

The concept of cultural interface extends beyond First Nations contexts to other areas where marginalisation results from unequal power relations (McGloin, 2009). In higher education, this becomes particularly relevant as institutions work to integrate First Nations Knowledge and practices into predominantly Western academic frameworks (Nakata et al., 2012). McGloin (2009) emphasises the ongoing need to incorporate First Nations ways of knowing into subject content, either directly or by creating spaces where students can introduce these perspectives themselves. Nakata (2008), as cited by McGloin (2009), argues that meaningful integration of First Nations perspectives into coursework, and productive engagement with First Nations colleagues, requires understanding competing knowledge systems and acknowledging their historical marginalisation within academia. While current efforts focus on building an 'educational pipeline' for First Nations students through recruitment into bridging programs, promoting cultural safety, incorporating First Nations Knowledge into curriculum, and providing supplementary learning support, there remains limited empirical research on how teachers can pedagogically support students in navigating tensions between First Nations and Western knowledge positions (Martin et al., 2017). This gap underscores the importance of integrating the FWB program *in situ* within the cultural interface of university curricula.

There abound complexities in operationalising the First Nations-developed FWB program within mainstream university curricula, which the cultural interface helps to illuminate. As Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009) emphasise, this integration requires more than simply adding First Nations content to existing courses – it demands a fundamental reimagining of how knowledge is created and shared within academia. Integrating the FWB program within mainstream curricula presented various challenges, but these tensions also created opportunities for positive change. Through negotiation, educators found ways to integrate the program to achieve desired outcomes. The theoretical model developed in this study, 'Getting people to experience it,' examined through the cultural interface lens, exemplified these tensions and negotiation and, consequently, offered possibilities for the future. In this way, the

model potentially bridges between First Nations and Western knowledge systems in higher education. The approach of the theoretical model promotes inclusivity and recognises the transformative potential of First Nations Knowledge, aligning with Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson's (2016) vision for culturally diverse and inclusive educational practices.

The theoretical model, while advocating for a holistic approach that equips students with both hard and soft skills, also demonstrates how to integrate First Nations Knowledge initiatives into mainstream university curricula. It offers ways for educators to incorporate wellbeing support without becoming overwhelmed, and methods to integrate soft skills even in traditionally technical subjects. This approach optimises student experience while addressing universal wellbeing, particularly benefiting students with mental health concerns who might hesitate to seek formal assistance due to stigma. The model helps normalise mental health discussions and provides an evidence-based framework for promoting student flourishing. In this way, the theoretical model aligns with three United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10). While Halkos and Gkampoura (2021) note that global progress towards these SDGs has been slower than anticipated, particularly due to COVID-19's impact, this model contributes to advancing these goals by enhancing student wellbeing and soft skills competencies during post-pandemic recovery, promoting quality education and equality by empowering students from all backgrounds, and supporting First Nations self-determination by helping to re-centre First Nations Australian epistemologies and ontologies in academia (Marsh et al., 2023).

At its core, the theoretical model takes a bold step towards helping universities create holistic and supportive learning environments that balance academic excellence with student wellbeing (Orih et al., 2025). This serves as a guide for institutions as they evolve to meet the complexities of today's challenging world. According to Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009), by creating an educational environment that values First Nations perspectives, educators can facilitate richer learning experiences that empower students and acknowledge their cultural identities. In the same vein, Martin et al. (2017) emphasise that effective teaching ought to be rooted in an informed knowledge of the peculiar challenges facing diverse First Nations students in higher education. This fundamental rethinking of educational practices not only boosts curriculum relevance but also fosters deeper engagement with the material, leading to better outcomes for both First Nations students and the broader community (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

Significantly, the theoretical model charts a path for engaging non-First Nations scholars, students, and interlocutors with First Nations Knowledge systems within academia. This aligns with Nakata (2008), as cited by McGloin (2009), who expressed that his desire for non-First Nations academics is to become familiar with his methodologies and engage in meaningful dialogue about the issues raised in his work. Nakata emphasised that non-First Nations educators should be well-versed in First Nations debates and struggles and understand the knowledge system that has sustained First Nations survival in Australia for over 60,000 years. This critical engagement with First Nations methodologies is particularly crucial for non-First Nations academics working in Indigenous Studies (McGloin, 2009). Working within the cultural interface requires non-First Nations academics to recognise it as a space of struggle and negotiation, where unlearning, though challenging, can lead to the emergence of new knowledge systems (McGloin, 2009). In the context of the theoretical model, this recognition demands humility and openness – an approach rooted in growth and an attitude to never stop asking the question of what possibilities abound in using the model to help students navigate life's complexities.

McGloin (2009) outlines two key approaches for non-First Nations educators to effectively integrate First Nations Knowledges. First, they must engage with First Nations sources and perspectives while encouraging students to critically examine Western epistemological claims. Second, they should validate experiential knowledge and understand Nakata's First Nations standpoint theory, which frames the cultural interface as a contested knowledge space where First Nations agency operates within continuities and discontinuities, shaped by ongoing tensions. These approaches are fundamental to the theoretical model's implementation, as evidenced throughout the discussion Chapter 8 and this Chapter 9. Through this perspective, the cultural interface becomes more than a site of negotiation – it emerges as a space for reflective practice that can challenge colonial power structures within university-based First Nations education (McGloin, 2009). Understanding the cultural interface within this paradigm opens possibilities for a new worldview that transcends the binary divide between First Nations and Western knowledge. Instead of seeing things in black and white, it embraces multiple perspectives and possibilities, ultimately contributing to developing inclusive, anti-racial frameworks for understanding the world (McGloin, 2009).

Nakata's (2002) cultural interface concept points towards a promising shift in educational approaches. Rather than perpetuating the rigid divide between First Nations and Western knowledge systems, it advocates for a unifying approach that values both knowledge traditions. The integration within the cultural interface creates new possibilities for fostering student development and better prepares educational institutions to fulfil their fundamental purpose: preparing students for the complex challenges of the modern world. In this context, education becomes, as Freire (2005) puts it, a means of empowerment by which people discover themselves and their potential as they learn to "name the world" around them (p. 33). This sense of empowerment serves as the driving force behind the theoretical model 'Getting people to experience it' in the grand scheme of what education is about. This comes full circle in this thesis's concluding chapter.

9.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have

- synthesised the outcomes of the entire studies underpinning this thesis
- discussed the implications of the outcomes through the lens of the cultural interface
- set the stage for the concluding chapter and recommendations for future research and practice.

In the next and final chapter, I will

- highlight how the research questions have been answered
- summarise the thesis while reflecting on my journey in undertaking this research project
- demonstrate new knowledge this research has contributed to the field
- make recommendations for action and future research.

Chapter 10
Conclusion and Recommendations

10.1 Chapter Outline

This chapter concludes the thesis by clearly demonstrating how the research questions have been addressed. It provides a comprehensive summary of the project through an intersubjective reflection on my journey in conducting this research. The chapter then offers recommendations for future research and practice while highlighting the novel contributions this project has made to the field of knowledge.

10.2 The Genesis

This doctoral research emerged from the convergence of a pressing global challenge and a profound personal experience of teaching in a remote secondary school, both highlighting a critical gap in contemporary higher education. The global challenge manifested in the escalating mental health crisis among university students, a situation further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. While universities responded by prioritising wellbeing initiatives, these efforts remained largely peripheral to core academic activities, confined to extracurricular programs that attracted limited student engagement. This approach left educators without effective frameworks to integrate wellbeing promotion into their teaching curricula, significantly diminishing the potential impact of these initiatives. Simultaneously, in the Australian context, despite policy directives encouraging the incorporation of First Nations Knowledge into mainstream curricula, academic institutions continued to grapple with questions about the relevance and application of these knowledge systems in contemporary educational settings.

Apropos to the second motivation for this research is my teaching experience in a remote secondary school, where I witnessed first-hand the disconnection between students' daily education and their future life prospects. This observation resonated deeply with Alain de Botton's critique that modern education has strayed from its fundamental purpose, emphasising technical skills at the expense of preparing individuals for life's complexities (SDF, 2013). This realisation sparked an exploration into integrating a philosophy of love into pedagogy, seeking ways to empower students to engage with the world in what Biesta (2020, 2021)

describes as a *grown-up* way. This journey led to meaningful partnerships with the National Centre for Family Wellbeing (NCFWB) and the James Cook University (JCU) Pathways program, culminating in an investigation of the Family Wellbeing (FWB) program as a heart-centred pedagogical approach. While the initial plan to pilot FWB sessions with Pathways students evolved, the grounded theory study's adaptation to focus on university educators' experiences integrating the FWB program across global institutions proved fortuitous, offering rich insights into curriculum integration of wellbeing initiatives.

To address these intertwined challenges, this research explored effective strategies for enhancing student wellbeing through a soft skills approach, situating this investigation within broader questions about the purpose of education in contemporary society. The project's findings, presented through studies woven together in this thesis, offer insight into how pedagogical approaches could be harnessed to enhance students' educational endeavours to prepare them for the complexities of life. This work is structured across four interconnected parts, each contributing to the overall understanding of how higher education can better serve both the academic and personal development needs of students in today's complex world.

10.3 The Nexus

In conducting this research, the steps unfolded across four interconnected parts. Part One, as already highlighted, established the foundational rationale. It examined the pressing challenges of student mental health in universities and the potential of soft skills enhancement as a pathway to wellbeing. With the addition of one published paper, this part contextualised the research by articulating my positioning as a researcher through exploring a philosophy of love in pedagogy.

Part Two built on the contextualisation of Part One by chronicling the conceptualisation evolution of the project. This culminated with a comprehensive systematic review of soft skills interventions across all educational levels, presented as a published paper. The underlying approach inherent in both Part One and Two provided both personal context and empirical grounding for the project's trajectory.

Part Three focused on the grounded theory study component that represented the heart of the thesis. The study explored the integration of the First Nations-developed FWB program into

university curricula. This investigation began by detailing the methodological journey, marking a crucial transition from problem identification to solution development. After establishing the preliminary steps for this project, I embarked on the grounded theory study by identifying my research philosophy, which guided my choice of study design. Due to the lack of existing frameworks or tools to guide educators and researchers in integrating wellbeing initiatives into teaching subjects, I adopted a qualitative research approach using constructivist grounded theory methodology. This allowed me to create a theoretical model for busy educators to seamlessly integrate the FWB program into their curricula while emphasising soft skills and wellbeing as core components. Grounded theory, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), is a qualitative research design where the researcher develops a comprehensive explanation of a process, action, or interaction by drawing insights from various participants' perspectives. Constructivist grounded theory, developed by Charmaz (2006, 2008a, 2014), foregrounds the subjective nature of research and the researcher's active involvement in data construction and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This methodology underscores the significance of the researcher-participant relationship and recognises how written expression influences the final text grounded in the data (Birks & Mills, 2015). By acknowledging these elements, constructivist grounded theory offers a more nuanced and reflexive approach to qualitative research. This methodology enabled me to develop a theoretical model that facilitates the integration of FWB into curricula while also incorporating my perspective as a researcher.

Being a novice in grounded theory methodology, I proceeded to explore the intricacies of conducting a grounded theory study. This involved attending workshops and receiving guidance from mentors experienced in grounded theory. I also attended a workshop on conducting a good interview through an oral history course. This training helped me operationalise the practical aspects of conducting effective research interviews, aligning with the recommendation of Creswell (2009), who stresses the importance of using interview protocols in qualitative research before conducting interviews. In the same vein, I recognised the importance of presenting my findings compellingly. This led me to enrol in a narrative course called 'How to be a Narrative Ninja'. This training improved my ability to write and explain the outcome of my research in a manner that will appeal to broader audiences.

The interviews I conducted for this study were structured in five phases. Following the grounded theory approach, I strategically selected the initial group of educators to gather rich data for analysis. Subsequent participants were chosen through theoretical sampling to address

gaps that emerged during analysis, including follow-up interviews, until data saturation was achieved in the fifth set of interviews. These educators shared their experiences of integrating the FWB program within their curricula, with variations across countries, universities, and contexts. This diversity allowed me to identify underlying principles and extract implications from their experiences and their interpretations of student experiences, ultimately constructing a data-grounded theoretical model. To present my findings, I employed a storyline approach. As Birks and Mills (2015) note, storylines are an established concept in research, serving both as data sources and research products. In this study, the storyline functioned as the latter, enabling me to craft a compelling narrative from the generated data. This approach is particularly relevant because grounded theories are inherently stories, whether explicitly stated or not, and some researchers acknowledge the narrative nature of the theories they produce (Birks & Mills, 2015).

The grounded theory study sought to (a) make wellbeing promotion a core part of curricula by developing a unique model to effectively engage students who need it most while also enhancing their soft skills with their hard skills acquisition, and (b) translate knowledge into practice by advancing the integration of First Nations Knowledge within the cultural interface of university curricula that is often fraught with the divide between First Nations and Western knowledge systems in academia. By doing so, this research addresses the need for more comprehensive, culturally inclusive approaches to student wellbeing and academic success in higher education.

Part Four provided a critical synthesis of the entire project through the lens of the cultural interface. This concluding part weaves together insights from the studies of the project, drawing conclusions and offering practical recommendations for future practice and research. The outcomes of these studies, synthesised under the ensuing heading – *The Revelation*, illuminates the project's unique contribution to knowledge in the field of higher education, particularly in understanding how wellbeing initiatives can be meaningfully integrated into core academic practices while honouring diverse knowledge systems.

10.4 The Revelation – New Knowledge Contribution of the Project

I set out through this doctoral research to explore the process of promoting student wellbeing as an integral part of core curricula. This fundamentally raises questions about the nature and purpose of education in contemporary society and the feasibility of soft skills in promoting wellbeing and preparing students for the complexities of life. The exploration led to investigating how educators integrated the FWB program as an explicit soft skills training initiative to promote student wellbeing within curricula. Utilising a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study analysed the challenges and opportunities that emerged as educators integrated this wellbeing-centric program into their teaching. These approaches aimed to accomplish two primary objectives: (a) create a theoretical model to facilitate the seamless integration of wellbeing as a fundamental component of academic curricula, and (b) bridge the gap between theory and practice in the grand scheme of fostering an education that prepares students for life's complexities through wellbeing and soft skills enhancement.

The first paper published from my research (included in Chapter 2) explored the foundational question of the role of love in pedagogy: *Can there be a recourse to a philosophy of love in education?* Through a careful examination of ancient Greek philosophical perspectives and intersubjective reflection, this study revealed a striking dichotomy in academic discourse: love in pedagogy is either dismissed entirely as irrelevant to education or acknowledged superficially without appreciating its deeper significance. The paper's unique contribution lies in its development of a unitive theoretical framework that positions love not as an optional addition to education but as fundamentally inseparable from it. This framework asserts that if education's primary purpose is to serve *the good of the other*, then *love* becomes both *essentially* and *existentially* integral to the educational process, as love fundamentally involves *willing the good of the other for the other*. This theoretical contribution proved pivotal in establishing the foundation for a heart-centred pedagogical approach, directly informing the broader investigation of integrating the First Nations-developed FWB program within university curricula. More importantly, it provided a philosophical underpinning for addressing contemporary challenges in higher education, particularly student mental health issues and the development of crucial soft skills needed to navigate life's complexities. By reconnecting education with its fundamental purpose through the lens of love, this paper laid the groundwork for reconceptualising what education should truly encompass in the contemporary world,

offering a theoretical bridge between traditional pedagogical approaches and the holistic development needs of today's students.

The second published paper from this research (included in Chapter 4) employed a systematic review methodology to comprehensively examine soft skills interventions across all educational levels. Although this project focused on university students, the exploration of soft skills across all levels of education was to highlight the importance of these skills across different levels of educational domains. This investigation addressed the critical question: *what are the characteristics of soft skills interventions at different educational levels, their reported outcomes, and the quality of intervention design?* Analysing 38 studies from major educational databases (ERIC, Scopus, Informit A+ Education, and Google Scholar) spanning 2012–2022, this research made several significant contributions to the understanding of soft skills development in education. The study's primary contribution was the identification and categorisation of three distinct intervention approaches: workshop-based, creative-based, and project-based methodologies. The findings revealed multifaceted benefits of soft skills enhancement, extending beyond traditional academic outcomes. These benefits encompass improved soft skills competencies, employability prospects, enhanced career planning capabilities, and strengthened social-emotional learning competencies. Notably, the research demonstrated that soft skills interventions not only enhanced academic performance but also contributed to reducing critical behavioural issues, including violence, drug abuse, depression, and bullying. A rigorous quality assessment using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) and the Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) tools yielded another important insight: only three studies qualified as 'best practice,' highlighting a significant gap in intervention design quality. This led to a crucial methodological observation that traditional randomised controlled trials (RCTs) may not be the most appropriate approach for evaluating complex social interventions like soft skills development. Instead, the study advocated for continuous quality improvement approaches incorporating mixed methods. This comprehensive review provided compelling evidence that notwithstanding their complexity across various stages of education, soft skills are both teachable and impactful within curricula, thereby establishing a strong empirical foundation for exploring how educators integrate programs like FWB as a soft skills approach into university curricula. This evidence-based understanding proved invaluable in informing the broader investigation of soft skills development in higher education settings.

The third and final published paper produced from my research (see Appendix 2) represented the culmination of this research project, examining how the FWB program has been integrated into university curricula in Australia and internationally. Through a constructivist grounded theory approach, this investigation addressed a crucial question: *What are the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating an Australian First Nations wellbeing program in university curricula?* This study's significance lies not only in its findings but in its methodological innovation in exploring the intersection of First Nations Knowledge systems and mainstream academic practices. Through interviews with educators who had integrated the FWB program across diverse university settings, the research yielded a novel theoretical model termed 'Getting people to experience it.' This model makes several significant contributions to the understanding of wellbeing integration in higher education. First, it illuminates the process of seamlessly integrating wellbeing programs within existing curricula, emphasising experiential learning as the key to meaningful engagement and understanding. Second, it challenges traditional approaches that treat wellbeing as peripheral to education, instead demonstrating how it can be interwoven with academic content to create a more holistic learning experience.

The model's development, refined through processes of reflexivity and expert feedback, represents a significant advance in the understanding of how First Nations Knowledge can be effectively translated into mainstream university practices. This theoretical model offers not just conceptual insights but practical guidance for institutions seeking to integrate wellbeing-focused initiatives. Perhaps most importantly, it demonstrates how First Nations approaches to wellbeing can enrich mainstream educational practices while maintaining cultural integrity and effectiveness. This study's findings provide a blueprint for transforming higher education by integrating wellbeing as a core component of learning rather than an auxiliary consideration. It exemplifies how First Nations Knowledge systems can contribute meaningful solutions to contemporary educational challenges, particularly in addressing student wellbeing and holistic development.

The study contributes new knowledge by revealing the challenges of 'looking from the outside' when attempting to integrate novel programs like the FWB into existing curricula within the university context. However, by adopting a *second naiveté* of 'looking from the inside' within the cultural interface of tension and possibilities inherent within university curricula, opportunities emerged despite the challenges. This shift in perspective led to the emergence of

strategies for *getting people to experience* the FWB program within curricula. These strategic steps ultimately facilitate achieving *outcomes* through engagement with the FWB program. The model offers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and possibilities in integrating wellbeing-focused, First Nations-developed programs into mainstream university curricula. It suggests a shift in how to conceptualise education, moving towards a more holistic model that values wellbeing alongside academic achievement.

This study also reveals that integrating the FWB program into mainstream curricula exemplifies Nakata's (2002; 2007a) concept of 'cultural interface' by effectively bridging First Nations and Western knowledge systems. The theoretical model identifies the challenges of integrating a First Nations wellbeing-focused program into Western educational frameworks, springing from curricular constraints and leading to staff resistance, racial biases, sensitive topics, funding issues, and accreditation requirements. To address these obstacles, the model proposes a solution-oriented approach utilising strategies such as changing the lens, adopting a generic name, mapping subject interrelatedness, adapting teaching, and fitting accreditation standards. The model also highlights the opportunities presented by the program's evidence-based nature, integration of First Nations Knowledge, focus on personal wellbeing, and research potential. The outcomes of this integration are two-dimensional because while the program was primarily designed for students, educators also benefited significantly through their facilitation of the program. These outcomes include enhanced wellbeing, improved soft skills, better student educational outcomes, and professional growth for educators.

In the broader context of the project, the outcomes of the studies viewed through the lens of the cultural interface reveal the complex tensions and negotiations involved in integrating student wellbeing into curricula. The first study, exploring pedagogical love in education, highlighted the tensions and challenges of developing teaching approaches that cultivate both technical competencies and essential soft skills. However, within the cultural interface, the feasibility and negotiation of this heart-centred pedagogy became practicable by exploring soft skills training within curricula. The second study of the project involving the systematic review of soft skills intervention within the curricula further highlighted that despite the growing recognition of soft skills' importance, their integration into curricula remains controversial. Yet, within this contested space of tension and negotiation lies the opportunity to advance holistic education that balances hard and soft skills to prepare students for life's complexities.

This sets the stage for the third study of this project, exploring the integration of the FWB program within the contested space of university curricula. The resulting theoretical model addresses the tensions within the cultural interface while encouraging creative approaches at the intersection of First Nations and Western knowledge systems. The model offers practical strategies for integrating First Nations wellbeing-centric programs into mainstream curricula, providing universities with a roadmap to authentically integrate both First Nations Knowledge and soft skills wellbeing practices as core curricular components. Through knowledge translation into practice, the theoretical model approaches the tensions within the cultural interface with openness and creativity to advance a transformative educational experience that can honour diverse knowledge systems and promote holistic wellbeing within mainstream academic settings.

10.5 Recommendations for Practice

The value of research lies in its capacity to inform decision-making and ultimately improve the human condition (Tsey et al., 2016). This implies that research findings only become meaningful when applied to enhance societal progress through more informed choices (Tsey et al., 2016). This perspective aligns with Charmaz's (2014) assertion that grounded theory is particularly valuable for driving action-oriented change. Building on these principles, this project offers several recommendations, some of which have been alluded to in the discussion chapter, while others are explicitly outlined below. These recommendations for practice provide a roadmap for transforming education to better prepare students for the complexities of modern life, balancing academic achievement with personal growth and life skills development.

10.5.1 Holistic Curriculum Balance

To foster comprehensive student development, institutions should implement a balanced curriculum that equally emphasises hard and soft skills across all disciplines. This approach, inspired by Alain de Botton's vision of empowering education (SDF, 2013) and Biesta's (2020) tripartite educational functions, allows for the integration of courses promoting emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and practical wisdom alongside traditional technical subjects. By adapting programs like FWB across various fields, including demanding health professions, institutions can address mental health concerns while preparing students for complex personal

and professional challenges. The restructured curriculum will produce well-rounded graduates who are both technically proficient and emotionally capable. Assessment methods should be modified beyond standardised tests to include holistic approaches such as project-based assessments, peer evaluations, self-reflection exercises, and portfolios that evaluate both hard and soft skills development over time.

10.5.2 Professional Development and Engagement

Some educators felt ill-equipped to deliver the FWB program effectively in their field. They worried that certain FWB topics might be too emotionally charged for their classrooms, thereby leading to resistance. A professional development program that would eventually lead to engagement is recommended to empower educators to integrate the program and address their concerns. This strategy involves implementing workshops, seminars, and ongoing training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills to navigate sensitive FWB topics and integrate soft skills across diverse classroom settings. A mentorship program pairing experienced educators with newer ones will facilitate knowledge sharing and build confidence. This could simultaneously foster collaboration among educators and other stakeholders, policymakers, and key figures at the coalface of integrating First Nations Knowledge systems into mainstream curricula. This collaborative approach should create partnerships between sceptical staff members and those experienced with the FWB program, providing opportunities for direct engagement and shared experiences. Demonstrating the program's importance and relevance in academic settings through these initiatives aims to enhance educator competence, broaden support, and ultimately lead to more successful integration of the FWB program across various disciplines and educational environments.

10.5.3 Cultural Sensitivity

In the university context, working within the cultural interface often involves tensions and negotiations, as Nakata attests. Yet, there are possibilities for creative inquiry that could lead to novel solutions. Practical ways in which the concept of cultural interface can facilitate First Nations wellbeing programs into university curricula involve engaging with First Nations leaders or scholars in implementing programs like FWB in specific contexts. This could involve inviting community elders or cultural experts as guest speakers and adapting teaching methods to accommodate diverse cultural learning styles. Educators in this study reported that

their engagement with First Nations leaders and scholars in the operationalisation of the FWB program *in situ* was instrumental in positively framing the FWB program, thereby fostering a sense of empowerment among First Nations students. This study recommends this ongoing collaboration to ensure that educators feel confident incorporating First Nations content into their teaching while meeting the needs of First Nations students and communities to prepare all students for a more diverse and inclusive society.

10.6 Recommendations for Future Research

With the limitations that abound in this project, future studies could broaden research in the FWB program's adaptation in academic settings in the following ways. These areas for future research could further enhance understanding of the FWB program's implementation, effectiveness, and broader implications for education and student wellbeing.

10.6.1 Continuous Quality Improvement for Soft Skills Intervention

The systematic review's identification of only three 'best practice' interventions, based on randomised controlled trials (RCTs), suggests a methodological limitation in evaluating soft skills programs. While RCTs represent the traditional gold standard, their application to complex social interventions may not always be practical or suitable for the multidimensional nature of soft skills interventions. Future research should consider adopting continuous quality improvement approaches incorporating mixed methods to better capture the nuanced impacts of these interventions and strengthen the evidence base for promising programs.

10.6.2 Comparative Analysis

Previous FWB studies have predominantly focused on student perspectives. In contrast, this current grounded theory study centres on educators' viewpoints. Future studies should explore the differential impacts of the FWB program on educators versus students when integrated into curricula, examining potential synergies or discrepancies in their experiences. This research could address the current gap between student-focused and educator-focused studies. Additionally, comparative analyses between the FWB program and other wellbeing initiatives could be conducted, building on some educators' perception of FWB as the gold standard among First Nations-developed social and emotional wellbeing programs. Such research could

provide valuable evidence to advocate for increased funding and broader implementation of the FWB program across educational institutions while also offering insights into the program's effectiveness relative to other wellbeing initiatives.

10.6.3 Enhancing Educator Preparedness and Support for Family Wellbeing Implementation

Building on this study's findings, future research should explore effective methods for training and supporting educators who feel unprepared to integrate the FWB program within their curricula. This investigation could encompass various training approaches, ongoing support systems, and professional development strategies that best equip educators to confidently integrate FWB principles into their teaching. Additionally, given the increasing demands to enhance university students' wellbeing and the resistance experienced by some staff members, research should examine how educators' concerns about job security and career advancement affect their readiness to integrate the FWB program. This comprehensive approach would address both the practical needs for educator preparation and the underlying factors contributing to resistance, providing a more holistic understanding of the challenges in integrating wellbeing programs in higher education settings.

10.7 Concluding Words

As this research draws to a close, I am reminded of the initial inspiration that sparked the early stage of the research – the words of Alain de Botton espoused at the beginning of this thesis. To bring this work full circle, I would like to conclude with the philosophical words of Richard Rohr (2024a, para. 1–6), enclosed in the box below that captures the cycle of 'Include and Transcend'. These words resonate with this project's spirit and underscores its central message for the future in embracing the fluidity of growth and change, while aligning with my focus on promoting an education that prepares students for life's complexities according to the signs of time.

Include and Transcend

When history evolves and embraces a new idea, cultural mood, or consciousness, we need not (we dare not, actually!) completely exclude the previous idea, mood, or consciousness. We grow best by including what was good and lasting in the previous stage and avoiding the overreaction and rebellious spirit that have characterised most revolutions up to now. This demands both humility and the capacity for nondual thinking. Either/or thinking immediately creates disjunction and mistrust. Both/and thinking creates continuity and trust over time. This …compromise can most simply be stated as include and transcend. It is at the core of what we mean by wisdom …. We can trust and even need certain kinds of disorder to clarify what our original Order meant, lacked, or intended. There are always a few needed correctives to every new proposition, and those correctives only appear over time and with practice. If we can rightly achieve an integration of original plan plus correctives, rule plus "the exception that proves the rule," Order plus Disorder, we have what I am calling Reorder. Reorder moves us forward in a positive way, but then sets the stage for the pattern to continue all over again. Even good Reorder, in time, becomes its own faulty Order and its own cracks will begin to show. The need for humility and creativity never stops. ORDER, by itself, normally wants to eliminate any disorder and diversity, creating a narrow and cognitive rigidity in both people and systems. DISORDER, by itself, closes us off from any primal union, meaning, and eventually even sanity in both people and systems. REORDER, or transformation of people and systems, happens when both are seen to work together.

Rohr (2024a) further argues that it is human hubris to view progress as a straight, uninterrupted line – a perspective that often leads to despair and cynicism. Instead, he posits that humanity, especially leaders and teachers, must embrace humility and creativity. These virtues provide the necessary detachment and patience for historical progress, preventing our absolutes, certitudes, and obstinacy from hindering growth. Rohr (2024a) describes a cyclical pattern where each original Order learns to incorporate an initially threatening Disorder, which then

evolves into a new Reordering, setting the stage for the cycle to begin anew. This perspective encourages a more flexible and adaptable approach to change and progress in both personal and societal contexts.

Just as Rohr (2024a) describes the cycle of Order, Disorder, and Reorder, this research has traversed similar phases, beginning with an Order – the existing educational paradigms, embracing Disorder – challenging these norms and introducing the FWB program, and now Reorder – creating a new theoretical model aptly named 'Getting people to experience it' that offers a more holistic approach to education. This journey, like Rohr's cycle, is not linear but a spiral of continuous growth and adaptation. The theoretical model, born from the crucible and the anfractuous nature of grounded theory, will inevitably face its own challenges and correctives in time, needing continuous refinement to meet tomorrow's needs. This is not a flaw but a feature of true progress, echoing Rohr's call for humility and creativity at this stage. These virtues will be the compass for educators and leaders to navigate the ever-changing landscape of education. They will allow for an open mindset to include and transcend, knowing that the theoretical model is not a static entity but a living, breathing framework that will continue to evolve. It will cycle through its own phases of Order, Disorder, and Reorder, adapting to the needs of future students and educators in preparing them not just for today but for the unknown challenges of tomorrow.

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Appendix 1. Interview Questions

1	Could you tell me some of the challenges you experienced when you were using the family wellbeing in the subjects that you taught?
2	What were some of the opportunities or enabling factors that helped in implementing the family wellbeing within the university curriculum?
3	Could you tell me how the family wellbeing was integrated into the existing curriculum without compromising the academic rigour and requirements?
4	What was your thought process that made you think this program would fit within your subject objectives?
5	How did the embedding of the FWB program impacted or enhanced student wellbeing, resiliency, or academic outcome?
6	What were the cultural or institutional factors that may have hindered the adoption and integration of the family wellbeing program?
7	What were the university requirements that you have to meet to get it actually accepted or being used in terms of accreditation?
8	What methods did you use to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the family wellbeing program on student wellbeing and academic outcomes?
9	What were some of the ways to monitor or refine or improved the family wellbeing program based on the feedback and evaluation data that you receive?
10	How has the design of the family well-being program supported the specific needs and challenges of university students?
11	Is there any way we can encourage teachers to be able to be themselves when they're teaching the subject?
12	Were there any limitations in terms of resources like financial, time, human resources that impeded the integration when you were doing it?
13	Do you think there is an age and sex influence in how people receive the program, and why?
14	Can you tell me about what resonate with you regarding the FWB program and why? Where any ideas eye-openers for you and why? Were there any things that did not sit well with you and why do you think so?

15	Can you give me some suggestions that would be helpful to education providers, educators and policy makers regarding using the FWB program in promoting student wellbeing in this time of pandemic recovery?
16	Could you tell me about anything we might have missed that could be important for students and how we can make the workshop better?

Appendix 2. A Grounded Theory Study Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities Involved in Integrating the FWB Program Within University Curricula

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Getting people to experience it: a grounded theory of the process of integrating a First Nations wellbeing program within university curricula

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Background: The wellbeing of university students is crucial for their success. Yet educators struggle with the lack of frameworks to integrate wellbeing into core curricula, and universities often relegate wellbeing initiatives to extracurricular activities. These initiatives frequently fail to engage students and the potential impact to wellbeing is reduced. In Australia, universities are also encouraged to integrate First Nations Knowledge within mainstream curricula, but some academics may be skeptical about the relevance of these knowledge systems in specific disciplinary settings. This study addresses these challenges by exploring the integration of the First Nations-developed Family Wellbeing (FWB) program—a wellbeing-focused soft skills approach—into core university curricula.

Methods: Using constructivist grounded theory methodology, the authors developed the theoretical model "Getting people to experience it," drawing on in-depth interviews with eight educators who integrated the FWB program within core university curricula in Australia and internationally.

Findings: The study examined the challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes of this integration, revealing significant improvements in wellbeing and soft skills for both students and educators. Viewed through the lens of cultural interface, the findings offer valuable insights into bridging First Nations and Western knowledge systems in higher education.

Conclusion: The theoretical model provides a practical framework for educators to integrate wellbeing and soft skills as core elements of curricula, rather than treating them as optional add-ons. This work has profound implications for addressing student mental health, enhancing soft skills, and creating a more inclusive and effective educational experience.

KEYWORDS

wellbeing, soft skills, First Nations, Indigenous knowledge, Family Wellbeing program, cultural interface, grounded theory, university curricula

Introduction

Wellbeing plays a critical role in enabling students to enjoy a happy and fulfilling educational experience (Fraillon, 2004), which is why wellbeing promotion has become a priority for education providers, policymakers, and educators alike (Partridge et al., 2018; Whatman et al., 2019). As a widespread term in both academic and popular literature, wellbeing can be understood from different perspectives: hedonic (experiencing

high positive and low negative emotions), eudaimonic (achieving personal goals through autonomy, growth, relationships, and self-acceptance), and social wellbeing (successfully navigating social challenges and functioning in the social world; Procházka and Bočková, 2024). In this study, to serve as a guiding concept, we utilized Dodge et al. (2012, p. 230) definition of wellbeing as "…the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced…" This definition resonates with the capabilities approach of Nussbaum (2001), which includes core human capabilities such as standard of living, health, education, social interaction, emotional agility, coexistence, and participation, as foregrounded by Heyeres et al. (2021). Whiteside et al. (2017) similarly define wellbeing as a subjective self-assessment of satisfaction with key aspects of life, including health, relationships, safety, standard of living, achievement, community connection, and future security—factors that correspond with the dimensions measured in the Australian Unity (2022) Personal Wellbeing Index.

Integrating wellbeing into curricula is increasingly recognized as essential for enhancing student educational outcomes (Hassed et al., 2009; Hoare et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2017). According to Whatman et al. (2019), social and emotional learning programs are gaining traction as effective methods for boosting student wellbeing in Australia and internationally. Despite various approaches, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the systematic integration of wellbeing programs into university curricula and a dearth of practical guidelines for educators. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes associated with integrating the Australian First Nations-developed Family Wellbeing (FWB) program into university curricula. The aim is to develop a theoretical model that seamlessly integrates student wellbeing promotion into academic studies without detracting from subject content or adding to student and educator workload.

Background

Challenges affecting university students' mental ill-health

University students face numerous challenges that significantly impact their wellbeing. The transition from secondary to higher education is often fraught with financial instability and deteriorating mental and physical health (Partridge et al., 2018). Globally, millions of young people are diagnosed with mental illness every day, with three-quarters of cases occurring in individuals under 25 years old (Orygen, 2020). In Australia, nearly four million young people experienced some form of mental illness in 2014–15 (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2020). The 2020-2022 Australian National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing revealed that 42.9% of people aged 16–85 had experienced a mental disorder during their lives, with 21.5% affected in the previous year. Anxiety was most common (17.2%), and young adults (16–24) showed the highest prevalence at 38.8% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023). According to the Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health (McGorry et al., 2024), there is a prevalence of global youth mental health crisis, with a 50% increase in mental illness rates in under two decades. Mental health conditions now typically emerge by age 15, with most onsets before age 25, influenced by social media, climate anxiety, and COVID-19 (McGorry et al., 2024). Despite causing 45% of disease burden in youth, mental health receives only 2% of global health funding (McGorry et al., 2024). The commission led by Orygen and involving 50 experts across five continents, calls for urgent system reform and increased investment to address this primary threat to youth wellbeing and productivity (McGorry et al., 2024).

Mental health decline in young adults can impair their academic performance. A study by the National Union of Students in partnership with the mental health service Headspace, reveals that many Australian tertiary students endure high levels of psychological distress due to financial pressures and the struggles of balancing life, work, and study, all of which adversely affect their academic progress and mental health (Rickwood et al., 2016). These stressors are significant risk factors for poor mental health among university students (Browne et al., 2017). Poor mental health can lead to students failing to complete their studies, resulting in low self-esteem, altered career trajectories, higher debt levels, increased stress, and feelings of disappointment (Andrews and Chong, 2011; Orygen, 2020; Rickwood et al., 2016; Waghorn et al., 2010; Whiteside et al., 2017). Consequently, Australian university students are more likely to experience mental illness than the general population, which affects their health, social connections, living standards, and educational and employment outcomes (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2020; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Orygen, 2017b, 2020; Stallman, 2010; Whiteside et al., 2017). Students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, low socio-economic backgrounds, rural areas, and international students, appear to face seemingly even greater risks and challenges (Orygen, 2017b).

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted populations worldwide, causing widespread physical, emotional, and mental health consequences for millions of individuals (Tuan et al., 2024). This global crisis has exacerbated many factors contributing to mental ill-health among university students worldwide (Ihm et al., 2021). For instance, in the UK, the Office for National Statistics (2020) reported a significant decline in mental health among students in 2020. In Australia, students experienced a loss of motivation, increased psychological distress, and decreased overall wellbeing (Dingle and Han, 2021; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021). The growing prevalence of these challenges for student mental illness since the pandemic affirms the urgent need to address these contributing factors (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021).

Universities' response to mental ill-health among students

Development of a global roadmap for mental health research among young people to address current challenges, fill neglected areas, and maximize the potential impact of initiatives is vital, given the dearth of research data on the nature and frequency of mental ill-health among university students in Australia (Orygen, 2017a,b). Optimizing the wellbeing of all tertiary students, both domestic

and international, is crucial for the flourishing of Australian society (Partridge et al., 2018). In response, universities are increasingly focused on improving student wellbeing and enhancing the overall student experience through initiatives such as counseling services, academic support, meditation, social events, physical activities, and mental health awareness programs including "RU OK Days" (Eva, 2019; James Cook University, n.d.; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Whiteside et al., 2017).

Despite these efforts, mental distress among students continues to rise (Eva, 2019; Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021). A significant issue is that many wellbeing programs are treated as optional add-ons rather than integral parts of the curriculum, limiting their reach to those who need them most (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Whiteside et al., 2017). For these programs to have a meaningful impact, they must be *integrated* into the core curriculum rather than being treated as supplementary activities (Klepac Pogrmilovic et al., 2021; Ritter et al., 2018).

The concept of "integration" extends beyond combining subjects into a foundational pedagogical approach. Although "integration" has multiple meanings (Beane, 1997), this paper defines it as systematically embedding wellbeing as core curriculum rather than as supplements. Powell and Graham (2017) advances this view by maintaining that student wellbeing support has evolved from a disconnected initiative to an integral element of education itself. Interventions *integrated* into standard curriculum improves implementation quality (Barry et al., 2017). Furthermore, this paper draws on Lister and Allman's (2024) framework of "embeddedness" regarding student mental wellbeing to clarify the concept of "integration" as: (a) modeled in practice, meaning wellbeing is intrinsic to teaching pedagogy and course structure, beyond mere subject matter; (b) customized to student needs; (c) fundamental to institutional values; (d) collaborative; and (e) explicitly planned and resourced. True wellbeing integration involves: systematic embedding throughout academic content (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Rowe et al., 2007; Wyn et al., 2000); synergistic reinforcement of academic goals (Rowe et al., 2007); multi-level implementation across curriculum, teaching, and policies (Barry et al., 2017; Powell and Graham, 2017); holistic development across cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains (Lewallen et al., 2015); and infusion throughout subjects rather than isolation in dedicated lessons (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Stirling and Emery, 2016). This represents a shift from peripheral to intrinsic positioning of wellbeing in education.

Integrating First Nations Knowledge in mainstream university curricula

In Australia, universities are encouraged to integrate First Nations Knowledge into mainstream curricula (The University of Melbourne, 2024). This initiative is driven by both educational goals and a commitment to inclusivity and reconciliation, which acknowledges the transformative potential of First Nations Knowledge (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; The University of Melbourne, 2024). The integration serves to increase the visibility of First Nations Knowledge, which can potentially boost self-esteem and academic engagement among both non-First Nations and First Nations students (Nakata, 2002). Moreover, it is considered a crucial step toward national improvement and building a better Australia (The University of Melbourne, 2024). By incorporating First Nations knowledge systems, histories, and cultures into the curriculum through new resources and professional development modules, all Australian students are given the opportunity to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (The University of Melbourne, 2024). This heightens the importance of knowledge translation into practice.

Knowledge translation is essential for effectively incorporating evidence into practice (Esmail et al., 2020). Knowledge translation involves developing evidence-based, scientific, and practical methods for implementing research findings, thereby enabling rapid and reliable improvements (Geng et al., 2017; Grimshaw et al., 2004; Reed et al., 2018). This iterative process includes the dissemination, synthesis, and exchange of ethically sound knowledge to drive positive change (Canadian Institutes for Health Research, 2017; Esmail et al., 2020). In the context of this study, knowledge translation provides a valuable framework for integrating wellbeing interventions into existing curricula, evidencing the significance of study findings in informing practice and measuring impact. Our work is consistent with the Australian Research Council's emphasis on research that enhances productivity and wellbeing for long-term economic growth and societal improvement (Australian Research Council, 2022a,b; Jefferson et al., 2024). As Tsey et al. (2016, p. 1) assert, research is "…of limited value unless the evidence created is used to make smarter decisions for the betterment of society."

Reed et al. (2018) propose three strategic principles, known as SHIFT-Evidence, for knowledge translation: (a) "act scientifically and pragmatically" by combining existing evidence with unique system conditions and adapting to emerging complexities; (b) "embrace complexity" by recognizing that evidence-based interventions depend on related practices and addressing interdependent system issues; and (c) "engage and empower" by leveraging insights from staff and beneficiaries to operationalize translation and navigate system changes. These principles are instrumental in guiding the translation of research into practice and fostering collaboration among policymakers, academics, patients, and practitioners to use interventions for improvement (Reed et al., 2018).

Applying SHIFT-Evidence principles to this study involved: (a) grounding knowledge translation in scientific and pragmatic approaches by integrating existing FWB program evidence with unique conditions and adapting interventions to emerging complexities; (b) embracing complexity by understanding the interdependent aspects of curricula, identifying issues affecting student wellbeing, and addressing underlying factors; and (c) engaging and empowering by drawing on educators' previous FWB insights to enhance wellbeing integration, guiding changes driven by their concerns. This approach led us to pose the following research question: *What are the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating an Australian First Nations wellbeing program in university curricula?*

As part of this strategy, the aim was to integrate the FWB program into university curricula in a way that complements learning objectives without increasing the workload for students and educators. The challenge lay in the lack of frameworks or tools to support busy educators and researchers in seamlessly incorporating research evidence into existing teaching subjects using continuous quality improvement approaches. This study sought to address this gap by developing a theoretical model that facilitates the seamless integration of the FWB program into university curricula.

The Family Wellbeing (FWB) intervention program

The FWB program is an empowerment intervention developed by Australian First Nations people to help individuals and families gain greater control over their lives (Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018; Whiteside et al., 2017). The program offers a structured framework, along with tools and resources, to guide participants through a step-by-step empowerment process aimed at enhancing wellbeing, personal development, and overall quality of life (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022; Tsey et al., 2018). The program is designed to cultivate essential social competencies for navigating life's challenges by addressing emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental needs (Tsey et al., 2018, 2005; Whiteside et al., 2014). When these basic needs are unmet, individuals may struggle to cope, leading to personal or relationship difficulties (McCalman, 2009; Tsey et al., 2018).

The FWB program teaches key concepts such as wellbeing, resilience, emotional intelligence, and practical wisdom (phronesis), which are increasingly recognized by universities as vital, yet challenging to integrate into curricula (Tsey, 2019; Tsey et al., 2018, 2005; Yan et al., 2019). Supported by over 23 years of research, the program has demonstrated significant improvements in social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), enabling participants to engage more fully in life, community, education, and employment (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022; Nolan et al., 2024; Perera et al., 2022). To date, more than 5,000 individuals have participated in the program across more than 80 locations in Australia and abroad (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022; Perera et al., 2022). An evaluation of the program found that for every dollar invested in delivering the FWB program in one Australian First Nations community between 2001 and 2021, $4.80 in benefits was generated for participants and the community (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022).

Commencing in 2021, a five-year program has focused on FWB research translation and impact evaluation. The goals of this initiative are to: (a) bring together FWB user organizations, training providers, and researchers in collaborative partnerships; (b) integrate the FWB program within, or use it to, enhance existing First Nations education, employment, and business development support programs and services; (c) evaluate the outcomes; and (d) use the results to influence First Nations wellbeing, education, and employment policies. This study is part of the larger program to translate research into practice. It is particularly focused on leveraging the experiences of educators who have integrated the FWB program within their curricula across universities in Australia and overseas. In this context, integration denotes how these educators adapted their existing course content by evaluating, aligning, and updating materials with FWB program elements, effectively incorporating aspects of the program despite curriculum constraints.

Methods

Study design

To explore the integration of the FWB program within university curricula, we employed the constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz (2006, 2008, 2014), which emphasizes the subjectivity of the research process and the researcher's active role in constructing and interpreting data (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Grounded theory, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), is a qualitative research design in which the researcher develops a comprehensive explanation of a process, action, or interaction by drawing insights from the perspectives of various participants. Charmaz's approach recognizes the importance of examining the relationship between the researcher and participants and acknowledges the role of written expression in shaping a final text grounded in the data (Birks and Mills, 2015). This approach was chosen due to the absence of existing frameworks or tools to guide educators and researchers in seamlessly integrating wellbeing initiatives into teaching subjects. By choosing constructivist grounded theory, we aimed to create a theoretical model that not only facilitates the integration of FWB into curricula but also incorporates the researcher perspective. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at James Cook University (JCU; H8811). Informed consent was obtained from all study participants. Participants were each assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity in reporting.

Study context and participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit university educators who had integrated the FWB program in higher education settings, both in Australia and internationally as participants in the study. Of the eight educators recruited from a pool of 11 available educators, all were female. One educator identified as First Nations, while seven were from non-First Nations backgrounds. All participants had substantial teaching experience, with three having taught for 6–10 years and five having over a decade of teaching experience. Their academic ranks were fairly senior, with five holding positions at the Associate Professor or Professor level, and three at the Lecturer or Senior Lecturer level. All eight participants held combined teaching and research roles. The background information of these educators is depicted in Table 1.

As shown in Table 2, the educators had used the FWB program in diploma courses ($n = 2$), bachelor degree courses ($n = 5$) or master's degree courses ($n = 2$) at four Australian universities: James Cook University (JCU), La Trobe University, the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and the University of Queensland (UQ); and three international universities: the University of

Papua New Guinea (UPNG), and Chinese institutions, Shenyang University and Guangzhou Agricultural University (GAU).

The FWB program integration within these courses spanned from 2009 to 2023, reaching between 10 and 285 students annually from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The widespread student engagement across diverse disciplines demonstrates the program's adaptability within university curricula in both regional and urban settings. While student perceptions of FWB program have been well-documented in previous research (see Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019), this study focuses on the educators' experiences of integration, with one to three educators interviewed from each participating university. The educators were trained to deliver the FWB program within their curricula by (a) engaging in a 2-day intensive workshop covering program content and delivery methods; followed by (b) a year-long remote mentoring period focused on teaching preparation, program facilitation, and delivery process debriefing (Yan et al., 2019). Beyond this initial training period, educators continue to receive informal support through ongoing collaboration within the FWB research network. This peer-led network sustains engagement and fidelity to the program and represents a key enabler of continued practice.

TABLE 1 Demographic information of interviewed educators ($n = 8$).

Characteristic	Categories	Number of educators
Gender	Female	8
	Male	0
Indigeneity	First Nations	1
	Non-First Nations	7
Teaching experience	0–5 years	0
	6–10 years	3
	Over 10 years	5
Academic rank	Associate prof/professor	5
	Lecturer/senior lecturer	3
Role	Teaching and research	8
	Teaching only	0
	Research only	0

Data collection and analysis

Individual interviews were used for data collection. The lead researcher conducted in-depth interviews with eight university educators. Interviews lasted between 30 and 82 min. Interviews were conducted in five phases, including follow-up interviews, adhering to constructivist grounded theory principles for initial coding and analysis (Birks and Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2014). This process of conducting interviews in phases enabled the application of constant comparative analysis inherent in the simultaneous collection and analysis of data in grounded theory. Constant comparative analysis plays a crucial role in grounded theory by allowing researchers compare new findings against existing data to spot patterns and gaps (Birks and Mills, 2015). As grounded theorist researchers identify similarities and differences, they can determine what additional data they need to collect, otherwise known as theoretical sampling (Birks and Mills, 2015). Theoretical sampling strategically selects data sources—typically through interviews with people who have direct experience with the research topic (Birks and Mills, 2015). The approach helps researchers fill gaps in their developing theory by choosing participants who can provide missing pieces of information (Birks and Mills, 2015). Theoretical sampling enables the clarification of variations, properties, dimensions, and relationships among codes and categories (Ligita et al., 2020). Through this back-and-forth process of analysis and data collection, researchers develop rich conceptual categories that help explain the phenomenon in question (Birks and Mills, 2015). In this study, theoretical sampling guided the selection of educators to be interviewed next, to deepen an understanding of the phenomenon being explored. Based on this, the initial set of interviews began with two experienced educators who had extensively integrated FWB within their curricula, chosen for their deep understanding and potential to provide rich data for initial coding.

Data analysis began following the initial set of interviews. The lead researcher transcribed the interviews using the online

TABLE 2 Description of university offerings with FWB program.

Name of university and type	Country	Name of degree[a]	Years FWB integrated	Enrolled students annually	Available educators for interviews
JCU (Regional)	Australia	Masters of Indigenous Studies	Since 2010	10	1
		Diploma of Higher Education	Since 2023	285	1
Shenyang (Urban)	China	Bachelor of International Trade	Since 2016	30	1
GAU (Urban)	China	Bachelor of Business	Since 2017	60	1
La Trobe (Regional)	Australia	Bachelor of Social Work	Since 2014	120	3
UNSW (Urban)	Australia	Bachelor of Health Sciences	Since 2010	Not provided	1
UQ (Urban)	Australia	Bachelor of Health Sciences	Since 2010	Not provided	1
UPNG (Urban)	PNG	Diploma/Master of Public Health	Since 2009	30	2

[a]Some of the names of these degrees have changed over time.

transcription feature in Microsoft Word, then punctiliously reviewed the audio files to correct any transcription errors, ensuring line-by-line accuracy. A denaturalized transcription method was employed to remove idiosyncratic elements such as stutters and pauses to focus on the meanings and perceptions conveyed in the spoken words (Cameron, 2001; Oliver et al., 2005). This approach is consistent with the principles outlined by Oliver et al. (2005), who stress the importance of extracting meaning from transcripts in grounded theory research. Initially, NVivo qualitative analysis software was used for coding, but as analysis progressed, manual coding and categorization were employed to refine and identify the core category. Constant comparative analysis, memoing, and diagramming allowed for continuous refining of findings until theoretical saturation was reached. Authors met regularly during data collection and analysis to evaluate and discuss processes and emerging findings.

Quality of the research design

To ensure the validity of the study methods, we used triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness refers to the credibility and dependability of research findings, supported by evidence (Guion et al., 2011). For this study, we employed data triangulation, investigator triangulation, and methodological triangulation.

- Data triangulation involved synthesizing participants' ideas to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.
- Investigator triangulation involved collaboration among the research team, who engaged deeply with the data to validate the emerging theory and narrative through personal reflexivity and rigorous epistemological scrutiny, which included constant debriefing and feedback.
- Methodological triangulation involved integrating literature reviews with grounded theorizing based on the educators' experiences.

This multifaceted approach helped ensure that our findings were robust, credible, and well-supported by the data.

Findings

The theoretical model identifies the core concern of "Getting people to experience it" as central to integrating the FWB program within university curricula. The model emphasizes that genuine understanding of the program's significance—both personally and professionally—can be achieved through direct experience. This experiential aspect emerged as a recurring theme among university educators who have integrated the FWB program into their courses, making it the linchpin of our theoretical framework:

> *People don't really know what it is until they do it. And they don't really know what it feels like and what the experience is until they have a taste of it. And then generally, once they've had that experience, they start to think about where they would fit it in the curriculum. And that it really is relevant to every curriculum – as professional development, personal wellbeing, relationship building. It ticks so many boxes, communication skills that often courses are running subjects on, and this often does it better. But people don't know that until they experience it.* (Alexandra)

The purpose of this theoretical model is to explore how wellbeing initiatives can become integral to curricula, ensuring everyone has an opportunity to experience the program:

> *. . . the perspective changed from the teaching staff through exposure to the program, exposure to the notion that wellbeing should be integrated into their curricula and not an optional on the side.* (Ada)

In this theoretical model, the categories of challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes, along with their dimensional attributes as sub-categories, are mapped within the university contextual environment. This model is diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1.

University contextual environment

The theory emerged within the university context, where integrating the FWB program into curricula presented both challenges and opportunities. Typically, educators are more focused on the challenges of integrating new programs into established curricula. However, the opportunities, though requiring a more in-depth exploration, are crucial for encouraging adoption. An external perspective (looking from the outside) tends to emphasize the challenges, while an internal perspective (looking from the inside) reveals the opportunities. The vantage point from which educators view the program significantly influences their decision to integrate it into their curricula. Ultimately, both challenges and opportunities play a role in enabling people to experience the program. The primary challenges discussed include (a) crowded curricula, (b) pushback from staff, (c) racial prejudice, (d) sensitive topics, (e) funding, and (f) meeting accreditation standards.

Looking from the outside (challenges)

This category details the issues and barriers educators faced integrating the FWB program into curricula when seen from an external viewpoint. "Looking from the outside" was an *in-vivo* code gifted from an educator during an interview.

Crowded curricula

Educators identified the issue of overcrowded curricula is a significant barrier to introducing new initiatives. Many educators face difficulty integrating the FWB program within their already packed curricula. The limited time and space in existing programs discourage educators from adopting new additions that might disrupt their established curricula. Overcrowded curricula often

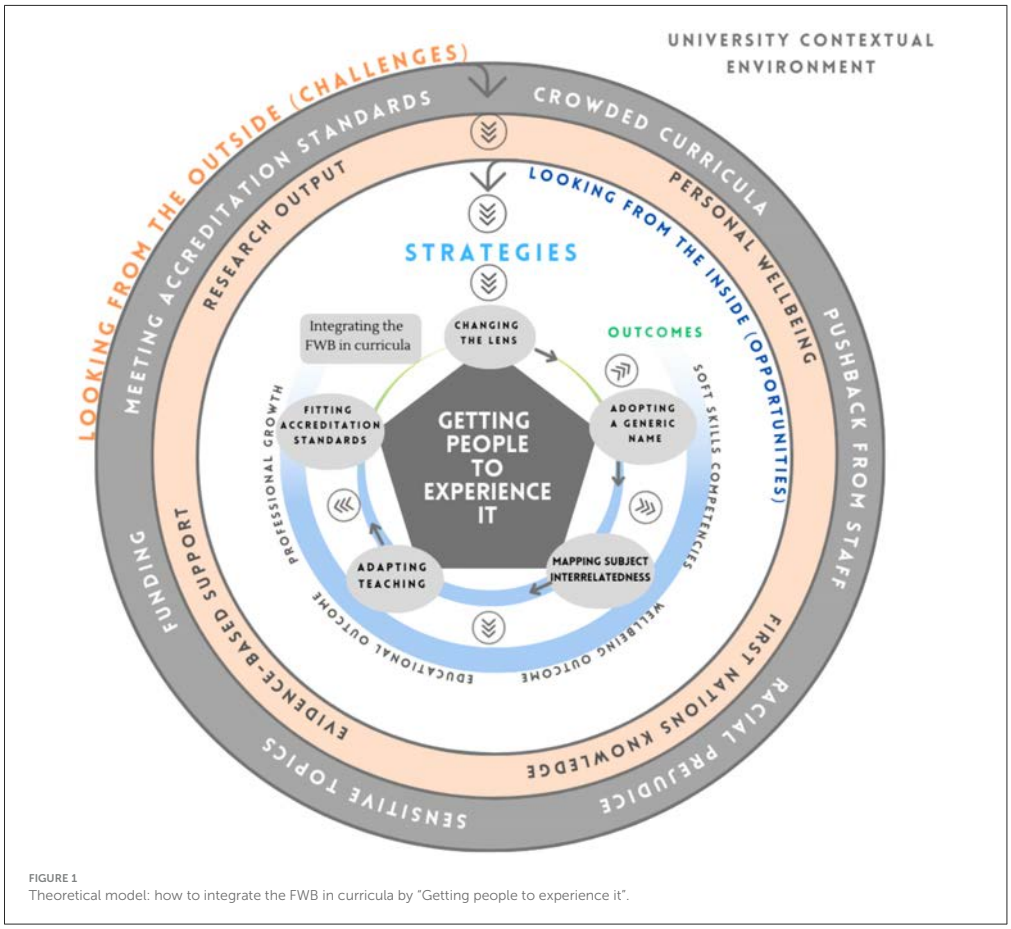

FIGURE 1
Theoretical model: how to integrate the FWB in curricula by "Getting people to experience it".

give rise to other challenges, such as staff resistance, racial prejudice, sensitivity to topics, funding, and meeting accreditation standards:

> *The first barrier was just a crowded curriculum, and teachers don't really want to have to think about and learn something new too. I think in every discipline, the common barrier is that they all have a lot of things they have to cover in their curriculum.... There's a lot of things that the accreditation standards say you have to cover in a curriculum so it can be hard to find space for anything new. They're all just keeping up and they don't want to learn anything new or have to develop a new subject. Often sounds enormous too.* (Alexandra)

Pushback from staff

Educators described how staff resistance often stems from dismissing the relevance of the FWB program to their curricula, citing its complexity and perceived inefficacy. Negative attitudes hinder the program's acceptance among some staff members. The program's relevance and alignment with curriculum were poorly understood:

> *The psychologist, who was the course coordinator, said, "Oh, it's not related to the curriculum." And I said, "You didn't even know. You didn't even ask me how it's related. I could tell you how it's related." But yes, I did have that problem with the psychologist. They couldn't see how it was related. It was not a good interaction because I'm sitting over public health and social work. They were sitting in psychology, and they needed FWB to understand it. The challenge there was really people looking from the outside, not recognizing how unique and valuable it is, and considering it silly. Across the board, that's our biggest problem. They think there's a wellbeing program, but then there's this wellbeing program, but to me, the FWB is the gold standard by far.* (Maya)

Racial prejudice

Educators described how racism was a challenge to integrating the FWB program in university settings. Educators stated the FWB program, which is First Nations-developed and rooted in the Australian cultural context, was dismissed as irrelevant or not evidence-based, leading to condescending or even racist attitudes from certain non-First Nations individuals.

> *The FWB looked a bit wishy washy for them, I was just lucky I got that break in social work. And then sometimes wellbeing gets dropped off because it sounds a bit wishy washy, a bit soft.* (Alexandra)
>
> *. . . there's a lot of people who are racist and redneck, and this was a required course, so a lot that came through that they don't like the name Indigenous. . . . They don't think they can learn anything from Aboriginal people.* (Josephine)

Sensitive topics

Educators found that the sensitive nature of some topics covered in the FWB program may be considered too emotionally charged for academic settings, leading to concerns about their teachability in such settings. Topics such as basic human needs, beliefs and attitudes, relationships, crisis and emotions, and grief and loss were described by educators as challenging to address within a university curriculum:

> *A lot of the topics and other topics might challenge people, and they've got to make sense of things. They're just everyday topics like our beliefs and attitudes or our values or our relationships. Whether it was too risky to run this in the curriculum, maybe it is too sensitive.* (Alexandra)

These concerns are twofold: the potential impact on students and the educators' perceived inadequacy in addressing these topics:

> *. . . a lack of confidence in educators themselves possibly, I think in delivering the content just because they didn't feel that they have a big enough knowledge base to be able to do it properly and effectively or to integrate it into subjects properly and effectively.* (Ada)

Funding

Educators acknowledged financial resourcing was a major challenge, particularly in meeting accreditation standards. Funding issues impacted the program's initial integration. Moreover, there was reluctance to allocate funds for a program perceived as less essential than other mainstream academic subjects:

> *Faculty is always worried about funding, but also, student satisfaction. So, if you put a case to faculty, you might get some interest. But I think generally it'll be about the cost of it and also, they'll be worried about meeting accreditation standards like can you fit it in the curriculum. And it's hard to get the long-term funding to strengthen the evidence.* (Alexandra)
>
> *. . . funding has always been a big issue. I guess the way that I used the FWB for our students in our course, funding didn't come into it because they were the students undertaking the subject. But you'd like to think that just having that framework might have taken people on to actually use that in their research, as they suggest that they would, and along with that, provide a basis for funding later, but they weren't at that stage at the time.* (Nneka)

Meeting accreditation standards

Educators found that meeting accreditation standards can be challenging, as the curriculum must accord with these standards while maintaining academic quality to ensure the program's legitimacy and effectiveness:

> *But then you had to meet the accreditation standards, the academic quality standards and have enough readings in it. We were able to, as a discipline, develop our own curriculum as long as we met accreditation standards and quality teaching standards.* (Alexandra)

Educators often face the challenge of convincing curriculum bodies of the merit of introducing new subjects like the FWB program. The difficulty lies in justifying the subject's introduction and providing case studies to prove its value. However, once the benefits are recognized, the program's adoption is usually significant:

> *We had to convince the curriculum body because everything has to be accredited. So, we had to put up a case for introducing the subject and it was fairly well accepted, but we had to actually justify why we wanted this in the program and given it was a bit different to the subjects we were using in the postgraduate studies. I guess the challenge was they were actually coming from that clinical basis, and also the fact that they hadn't actually done any wellbeing program as a participant, they're very much looking at it from a theoretical basis.* (Nneka)

Looking from the inside (opportunities)

The challenges associated with the FWB program often arise from viewing it from an external perspective. However, there is a dynamic interplay where opportunities become evident when the program is viewed from the inside. Challenges and opportunities are interconnected, working together to encourage engagement with the program. Sometimes, opportunities are recognized alongside challenges, while at other times, challenges come first, but opportunities emerge upon closer examination. The perspective from which one views the program—whether external or internal—shapes this continuous flow between challenges and opportunities. Shifting from an external to an internal perspective reveals valuable opportunities, such as (a) personal wellbeing, (b) First Nations Knowledge, (c) evidence base support, and (d) research output.

Personal wellbeing

Educators believed integrating the FWB program into university curricula offers a unique opportunity to improve personal wellbeing, especially considering the escalating mental distress among students and the ongoing challenges of pandemic recovery. One educator noted its particular importance for students in health departments, who may otherwise overlook the significance of such a program within their studies:

> *You see across the profession that when you look at the data from dentists and vets, the mental health statistics is big for those professions – the health professions. Surely, they need this kind of content in their curriculum so that their students can look after themselves while they're studying and navigating life challenges.* (Ada)

Previous attempts to enhance student wellbeing have often been seen as add-ons, failing to fully engage students. Educators acknowledged integrating the FWB program as a core part of the curriculum can address universally mental health needs among students more effectively:

> *Well, obviously the issue it addresses most is mental health in terms of needs, I think, and the beauty of it is that it's a universal mental health thing rather than people thinking they have mental issues. And I think it is partly too because students learn about each other.* (Alexandra)

First Nations Knowledge

Integrating the First Nations FWB program into mainstream university curricula presents a significant opportunity to advance First Nations Knowledge within the higher education system. By introducing students to the FWB model developed by First Nations communities, educators saw how a more comprehensive understanding of First Nations people could be promoted within university curricula and the often-negative narratives surrounding their experiences challenged:

> *I suppose the other kind of motivation for us was to say we wanted our social workforce to be more inclusive of First Nations Bridge. And you know the thing that can happen in a social work course is that discussion about what's happening with First Nations people can become very problem-focused, all very gloomy. I suppose we felt, this is increasingly so clear, that there's so much that people who are not from First Nations can learn from First Nations people. And so, it was a really good way of saying right from the beginning of the course. Here you are. We're using this model. It's been led by groups of First Nations people. It's been refined. We think it's so terrific and so useful that we think everybody should be having this, and that's why it's in the course.* (Josephine)

Evidence based support

The extensive evidence base of the FWB program, served as a compelling motivator for educators, challenging the perception that the program lacks empirical support. The FWB was regarded as a leading evidence-based, First Nations social and emotional wellbeing programs, potentially on an international scale:

> *In fact, in First Nations context, this is the most evidence-based or the most researched of any Australian First Nations social emotional wellbeing programs. I actually think it's probably one of the most internationally because I've done some literature reviews internationally.* (Alexandra)

Research output

Educators discussed how integrating the FWB program provides significant research opportunities to enhance student wellbeing and learning while contributing to the implementation of First Nations Knowledge in higher education. Many saw the opportunity as a way of combining teaching with research publications, especially in academia where high teaching loads limit research time. Educators considered research has the potential to generate new funding opportunities and insights into First Nations Knowledge while improving the overall educational experience:

> *We've been doing some research. We've got two or three papers now that have provided student feedback as well with mental health surveys, qualitatively.* (Alexandra)

Getting people to experience it (strategies)

Successfully integrating the FWB program into curricula requires thoughtful strategies to help educators overcome initial resistance by enabling them to experience the program firsthand. Prior exposure through participation, reading literature, and engaging with materials offered valuable insights, helped educators understand the program's relevance, and identify how its components can be integrated into their subjects by replacing redundant materials in their curricula with some of the aspects of the FWB program:

> *When I was integrating it into the subject myself, I had the advantage of having more insight into the program, having read the literature, been exposed to the project, done the session, and received all the provided materials. I could see where different parts would fit into my subject and recognize the relevance of the content. That helped me to replace what was no longer relevant in my subject with aspects of the FWB program.* (Ada)

The strategies for "Getting people to experience it" include (a) changing the lens, (b) adopting a generic subject name, (c) mapping subject interrelatedness, (d) adapting teaching, and (e) fitting accreditation standards. This strategic framework is shaped by the experiences of educators who successfully integrated the FWB, outlining how they framed and utilized the program.

Changing the lens

Changing the lens involves encouraging educators to adopt a fresh perspective on the FWB program, moving beyond any preconceived notions about its First Nations origins. Some educators emphasized its history as a First Nations initiative focused on wellbeing and empowerment. One educator described how at her university a holistic lifespan approach was used to structure the sequence of the program delivery. This approach gradually shifted perspectives among students to be more receptive to the program's content:

> *We started with a three-day workshop, followed by a 13-week curriculum that really cemented the learnings from the workshop. Before diving into the curriculum, we wanted the students to change their perspective. The workshop was about shifting the lens through which they viewed the program, helping them to understand their emotions, strengths, and recognize strengths in others.* (Maya)

Adopting a generic name

The strategic approach by educators of adopting a generic program name increased the relevance of the FWB program for students. Giving the program a more inclusive name made it more appealing and easier for students to connect it to their academic pursuits, thus enhancing accessibility:

> *I was concerned about how people would perceive this new subject called the FWB program. So, we renamed it to change perceptions, and as a result, we had a full complement of students signing up.* (Nneka)

Mapping subject interrelatedness

Mapping FWB program connections within existing curriculum content was seen as crucial for successful integration. Educators impressed the relevance of the FWB program by identifying links between subjects, recognizing how these subjects play a role in students' educational journeys, and understanding how the FWB program is situated within broader course objectives. Mapping exercises show how the FWB program can be seamlessly integrated into curricula, meeting subject demands while enhancing students' overall learning experiences:

> *The benefit of the new curriculum was that it allowed for much more mapping of how subjects were interrelated and how they served as steppingstones for each year. It was carefully articulated to ensure that the subject attributes aligned with the overall course.* (Alexandra)

Adapting teaching

For educators, adapting teaching methods involves addressing challenges such as large class sizes, time constraints, diverse age groups among students, group dynamics, inclusivity, and the handling of sensitive topics:

> *One of the main challenges is that the class size is too large, making it difficult for students to engage in discussions and share their ideas. Due to the large number of students and limited class time, I combine the course content with the textbook, but I can't engage with the students as much as I'd like.* (Olivia)

Strategies include dividing large classes into smaller groups, mixing different age groups to foster dynamic knowledge exchange, reinforcing group agreements which are developed at the outset of the program, employing differentiated instruction, and addressing diverse student needs through contextualized teaching methods. Appropriately modifying sensitive FWB topics is crucial, as they can evoke emotional responses related to students' personal experiences:

> *I did have in a couple of times, where students have asked not to participate in a particular topic because it's been a little bit close to home. For instance, one mum whose daughter had committed suicide, and she didn't want to come to one particular week.* (Emily)

Building a safe environment that emphasizes voluntary sharing and support is essential:

> *And we do have in the group of women, you don't have to share anything, you don't have to tell your deepest secret. And we really try to reinforce that.* (Alexandra)

However, managing sensitive topics remains challenging for some educators:

> *Another thing is when it comes to sensitive topics, the content that was on grief. And that's where one of the lecturers said, I'm not comfortable talking about this. I don't feel like I can talk about this in my classroom, or I don't know how it's going to affect students.* (Ada)

Cultural factors can influence perceptions of sensitivity, requiring clarification around concepts like spirituality:

> *It's not easy to use FWB in my class because of most of the topics are sensitive to people themselves. In Chinese culture, … I dare not to talk about topics related to emotions, relationship, belief and so on, … in public, as in a class.* (Olivia)
>
> *Spirituality is traditionally very low among students. I think they're far too afraid to admit that they have any. But after in that one unit with the FWB program, it just went way up. And it's not that they all became spiritual. Question is about whether you recognize your spirituality. Whether you see it in yourself. And because they were allowed to redefine what spirituality is, it's not going to church. It's actually your connection. And the way, that just went through the roof in only the FWB containing unit, … It's just so huge.* (Maya)

Measures such as group agreements, personal reflections, gradual sharing, and

counseling support are essential for maintaining emotional wellbeing:

> *But you know little things like doing the group agreement. At the start of the class, the start of the whole course. It was a stop and pause moment for all of the students in that classroom to articulate what they wanted from their class as a community. I suppose, that's one of the things that I think happened as a result of taking that starting point.* (Ada)

Fitting accreditation standards

Fitting accreditation standards involves three key strategies: fulfilling curriculum requirements, creating practical assessments, and ensuring student satisfaction. Tailoring FWB program activities and assessments with required knowledge and skills helps fulfill curriculum demands. Educators found that the program was well fitted with their subject needs such as encouraging reflective practices, enhancing group dynamics, and promoting core values of their discipline:

> *It aligns really clearly with social work values, focusing on group work, communication, essential listening skills, and reflection. It fits beautifully.* (Emily)

Creating practical assessments allows educators to evaluate the FWB program's approach to developing soft skills while meeting accreditation standards. Common methods include having students run programs themselves and write reflective reports, fostering a sense of ownership and practical application of skills. Reflective journals, personal reflections, and analyzing program components through the lens of social determinants of health and work experiences are also utilized.

> *We saw that as a way of empowering students to think differently and to bring that different thinking to their practice. We asked them to do our personal reflections on the different subjects, about grief and loss, and how that actually played out in their own lives, but also how they could use that to assists their clients and families that are working to overcome grief and loss. In essence, they had to take components of the FWB and analyse those in terms of the social determinants of health and their own work. And then the final report had a personal reflection in it, plus a learning reflection of the actual subject itself and how they would see applying that in their own situation from a learning perspective. So, it had three components to it.* (Nneka)

Ensuring student satisfaction is crucial for integrating the FWB into the curriculum while meeting accreditation standards. This involves gathering student feedback through online journals, assessment tools, and metrics like informal class feedback, the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM)[1] tool, and formal evaluations. These insights help inform program improvements and establish the significance of feedback in the university's evaluation process. By collecting and analyzing feedback, educators can ensure the program meets accreditation standards and student satisfaction, enhancing its reputation as a valuable curriculum addition:

> *Through student feedback each year, we're required by the university to look at that and write a report on what we're going to do about it. And then we do informal feedback just within classes too and ask them how they're finding it and what do they like, and what they don't like? What would you change? Those sorts of questions you can have informally with students or with the student group, and then you do get it more formally through the student feedback on teaching processes.* (Alexandra)
>
> *The GEM was deliberately developed to be part of the process of healing and empowerment. So, it has a dual purpose to measure, but also to help in the sense of, oh well, I'm here, but I could be there or to see a journey.* (Maya)

These strategies aim to seamlessly integrate the FWB program into university curricula while meeting rigorous academic requirements and promoting student growth and wellbeing.

Outcomes

The FWB program, seamlessly integrated into university curricula, proved to be a transformative force, yielding remarkable outcomes for both students and educators. The innovative approach of the program enhanced (a) soft skills competencies, (b) wellbeing outcome, (c) educational outcomes, and (d) professional growth.

Soft skills competencies

Educators described how the collaborative nature of the FWB program created a nurturing environment for developing essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, resilience, and emotional intelligence. Through group work, reflective journaling, and public speaking opportunities, students honed their problem-solving, self-reflection, and interpersonal abilities. The program also promoted a sense of community and belonging, bridging generational gaps, and empowering students to navigate both personal and professional domains with empathy and insight:

> *The FWB program helps students learn to work in teams, better understand themselves, become more confident, discover the beauty of life, deeply understand interpersonal relationships, deal with conflicts and emotions, establish correct beliefs, maintain a positive attitude, and better plan for themselves.* (Isabella)

1 The Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM), developed from Aboriginal Australian perspectives involving in the FWB program, combines a 14-item Emotional Empowerment Scale and 12 Scenarios with the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale to assess and enhance understanding of psychological and social empowerment processes and outcomes in Australian First Nations contexts (Haswell et al., 2010).

Educators similarly benefitted from the FWB program, reporting substantial improvements in teamwork, communication, empowerment, self-awareness, resilience, relationship-building, problem-solving, critical reflection, confidence, and compassion. The program's innovative and evidence-based teaching methods provided techniques for educators to address conflicts and foster equality and independence in both personal and professional relationships:

> *Before I encountered FWB, I tended to focus on problems in myself and those around me. But after exploring the "Basic Human Qualities" module, I realized that these qualities protect each individual. This realization led me to change my teaching method and attitude, reducing criticism of students, my relatives, and those around me.* (Olivia)

Wellbeing outcome

The FWB program had a profound impact on the personal wellbeing of both students and educators. Educators told how students would describe the FWB sessions as the highlight of their week, emphasizing the program's value in addressing holistic needs. Practices including meditation and life-enhancing activities led to personal growth, improved interactions with partners and children, and a heightened sense of empowerment:

> *It was really good for student wellbeing. Some students said, "This is what I look forward to all week." Others mentioned in evaluations that they planned to meditate more often or engage in activities that enhance their lives.* (Josephine)

Educators acknowledged the program also addressed student mental health through the curriculum, providing an alternative to traditional counseling services, which some students avoid:

> *By integrating FWB into the curriculum, we were able to address student mental health in a way that didn't require them to seek out counseling services.* (Alexandra)

For educators, the FWB program was a powerful catalyst for enhancing personal wellbeing. The structured reflection process provided a valuable framework for learning from experiences, while teachings on handling emotions and resolving conflicts reduced anxiety and fostered peace and inclusivity. Educators reported increased happiness, improved confidence, and more harmonious family dynamics:

> *It has improved my friendships and helped me to communicate from the heart, rather than from a place of exchange. It has encouraged me to follow my beliefs, do things that make the world more beautiful, and be satisfied with my basic human needs. Overall, it has encouraged me to be happy and pursue a healthy lifestyle.* (Olivia)
>
> *I consider myself a confident, well-educated person. But going through the FWB experience, really thinking about my life and how I deal with challenges, has made me a better person.* (Nneka)

Educational outcome

Educators recognized the integration of the FWB program into curricula enhanced educational outcomes for students, including boosting their academic achievements, preparing them for future careers, and elevating their understanding of First Nations Knowledge. Educators reported qualitative feedback indicated a positive correlation between the wellbeing fostered by the program and academic success. Students reported increased self-awareness, confidence, and improved stress management skills, enabling them to handle the demands of quotidian life more effectively and engage more fully with their university studies:

> *Qualitatively, students felt they gained more self-awareness and confidence, managed daily stresses better, and appreciated the strengthened relationships with other students. They also recognized that they were gaining knowledge relevant to their future professional lives, which helped them engage more fully with their university studies.* (Alexandra)

Educators stated the FWB program also prepared students for their future careers, particularly in fields like social work. Through practical components such as counseling and group work, students gained hands-on experience that effectively equips them for the challenges and demands of their professional degrees. The program's emphasis on self-awareness and its relevance to career preparation enhanced student engagement and interest in their educational experiences:

> *I think it really resonates with students, both personally and professionally. We get feedback from social work students who see the program as their first real taste of what social work entails, helping them decide if it's the career they want to pursue.* (Emily)

Moreover, the FWB program was seen to advanced student understanding of First Nations Knowledge, allowing them to engage with content in a respectful and enriching manner. The positive framing of First Nations Knowledge contributed to a more inclusive and empowering learning environment, enabling First Nations students to participate with pride and prompting shifts in perspectives among non-First Nations students:

> *In an evaluation, a couple of First Nation students said, 'What a relief to come to a class where there were no negative perceptions of First Nations people. Everything was framed positively, and I could just participate.' That was a really positive outcome.* (Josephine)

Professional growth

The FWB program also facilitated professional advancement for educators by providing opportunities to contribute significantly to research in First Nations Knowledge. Their experiences with the program enriched the knowledge base through publications and evidence-based studies, raising awareness and promoting the adoption of the FWB program across educational institutions, public health domains, and various organizations:

> *The publications have helped. The more people write about it and publish, the more awareness spreads, leading to greater adoption. Personal communication and direct experience with the program also played a crucial role in its uptake.* (Alexandra)

In addition, the integration of the FWB program catalyzed a pedagogical shift, with educators emphasizing the recognition of complexity and the interconnectedness of all aspects of life:

> *The FWB program encourages thinking in complexity. I try to teach my students that the parts don't add up to the whole, and you need to consider all aspects to see the complete picture. This approach aligns with my background as an analytical scientist, where understanding the interconnectedness of everything is crucial.* (Maya)

The program's intersubjective nature and emphasis on personal stories influenced educator's teaching methods, fostering a collaborative atmosphere where students are viewed as experts in their own right:

> *My teaching style always involves learning from students, but with the FWB program, you really embrace the idea that students are the experts in the room. They're sharing personal experiences, and we're all experts of ourselves.* (Emily)

The participatory social learning method inherent in the FWB approach has been adopted by some educators in teaching other courses, encouraging students to express themselves freely and generate new ideas.

> *The teaching method of FWB, namely "participatory social learning method," has opened my eyes. This method… let people recall their previous cognition and experience through brainstorming, …to explore creative solutions to problems. Through the experience of using FWB program, I use the method of "brainstorming" in teaching other courses. I feel that people will speak freely, think actively, and fully express their opinions, often generating new ideas or stimulating innovative ideas.* (Isabella)

Discussion

"Getting people to experience it" emerged as the central theme in this grounded theory study, encapsulating the core *process* of integrating the FWB program into university curricula. The theory, developed from the experiences of educators who integrated the FWB program across Australian and international universities, details the challenges, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes associated with this integration.

Initially, educators approached the FWB program with trepidation but later recognized its relevance after experiencing the sessions. The integration process revealed several challenges for educators, including overcrowded curricula, staff resistance, instances of racial prejudice, the need to address sensitive topics, securing funding, and meeting accreditation requirements. Overcrowded curricula emerged as the root cause of many subsequent challenges. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020, p. 11), highlighted critical questions that curriculum designers often face regarding overcrowded curricula, such as: "Is it real or perceived?"; "How can we accommodate new demands from society in an already crowded curriculum?"; and "How can we ensure breadth and depth of learning that are both achievable within the time allocated in a curriculum?".

The challenges originating from overcrowded curricula reflect a perspective of "looking from the outside." They are particularly pronounced for wellbeing initiatives designed as soft skills approaches, which often receive lower priority in educational settings that emphasize hard skill acquisition. Furthermore, these challenges are exacerbated by the influence of neoliberalism in educational institutions. George Monbiot, in an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Late Night Podcast hosted by Adams (2024), discusses how neoliberalism has led academic institutions to follow neoliberal trends. Consequently, curricula are being shaped by neoliberal ideologies (Maistry, 2020). To this end, Giroux (2002, p. 435) describes universities as "training grounds for corporate berths," while Savage (2017, p. 150) notes that educational institutions have become "a site for building human capital and contributing to economic productivity, from the early childhood years, right through to the tertiary level."

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist for educators to substantiate the academic value of the FWB program through evidence-based outcome reports. Hickey (2021) argues that hard skills alone are insufficient to prepare students for today's complex world. When students perceive their learning as purposeful and relevant to real-life scenarios, they are more motivated to develop the intended competencies (Eccles and Midgley, 1989). The OECD (2020) proposal that affiliating curricula with real-world demands can increase students' sense of relevance is supported by research reporting that integrating futures education, soft skills, and wellbeing initiatives into curricula, while demonstrating their real-world relevance, is crucial for enhancing student wellbeing (Paynter, 2018; Sanders et al., 2024; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019).

The transition of educators and students from initial apprehension to appreciation of the FWB program is emblematic of Ricoeur's (1967) concept of moving from first to second *epistemic naiveté*. This experiential transition begins with an uncritical, pre-critical acceptance (first naiveté), progresses through a critical deconstruction phase (potentially leading to a "desert of criticism"), and culminates in a post-critical reconstruction stage (second naiveté). This final stage, the second *epistemic naiveté*, brings a more nuanced, reflective, and symbolic understanding, revealing newfound depth and complexity in familiar concepts that once seemed black and white, now showing different hues of colors (Ricoeur, 1967).

The process of transition conceived by Ricoeur aligns with Martin Nakata (2002, 2007) concept of the "cultural interface" where First Nations and Western knowledge systems intersect. The second naiveté approach views the cultural interface as a space of tension and negotiation, yet one that offers opportunities for open, exploratory, and creative inquiry. The approach

challenges the pre-critical oversimplification of First Nations and Western knowledge as separate entities, emerging through critical deconstruction as a post-critical understanding that welcomes the creative possibilities of this intercultural space, allowing for deeper analysis and novel solutions. This process enables educators to develop curricula that fosters new teaching approaches and supports First Nations self-determination through education and research (Hart et al., 2012; Horsthemke, 2021).

From the perspective of "looking from the inside" afforded by the second *naiveté* within the cultural interface, various opportunities emerge. These include improving personal wellbeing, enhancing First Nations Knowledge thresholds, leveraging the program's evidence-based support, and facilitating research output. As a First Nations-developed wellbeing program with a strong evidence base and numerous publications, the FWB not only increases the visibility of First Nations Knowledge within mainstream curricula, as Nakata (2002) argues, but also represents a critical step toward national improvement in Australia by fostering a more nuanced understanding of First Nations people (The University of Melbourne, 2024). This approach challenges prevailing negative narratives about First Nations Knowledge and aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and recognizing the transformative potential of First Nations Knowledge in education (Battiste, 1998, 2018; Carey and Prince, 2015; Jones et al., 2024; Nakata, 2001, 2002, 2007; Nakata et al., 2012).

The FWB program, with its strong evidence base and dual focus on technical and soft skills, exemplifies both an evidence-based approach and an educationally desirable program as advocated by Biesta (2007). The holistic approach of FWB program bridges the unhealthy methodological debates within disciplines, particularly those pitting quantitative against qualitative research (Tsey, 2015). Emerging from the need of First Nations Australians to regain control over their lives in the face of ongoing colonial impacts (McCalman et al., 2012; Nolan et al., 2024), the program necessitates continuous democratic deliberation in education, evident in the strategies of its operationalization.

Strategies for operationalizing FWB in curricula include educators changing the lens through which the program is viewed, using generic subject names to broaden appeal, mapping connections across subjects, adapting teaching methods to integrate FWB principles, and ensuring the program fits accreditation standards. By changing the lens, educators confront and dispel prejudices, allowing individuals to view the program from a strength-based approach. This is consistent with the notion that strengths-based approaches to research rather than deficits, foster a sense of empowerment (McEwan et al., 2010; Tsey, 2010, 2019; Whiteside et al., 2006).

Adopting a more generalized name helps educators associate the program with academic goals and enhance its accessibility. This is supported by literature on adaptive strategies regarding culturally responsive education and the integration of First Nations content into mainstream curricula, making it more approachable for non-First Nations students while preserving its core values (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2018; Sleeter, 2011). Mapping subject interrelatedness promotes how the FWB program seamlessly integrates into the curriculum, contributing to students' holistic development. These outcomes are consistent with those of Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre (2018), who argue all education providers should make graduate attributes/soft skills more visible within the academic framework.

Adapting teaching pedagogy involves educators addressing challenges such as managing diverse class sizes, time constraints, and student age ranges; navigating complex group dynamics; ensuring inclusive lesson differentiation; and modifying sensitive topics. These approaches are supported by a broad spectrum of educational literature, from foundational works on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2023), effective teaching strategies (Biggs et al., 2022; Hattie, 2008), and multicultural education (Banks, 2015; Banks and Banks, 2019), to research on evidence-based teaching practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), higher education curriculum development (Bovill and Woolmer, 2019), and inclusive pedagogy (Arday et al., 2021).

The integration strategies of the FWB program are further supported by research on classroom group work (Blatchford et al., 2003), facilitating discussions on sensitive topics and establishing ground rules (Brookfield and Preskill, 2012)—exemplified through the "group agreement" of the FWB program, enhancing adult learning motivation (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 2017), and adaptive teaching strategies (Rapanta et al., 2020). These adaptive teaching practices are to ensure that students engage with the FWB program meaningfully. According to Kahu and Nelson (2018), student engagement significantly improves when teaching methods match individual learning preferences and course content reflects personal interests. This is crucial in preparing students for successful entry into their professional careers (Brennan and Dempsey, 2018).

Furthermore, the ability to adapt teaching approaches highlights the importance of pedagogy, which Sankey (2021) defines as the art of teaching or the science of how students learn. Biesta (2020, p. 91) emphasizes that, "…the point of education is never that students simply learn—they can do that anywhere, including, nowadays, on the Internet—but that they learn *something*, that they learn it *for a reason*, and that they learn it *from someone*." This underscores the critical role of adept educators in shaping students' educational journeys through differentiated pedagogy. Tomlinson (2014), describes educators in differentiated classrooms as flexible time managers who employ various instructional strategies, partnering with students to shape content and learning environments. These educators function as diagnosticians, prescribing optimal instruction based on their content knowledge and understanding of student progress. Tomlinson (2014) likens these educators to artists who skillfully address individual student needs, eschewing standardized lessons in favor of personalized approaches that prioritize student learning and satisfaction over merely covering curriculum content. This approach to differentiation subscribes closely to the FWB program principles that emphasize personalized learning experiences and individual strength development based on a participatory social learning approach (Tsey et al., 2005), anchored in the "Socratic Way" (see Assiter, 2013; Orih, 2022), or "Both Ways" learning approach in First Nations parlance (see Hall and Wilkes, 2015).

Ensuring the FWB program meets accreditation standards is crucial, given that the process significantly influences what is taught, how it is taught, and the quality of assessment (Eaton, 2015; Gupta et al., 2021; Kafaji, 2020; Medland, 2019; Reddy et al., 2023). Wood et al. (2019) discuss the pivotal role of accreditation in shaping curricula, noting that it often dictates educational priorities and outcomes. The accreditation process requires educators provide evidence of how programs meet institutional goals and learning outcomes, impacting students' learning experiences (Kafaji, 2020; Reddy et al., 2022, 2024; Wood et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant for FWB program, which needs to assert how its soft skills contribute to the overall educational objectives and professional readiness of graduates (Brennan and Dempsey, 2018; Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Orih et al., 2024).

The FWB program demonstrated transformative outcomes for both students and educators, a finding adding to the current literature on the importance of soft skills and wellbeing in education (Brennan and Dempsey, 2018; Cinque, 2016, 2021; Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Orih et al., 2024; Succi and Canovi, 2020; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019). The program has also significantly boosted personal wellbeing for students, resonating with research on integrating wellbeing programs within curricula (Sanders et al., 2024; Travia et al., 2022; Whiteside et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019; Zhu and Shek, 2021). For educators, this finding resonates with those of Jennings et al. (2019) who reported sustained enhancements in social and emotional competence and wellbeing of educators, as well as Almaguer-Botero et al. (2023), who noted improved job satisfaction of educators following participation in wellbeing programs.

The study's findings have significant practical implications for education, advocating for a continued holistic approach that equips students with both hard and soft skills to navigate life's complexities (Orih et al., 2024). The findings challenge the current neoliberal trend of commercializing education and reducing it to a mere "production" process that prioritizes technical skills for job acquisition at the expense of crucial soft skills, as decried by Biesta (2015) and the contemporary philosopher, Alain de Botton (SBS D FORUM, 2013). By integrating programs like FWB into core curricula, educational institutions can foster a balanced development of hard and soft skills, answering the call for a return to the fundamental purpose of education and countering the neoliberal emphasis on hard skills acquisition alone (Biesta, 2015, 2020, 2021).

Implementing the study's theoretical model, even in subjects traditionally focused on hard skills, can bridge the gap between technical proficiency and the soft skills necessary for long-term career success. As a model for integrating wellbeing into curricula, it addresses universal wellbeing for students with mental health issues who may not seek formal assistance or disclose their conditions (McKendrick-Calder and Choate, 2024). This approach not only optimizes students' overall experience and mental health but also provides a strategy for educators to incorporate wellbeing support without overextending themselves or feeling strained by added workload and self-doubt. It further advances the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 3, which aims to improve health and wellbeing for people of all ages worldwide (Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021).

In sum, the process of integrating the FWB program into university curricula involves navigating challenges while leveraging opportunities to accentuate the program's academic value. Through thoughtful use of strategies enabling program experience, educators can effectively operationalize the FWB program. This process, informed by grounded theory and the perspectives of experienced educators, testified to the importance of fostering a nuanced understanding of First Nations Knowledge and wellbeing in higher education, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and holistic educational experience for all students.

Strengths, limitations, and direction for future research

The major strength of this study lies in developing a practical theoretical model to help busy educators integrate First Nations wellbeing programs into their curricula, based on input from experienced university educators. The study's participant profile supports this argument because of the participants' extensive academic experience, with all educators having taught for over 6 years and five, having more than a decade of teaching experience, with no early career researcher or educator involved. The high proportion of senior academics (five Associate Professors/Professors) suggests participants had substantial expertise and decision-making authority in curriculum development. All participants holding combined teaching and research roles indicates they could provide insights from both pedagogical and scholarly perspectives. The number of non-First Nations participants (7 out of 8) is a testament to how the program has gained recognition, support, and appreciated beyond First Nations communities, which helps promote its broader adoption in university curricula.

However, several limitations should be noted. The gender composition of exclusively female participants means male educators' perspectives are not represented. Similarly, with only one First Nations educator among the participants, First Nations voices are underrepresented, particularly significant given the program's First Nations' foundations. The absence of teaching-only or research-only staff also limits understanding of how the program might be implemented under different academic workload models. The small sample size, while providing in-depth insights into the broader context of integrating the FWB program within university curricula, may limit the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on educators' perspectives could introduce bias, particularly in representing student experiences. However, this focus was intentional to address a gap in existing FWB program research, which has predominantly explored student perspectives. Additionally, as a qualitative study based solely on interview data, it does not offer a comparison between reported behaviors and actual practices. These limitations were addressed through rigorous critical review by scholars in grounded theory, engagement with First Nations scholars, and the application of trustworthiness measures. Future research could enhance these findings by adopting mixed-method approaches, comparing educator and student perspectives, examining disciplinary differences of the FWB program uptake

within curricula, conducting contextual analyses or longitudinal follow-up study, and employing observational methods. While these limitations provide context for interpreting the findings, they do not diminish the study validity. Instead, they offer valuable directions for further exploration in this area.

Conclusion

The grounded theory of "Getting people to experience it" provides a transformative model for integrating the FWB program into university curricula, revolutionizing the integration of wellbeing initiatives in higher education. The model effectively addresses concerns about the teachability, adaptability, assessability, and practicability of soft skills approaches within academic frameworks. By addressing these concerns, the theoretical model suggests it could be adapted to integrate other First Nations or culturally diverse wellbeing approaches beyond the Australian context, offering a versatile framework for educational institutions worldwide to integrate culturally responsive wellbeing initiatives into their curricula. Through advocating for a streamlined curriculum that prioritizes depth and interconnectedness, the model offers a viable solution to contemporary educational challenges in integrating First Nations wellbeing-centric soft skills approaches within curricula. The universal approach to wellbeing normalizes mental health discussions, reduces stigma, and provides educators with a structured, evidence-based method to foster student flourishing. Supported by research findings and implementation science, this model charts a bold course for universities to create holistic, supportive learning environments that balance academic excellence with student wellbeing. The model serves as a guide for institutions seeking to evolve in response to changing societal needs, promising a future where wellbeing is not an afterthought but a core component of higher education.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Human Research Ethics Committee at James Cook University (H8811). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

DO: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KC: Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. RM: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. HU: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. KT: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Note: Reference List Integration

For this published article, the complete list of references has been consolidated and integrated as a single, comprehensive reference section within the thesis document. This approach ensures a unified and streamlined presentation of all source materials supporting the research.

Appendix 3. Accepted Book Manuscript Information