

# Learning from evaluations of school-family strengthening programs: lessons for all

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## **Abstract**

For more than 10 years, a program called Families And Schools Together (FAST) has been run in schools across the Northern Territory. These programs have always had an evaluation component built in. However, over time, the evaluations have changed. Initially, they were summative, built around a quantitative psychometric tool (with a positivist research paradigm). The intent of the summative evaluation was to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program. However, as the program was rolled out in remote contexts, the need for adaptation was recognised. Changes were made but it was soon recognised that other outcomes, not captured or explored in the methodology, were emerging. After six years of working together, the evaluator and the program manager felt that it was time to explore effectiveness in a different way with a more qualitative evaluation process (based on naturalistic and pragmatic paradigms).

The purpose of this paper is to share learnings from this experience with other program managers and evaluators. The presentation will be an opportunity for participants to engage in a discussion about monitoring and evaluation from a program evaluation perspective, particularly taking account of the complexities of the northern Australian context.

This paper explores the six year learning journey through evaluation that the evaluator and program manager have undertaken. It describes tensions between the need for reliable and generalizable objective quantitative data and the need for authentic and credible data based on participant experience.

## **Introduction**

Families And Schools Together (FAST) is a family strengthening program that originated in the United States of America more than 25 years ago. It was built on a strong evidence base and over the years, evaluations have demonstrated the program's effectiveness in a range of contexts. The primary mechanism used for assessment of effectiveness has been a pre- and post-program survey instrument. This psychometric tool is designed to quantitatively measure changes in perceptions among participants, teachers and team members.

FAST has been running in the Northern Territory since 2003. It has operated in a variety of school and community contexts in urban, remote and very remote areas of the Territory. Over 100 programs have been run; about 600 people have been trained; and about 800 families have participated. While the format of activities within the program changes a little

depending on the context, the intent of the program is consistent. The aims of the program are to:

1. Enhance family functioning;
2. Prevent the target child from experiencing school failure;
3. Prevent substance abuse by the child and family; and
4. Reduce the stress that parents and children experience from daily life situations.

The program has been well-received regardless of the context. As noted above, evaluation has always been built into the FAST program. However, it soon became evident that the psychometric tool used for evaluation did not work for participants in remote locations. Spurious results were obtained because the survey instrument was long (more than 180 questions) with language and concepts that were not understood by participants, many of who speak English effectively as a foreign language. The questionnaire which used ordinal response scales 'Not at all', 'A little', 'A medium amount' and 'A great deal' were sometimes confusing for respondents, and often depended on conditions, like 'If you answered yes to the above, please answer the following...'. In 2008 it was decided that a different approach was needed for remote sites. What has followed has been what could be argued has been a messy, inconclusive pathway that still has many loose ends that still falls short of the ideal in terms of representing the worth of FAST to funders, and still falls short of the ideal in terms of representing the voice of remote families.

The purpose then, of this paper is to articulate some of the learnings of those messy, and somewhat inconclusive processes that has led FAST to where it now is in terms of evaluation. The aim in this is partly to inform those (evaluators, program managers and funders) who may be struggling with similar issues, and partly to help FAST to critically reflect on the evaluation journey with a view to doing evaluation better in the future.

### **Background to FAST in the Northern Territory**

The FAST program's implementation in the Northern Territory communities in 2003 was part of a holistic approach to enhance educational outcomes for all students. The program has been adapted for both urban and remote Indigenous contexts but the principles by which it operates are the same regardless of the context. The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA) in partnership with local communities established Woolanang Homeland Christian College, a regional, secondary, residential school. From the earliest planning stage, community leaders identified a lack of effective parenting as a key impediment to participation and success in schooling. Since 2003, the program has been run through schools and communities in and around Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Alice Springs, Gove and in many small Indigenous communities throughout the Northern Territory. It has been funded through the Northern Territory Government, Communities for Children, The Alice Springs Transformation Plan, and General Practice NT, The Smith Family, and some other organisations.

FAST is an eight-week, early intervention/prevention program, designed to strengthen family functioning and so build protective factors in children. The program targets the whole family and participation is strictly voluntary. It is conducted in the context of a local school. The core of the program involves eight weekly multi-family meetings usually held in the school during which positive interactional experiences for families are structured and facilitated by a collaborative leadership team. The collaborative team consists of four to six members: a parent partner, a school partner, a community-based agency partner, and a community-based partner.

The program operates in various forms to meet the needs of participants. BabyFAST is for families with young pre-school aged children. KidsFAST is generally for families with primary school aged children. Teen or Middle School FAST is designed for families with high school aged youth. A FAST Works program also operates after the eight week program, run by parents to support and sustain the learnings from the program.

## **Literature**

### *Complexity and evaluations in the remote NT context*

There is nothing simple about research and evaluation in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in remote parts of the Northern Territory. Attempts to simplify research processes are fraught with challenges of time, cost, distance, language, culture and ethics. Some of these can of course be ameliorated by good professional practice (Downe et al., 2012) but arguably formulaic approaches do not overcome the challenges of the complexity itself. The challenge for researchers is often as much about complexity as it is about cultural difference.

There has been considerable discussion about complexity in the field of evaluation research. Rogers (2008), following arguments presented by Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002), differentiates between simple, complicated and complex evaluations. Simple interventions are those where there is a clear cause and effect relationship (Patton, 2008, p. 372). Complicated evaluations are those where interdisciplinary and cross-jurisdictional governance structures result in the need for more negotiation to secure agreement on evaluation parameters to occur. At the same time, there are multiple and simultaneous causal strands, and different causal mechanisms for this in different contexts. Complex evaluations, by contrast, are those where outcomes are achieved through non-linear feedback loops and where outcomes are emergent—and where measures cannot be determined in advance.

Complexity however, is not just about predicting outcomes or their causes through a single strand or simultaneous or multiple cause and effect diagrams. Evaluations are also complex because of the context. That is, depending on context, a theory of change model may work well in one context and not in another. Burton et al. (2006, p. 307) suggest a number of context factors that contribute to complexity. These include (among others): history of previous attempts at involvement; socio-demographic profile; the state of local voluntary and community sector; availability of resources; and timing of interventions.

Besides complexity, part of the challenge in the intercultural context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community research lies with the researchers and evaluators themselves (Guenther, 2008). In some cases, there is an uneasy tension between being an apparently objective researcher, as is often expected in summative evaluations, and an actively involved 'insider' (Guenther & Falk, 2007) as happens often in formative or developmental research and evaluation processes. Is it possible to maintain an appropriate balance of objectivity and subjectivity when formative and summative approaches are merged? Perhaps more generally the issue is that there can be some dissonance between the cultures and language of the evaluators, the commissioners and the participants. The role of the evaluator in this contested space 'is one of a mediator and a trusted critical friend—an 'outsider' that works collaboratively and constructively with 'insiders' (Guenther et al., 2014, p. 10). Outsider evaluators need to take time to 'hear', not just listen in this context (Osborne, 2014). Using 'culturally embedded' tools that allow for a shared meaning of concepts and language or perhaps a 'bottom-up view' go some way in bridging the cultural divides, but they are insufficient in themselves (Williams, 2012). Those bottom-up views still need to be translated

into a language that governments or funders understand and this does not always work. Foster et al, (2006) give a good example of this in their description of Indigenous research methodologies in Alice Springs town camps:

We presented our report to the Northern Territory Licensing Commission, but it did not appear to take a great deal of notice of our recommendations. Instead of strengthening the restrictions, it weakened them by lifting the ban on the sale of alcohol in containers of more than 2 litres. (p. 216)

This concern was echoed in a 2012 Roundtable on the role of evaluation in Indigenous policy organised by the Productivity. In his paper, Malezer (2013) argues that it is one thing to obtain data for policy purposes, but it is another to use it appropriately:

We can see that there is a process [of using data from evaluation] inside government, but the proper engagement of Indigenous communities is being totally overlooked or conveniently avoided. (p. 78)

Others have grappled with the same issues and have acknowledged the potential for conflict of interest and ethical compromise (Caracelli, 2006; Conley-Tyler, 2005; Yang & Shen, 2006). One way that research institutions try to address these concerns is through the promotion and requirement for ethical processes and procedures to be followed (Australasian Evaluation Society Inc., 2013; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2011). However, having policies and procedures in place does not necessarily mean that research and evaluation will be truly ethical (Williams et al., 2011).

Many of the ethical breaches raised most often by evaluators concern the final stages of projects, when reports are finalised and when the information in the submitted reports is used for decision-making. Issues cited (for example in Markiewicz, 2008) included managers or funders trying to influence evaluations, applying pressure to report a more positive or a more negative result than the evaluators felt was warranted, or to use information gained in an evaluation focused on program improvement for other purposes, such as 'accountability'. Accountability can be conceptualised in many ways, including community accountability (Scougall, 2006), but in this case the term appears to refer to programs being held accountable for justifying their funding by delivering targets. Note that in these examples the ethical breaches were caused by the actions of those commissioning and/or using the evaluation information, rather than by anything the evaluators had done.

### *The need for evaluation*

Program funders and evaluation commissioners, however are not necessarily interested in complexity, despite being aware of the challenges discussed above. In many cases, they are just interested in outputs and monitoring systems therefore only need to measure the 'simple' elements of participant numbers or other indicators of the contract deliverables such as a report, evidence of program delivery, employment of staff, or expenditure/acquittal of funds. While on the surface many would argue that evaluations are about ensuring that policy is informed by evaluation (Cameron et al., 2011) and that organisations need to learn from the evidence obtained (Gill, 2010) there are suggestions in the literature that in some political contexts, the role of the evaluator has been relegated to that of a 'technical specialist' whose function is more about auditing performance management than contributing to policy or practice (Sullivan, 2011). The role of evaluation for accountability and performance measurement should not be ignored, but it does have other functions which are acknowledged broadly as determining program outcomes and informing policy direction (Productivity Commission, 2013). Beyond these purposes, evaluations can have developmental and

transformative purposes (Mertens, 2009; Patton, 2011). It is possible that the program deliverer gets caught in the middle of these sometimes competing interests. On the one hand the organisation is expected to provide performance and accountability measures; and on the other it is concerned to ensure that what it does works and that the learnings of evaluations inform improvements in practice.

All of the above issues have played out in FAST's Northern Territory remote evaluation processes. So how should evaluators address this complexity? How should evaluations be designed to take into account the challenges of the cross-cultural context? There are no simple answers.

### *Evaluation and research at the 'cultural interface'*

At one end of the spectrum there are those who would argue that indigenous peoples should be the only ones to engage in research on or about other indigenous peoples. This is in part a reaction to colonisation and imperialist views of the world and the subsequent struggles for self-determination among indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). It is also a reaction to being researched 'on'. The term 'Indigenist' research is a way of recognising the importance of indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing—epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies and methodologies—as an alternative paradigm separate from western paradigms (Chilisa, 2012; Martin, 2003, 2008; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Rigney, 1999).

Indigenists resist the positivist and postpositivist methodologies of Western science because these formations are too frequently used to validate colonizing knowledge about indigenous peoples. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 11)

There are however indigenous critiques of Indigenist research. Nakata et al (2012) in particular, challenge the validity of 'teaching students to 'resist' Western inscriptions of the Indigenous and take up Indigenous ones' (p. 136). They suggest instead an approach:

that makes spaces for the exploration of ideas, that insists on critical reflection on the limits of all thinking on both sides, and that requires the development of better language for navigating such intricate and complex entanglements of meaning. (p. 136)

A recognition of the contested nature of knowledge led some academics to promote the idea of the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009) where new knowledge could be created that was not necessarily 'Indigenous' nor western. The simplistic idea that taking on an Indigenous standpoint necessarily divorces the researcher from the colonised and hegemonic space of western research philosophies is not universally supported. There is a recognition by some that the complexity and contested nature of knowledge along with the nature of the researcher's role as both an insider and outsider is a reality (Tur et al., 2010).

What does this then mean for non-Indigenous researchers? One consequence of the Indigenist movement may be to dissuade non-Indigenous researchers from engaging in the contested space and so decolonise the field. Some non-Indigenous researchers may ask if their contribution can be legitimate or how to reconcile the complicity in whiteness while 'acknowledging Indigenous sovereignties' (Koerner et al., 2009, p. 204). Surely there can be a 'productive dialogue between indigenous and critical scholars' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 2). Chilisa (2012) suggests that this can be achieved through collaborative partnerships between researchers and communities and 'partnership of knowledge systems' (p. 297).

The non-Indigenous researcher can never adopt Indigenist methodologies nor claim to operate from Indigenous standpoints. However, they can adopt positions that are congruent with the goals and needs of indigenous peoples in a respectful way. This is partly achieved through cultural sensitivity (Liamputtong, 2010). It could be argued that ‘insiders’—those who belong to the group of those being researched—are better placed to conduct meaningful research than those who are ‘outsiders’. However, the binaries of insider and outsider are not necessarily as straightforward as they may seem. It is possible for example, for Indigenous researchers to be outsiders in their cultural group by virtue of the knowledge and power they hold or their ‘class, gender and perceived outsider status’ (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 121). Bishop (2011, p. 18) argues that researchers in Kaupapa Māori contexts need not attempt to empower or emancipate subjugated others, but rather ‘to listen to and participate with those traditionally “othered” as constructors of meanings of their own experiences and agents of knowledge’. The point here is that cultural outsiders can play a role in meaningful research in Indigenous contexts.

Notwithstanding the above caveats, there is a case for intercultural methodologies that are collaborative, participatory and reflexive. Nicholls (2009) argues that these methodologies require the researcher to cede control of the research agenda. Christie (2011) goes further in his argument for ‘generative research’ where the control of the research agenda is built collaboratively from the ground up. In a similar way, Bainbridge et al (2013) advocate for a merging of decolonising methodologies with constructivist approaches of grounded theory for the ‘coconstruction of knowledge’ (p. 286) for the purpose of ‘delivering social change for the common good’ (p. 277).

In all of FAST’s Northern Territory evaluations, the evaluators have been non-Indigenous. That said, the non-Indigenous evaluators have had long experience working in cross-cultural contexts and are conscious of the methodological, cultural and ethical issues posed by working in complex contexts. This awareness led to a concerted effort on the part of FAST to approach evaluation in remote contexts such that the results would be seen by all to have integrity and validity. The case study that follows, attempts to document how this occurred.

### **Case study: Development of evaluation processes of FAST in the NT**

FAST programs have been run in remote parts of the Northern Territory for more than ten years. While FAST internationally is built on a sound evidence base and uses validated evaluation tools to assess program outcomes, it soon became evident that in remote Indigenous contexts, these tools would not work primarily because of cultural and language issues. To this end a consultancy was commissioned in 2008 to develop a new evaluation process that was designed to:

- a) to build a robust evidence base that supports the ongoing improvement of the program and satisfies the evidence requirements of funding bodies;
- b) develop a mechanism that will provide meaningful data about the outcomes of the program (consistent with existing program objectives and expectations) in remote Indigenous locations where program participants and facilitators do not have the skills in English language, literacy and numeracy to be able to complete the existing evaluation response forms;
- c) use tools that were designed to be replicable and adaptable to other Indigenous locations; and
- d) be used locally with minimum support from non-Indigenous FAST staff or external evaluators.

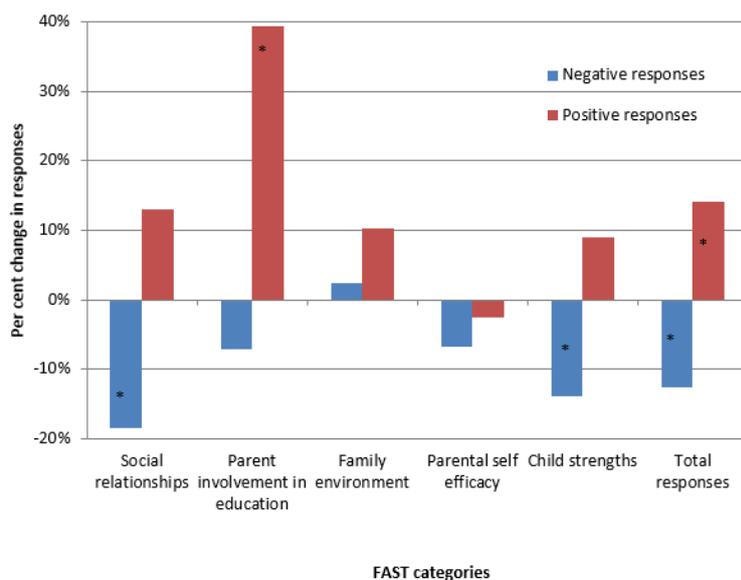
An extensive development process followed that produced and then trialed a set of pre- and post-program tools at three sites in remote Northern Territory: Yirrkala, Garrthlala and Pine Creek/Kybrook (see Guenther & Boonstra, 2009 for details of the process). Part of this evaluation process was designed to engage participants in a discussion about their relationships. We did this using feltboard pictures as shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Pre and post assessment of strong and weak family-community relationships



The analysis of the data that resulted was intellectually interesting but was perhaps difficult to interpret. Figure 2 below, shows one representation of the analysis, showing change from pre- to post-survey change. The useful part of the analysis was that it showed statistically that change in some of the domains had occurred (as noted at the side of the chart). The challenge though is in interpreting what the data actually means. In simplistic terms it means that the program worked. But a closer look shows that it did not work in all the domains where we expected change.

Figure 2. Representation of changes in FAST domains



- Significant changes:
  - Reduced negative feelings about social relationships
  - Increased positive feelings about involvement in education
  - Reduced negative responses about child strengths
  - Overall increase in positive responses and decrease in negative responses

Given the problems with statistics, particularly with small samples, it was also recognised that narrative processes may contribute to richer findings and explain how and why things were working (or not) for a particular site. To this end, FAST Northern Territory staff

engaged in narrative inquiry professional development in August 2010. The intent of this professional development was to equip program coordinators to elicit the stories that emerge from participation while collecting data for the ‘remote tool’.

While this new tool did show results, the practicalities of administering surveys before and after programs proved difficult and a further revision of the tools was made for trial at Galiwin’ku in 2011 (Guenther, 2011). This revised ‘remote tool’ was a post-assessment tool designed to assess from participants’ and teachers’ perspectives, how the program produced change, retrospectively. It reduced the number of questions asked of participants, down to 19 across five domains, and gave respondents the opportunity to reflect on what had changed for the better or worse. It also gave them opportunity to say ‘nothing changed’ or they ‘don’t really know’ as shown in Figure 3 below. The administration of the tool was to be accompanied by gathering stories associated with the responses. The participant survey was accompanied by a staff survey and an analysis of attendance was also undertaken.

Figure 3. Revised remote evaluation tool



Again, administration of the evaluation tool has proved somewhat difficult and time consuming for FAST program coordinators. Further, the results obtained were not as strongly favourable as might have been expected—only 55 per cent of responses suggested that since FAST, things had changed for the better. While the ‘55 per cent’ figure might be an accurate reflection of the impact, it probably does not sound as enticing for funders as a find that showed a ‘90 per cent improvement in attendance’ for example. The teacher surveys suggested that little had changed and the attendance analysis suggested that nothing had changed. Again, these findings, which may be true, do not sound particularly good to funders who want improved educational outcomes. All this was despite the observations of FAST team members of strong engagement in the program and a number of personal anecdotes that improvements had occurred. The program also appeared to support community development. This element was not captured in any of the evaluation instruments and resulted in a revised theory of change model.

Since 2011 FAST NT has attempted to develop a range of other evaluation tools, all of which have been found to have limitations. The tension between gathering data that reflects the voice of local participants and the need to demonstrate to funders (often quantitatively) that the program works, remains as it did in 2008.

### Lessons learned

#### *No simple solutions for a complex problem*

Six years of development has not resulted in an ideal evaluation process for FAST. Given the effort and investment, this is perhaps disappointing. However, this is a reflection of the complexity of the context. What we have seen is that attempts to ‘simplify’ a complicated evaluation tool for the remote context haven’t worked as well as we’d have hoped. While this is reflected in the literature discussed earlier (see Complexity and evaluations in the remote

NT context, page 3), the case study highlights the practical realities of the challenges associated with adapting tools and giving attention to the ethical, resource and cultural challenges that evaluators and program managers may face. While these limitations are acknowledged, the process of evaluation continues to inform the evidence base on which the program is based. It allows for critical and personal reflection within program teams. It is quite likely that the evaluation process understates the broader value of the program because of its dominant focus on a fairly narrow range of participant outcomes.

#### *Hearing the voice of participants*

Allowing the voice of participants when languages and cultures do not share common frames of reference is not as simple as just transliterating words from one tool to another. Indeed often, the reality is that concepts do not have a literal translation and need to be explained, discussed and critiqued. This is perhaps one reason why the simplified tools developed for Galiwin'ku were so problematic. What we, as a non-Indigenous evaluator and program manager think are fairly straightforward questions are not necessarily so. That said, as suggested by the literature reviewed earlier (see Evaluation and research at the 'cultural interface', page 5), there is a role for respectful research and evaluation processes to be used by non-Indigenous evaluators in cross-cultural contexts.

#### *Can methods be adapted to another context?*

The last point then raises questions about the adaptability of tools from one context to another. The remote Northern Territory context does not have a single Indigenous culture. Nor does it have a single Indigenous language. There are several discrete languages, multiple dialects, creoles and versions of Aboriginal English that inhabit the social and cultural landscape. We have opted not to translate tools into these languages, partly because there are so many and partly because in most communities, ability to read written English is often greater than ability to read in the local language. Further, the process of translating tools is expensive and funders do not generally provide resources for this purpose. This should not come as a surprise when so many value judgments are based on non-Indigenous perspectives (Malezer, 2013).

#### *Can evaluation findings be used to support sustainable development?*

This question arises from a desire to see evaluations used to support the sustained development of programs with evidence that demonstrates the program's value and effectiveness. To that end, the evaluation results of FAST in the NT have been widely published and presented at conferences over the last six years. We would like to think that dissemination of findings has contributed to sustained funding over that time, but in reality the ongoing development of a program is dependent on a range of other factors that are often not at all related to evaluation or evidence. These were noted earlier in the literature on 'The need for evaluation' page 4. If evaluations are simply used for accountability and funding acquittal purposes, then there is not much hope that they will be used for sustainability purposes. Evaluation has supported the program's relationship with schools, and to the extent that schools are critical for the ongoing sustainability of the program it has worked well in this way. It allows schools to review how the activities have produced outcomes but perhaps more importantly, it provides an important avenue for ongoing community engagement beyond the life of the program.

#### *The value of evaluation for program development*

Evaluation has provided FAST NT with a critical feedback and review process that has been vital in understanding the link between the activities and outcomes of the program, and

seeing how various stakeholders fit in. The theory of change model developed in 2008 has undergone several changes in response to evaluations. In itself, it offers a critical point for internal critique and allows the team to reflect on what it is doing and why. In short, evaluation helps the FAST team identify if the program is doing what it says it is. It also allows for consideration of alternative ways to achieve the desired outcomes. Evaluation for FAST, is more than just data collection, analysis and reporting. It serves all the program's stakeholders, not just the program team and the funders—it offers schools, participants and community members a way to reflect and think critically on issues raised by FAST and which are important for family members, schools and the broader community.

## **Conclusions**

This paper is not a glowing story of success in evaluation. Indeed, the overarching themes presented here have been about challenges associated with trying to do evaluation well in remote contexts of the Northern Territory. It is a story of how a program manager and an evaluator have tried very hard to find ways to reflect the value and outcomes of a family strengthening process with integrity, and which respects the voices of program participants.

The case study of the six year development of an evaluation process for remote program delivery offers several lessons for other evaluators and program managers. The first lesson is that it is highly problematic trying to simply a measurement tool for a complex context. The second lesson is that if evaluations in these contexts are to genuinely hear participants' voices (where English is not the main language spoken) English language tools will inevitably fall short of the ideal. The third, following on from the second, is that a measurement or data capture tool is not easily transferrable from one community to another—the diversity of language and differences in understanding about concepts, requires patient and careful unpacking. The fourth lesson is that even the best evidence, and the most culturally appropriate tools, do not necessarily translate into sustainable funding for a program. However, the final lesson noted in this paper is that evaluation has intrinsic value for all stakeholders. This lesson should not be lost in significance despite the apparently disappointing story presented in this paper.

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