SNAPSHOT REPORT

AN EVALUATION OF THE PEER TO PEER MENTORING PILOT

SUPPORTING EXPECTING & PARENTING TEENS PROGRAM

BRAVE

CONTENTS

Cultural Acknowledgment

Brave Foundation acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation as the traditional custodians of the lands on which our organisation works. We pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Brave's work also brings us into contact with people from diverse communities. Brave is committed to respecting the sexuality, gender, culture and heritage of each person we encounter, inside and outside our organisation.

Citation

Deane, K., Cooper, C., Wilson, S., & Williams, N. (2024). Snapshot Report. An Evaluation of the Peer to Peer Mentoring Pilot. Brave Foundation.

Note

Photographs in this report are not of participants or mentors referenced.

INTRODUCTION

Brave Foundation's (Brave) Peer-to-Peer Mentor Pilot was a stepped-down extension of the SEPT program designed to support young parents who were ready to engage or re-engage with education or employment on completion of the SEPT program. The pilot lasted approximately 12 months and involved one SEPT graduate taking on the role of Peer Mentor to support a small group of young mothers upon their completion of the SEPT program.
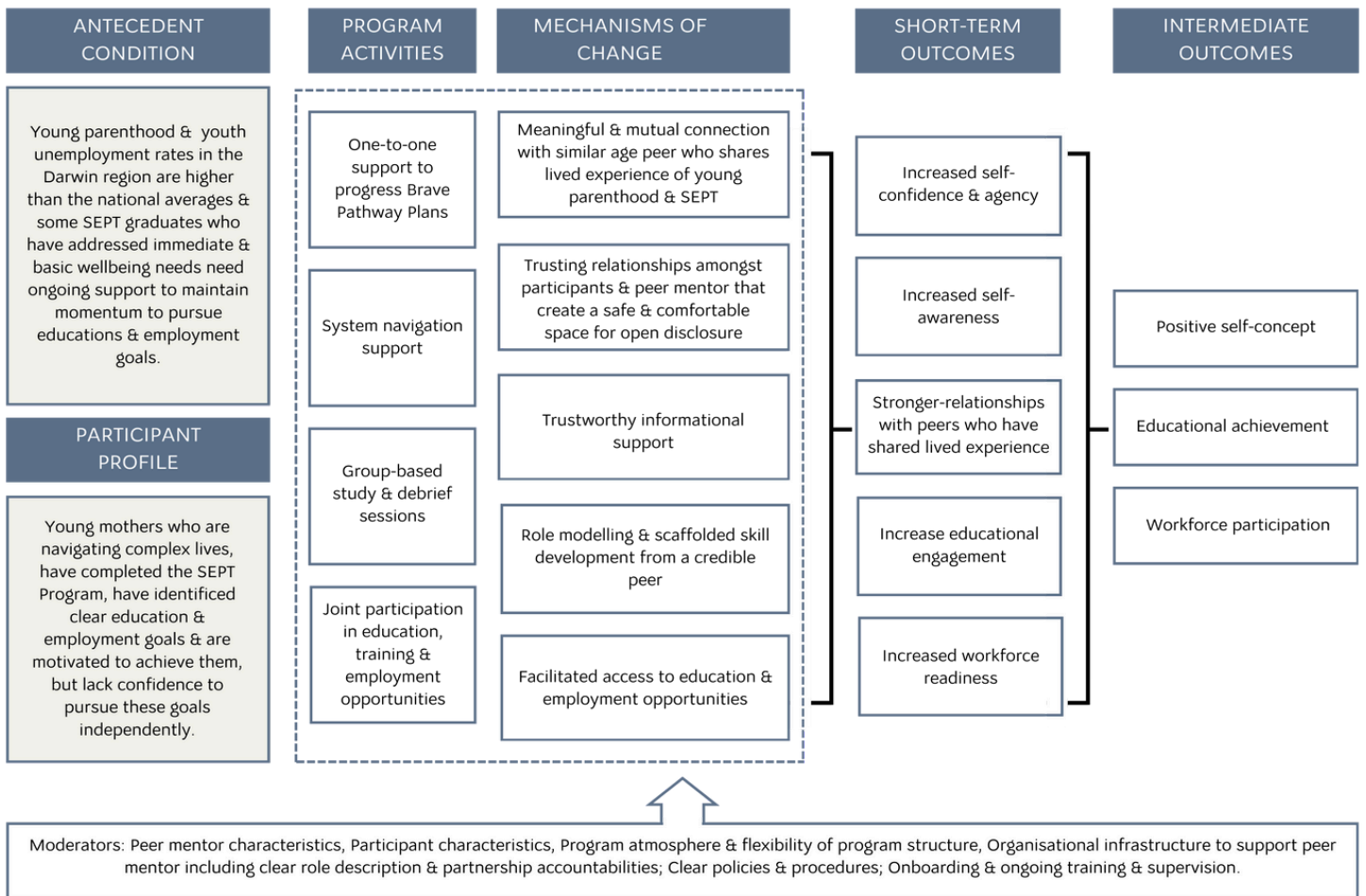
This snapshot report provides key insights from an evaluability assessment of the small-scale pilot focused on the robustness of the program concept and internal stakeholders' experiences of the pilot implementation. It includes recommendations for success if replicated at the pilot site or other locations in the future.

A theory of change was generated from semi-structured interview data and an analysis of program documents. Additional insights about implementation quality were derived from these two primary data sources. A review of existing research literature on peer mentoring and similar peer-led support interventions also informed a logic analysis of the emerging theory of change.

The emergent theory of change is presented next, followed by the concluding findings in relation to four Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and recommendations. The full report is available from Brave upon request.

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EMERGENT THEORY OF CHANGE

ANTECEDENT CONDITION	PROGRAM ACTIVITIES	MECHANISMS OF CHANGE	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

ANTECEDENT CONDITION

Young parenthood & youth unemployment rates in the Darwin region are higher than the national averages & some SEPT graduates who have addressed immediate & basic wellbeing needs need ongoing support to maintain momentum to pursue educations & employment goals.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Young mothers who are navigating complex lives, have completed the SEPT Program, have identified clear education & employment goals & are motivated to achieve them, but lack confidence to pursue these goals independently.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

- One-to-one support to progress Brave Pathway Plans
- System navigation support
- Group-based study & debrief sessions
- Joint participation in education, training & employment opportunities

MECHANISMS OF CHANGE

- Meaningful & mutual connection with similar age peer who shares lived experience of young parenthood & SEPT
- Trusting relationships amongst participants & peer mentor that create a safe & comfortable space for open disclosure
- Trustworthy informational support
- Role modelling & scaffolded skill development from a credible peer
- Facilitated access to education & employment opportunities

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

- Increased self-confidence & agency
- Increased self-awareness
- Stronger-relationships with peers who have shared lived experience
- Increase educational engagement
- Increased workforce readiness

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

- Positive self-concept
- Educational achievement
- Workforce participation

Moderators: Peer mentor characteristics, Participant characteristics, Program atmosphere & flexibility of program structure, Organisational infrastructure to support peer mentor including clear role description & partnership accountabilities; Clear policies & procedures; Onboarding & ongoing training & supervision.

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THE NEED & PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Many SEPT participants in the Darwin region had lives characterised by complex challenges when they started SEPT, therefore the participants focused on addressing immediate, basic needs with their Brave Mentors. Those participants developed confidence and motivation that made them more ready to pursue their education and employment goals by the end of the 12-month SEPT program, but they still required support to achieve their educational and employment aspirations. The stakeholders who conceptualised the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Pilot identified that the lower-level of need of these motivated graduates could be well-served by a Peer Mentor once the young parents finished SEPT.

The decision to pilot the program was also brought about by a convergence of opportune factors that created favourable conditions to trial a Peer Mentoring model, including:

- The desire to provide a SEPT graduate who exhibited a high level of leadership skills with an employment opportunity, thereby piloting the idea of creating employment opportunities for additional graduates post-SEPT
- Funders who were interested in Peer Mentoring models
- A partner organisation that was delivering group-based parenting programs and was interested in partnering with Brave.

The broad target group for the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Pilot was SEPT graduates based in the Darwin region who had identified education or employment goals and were motivated to achieve in these areas but needed ongoing support to get there. All young parents who participated in the pilot were young mothers who had complex lives but had completed the SEPT program. They also had an existing relationship with the Peer Mentor.

MECHANISMS OF CHANGE & OUTCOMES

Given the focus on stepped-down, but ongoing support to assist participants in their transition from SEPT to independent pursuit of their aspirations, and the similar roles that Peer and Brave Mentors had, interviewees identified numerous mechanisms of change (i.e. the program processes that produce outcomes) that were common to SEPT and the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Pilot. For instance, relationship building; an intentional focus on confidence and capability building and self-identified goals; scaffolded skill-building experiences; and facilitated access to relevant information and opportunities.

It was noted that a few mechanisms of change that were unique to the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Pilot:

1. The nature of collaboration was different because the Peer Mentor was often jointly involved in training, education and employment opportunities with participants or had recently completed them herself. In this way she was much more 'alongside the participants' than a Brave Mentor would be, and communicated in a way that was more at their level.
2. There were different opportunities for the Peer Mentor to stretch the participants into leadership because, after completing SEPT, the participants were more ready to be stretched than when beginning SEPT.
3. There was added value that came from the sense of sameness and mutuality they experienced with a mentor who shared their lived experiences as young mums in the program.

Together, the three above mechanisms appeared to be the key drivers of program outcomes, the most common of which was increased agency.

Other outcomes included educational and employment achievements such as engaging with new educational opportunities, completing certifications or qualifications and securing new employment; increasing skills; strengthening of relationships formed through the program, and gaining life learnings.

SUCCESS FACTORS

The success factors represent the conditions (including individual, relationship, organisational or broader contextual factors) that influence the quality and effectiveness of an initiative. Features that made the pilot implementation work well, along with aspects that were challenging or where improvements were needed informed this component of the theory of change. The insights related to the success factors are summarised below:

- Characteristics of the participants related to readiness influences program success. For instance, young single mums lead busy lives that can get in the way of engagement. SEPT graduates who were thought to benefit most from continued peer support were those who had addressed other barriers to education and employment through SEPT and were ready to engage with education and employment opportunities.
- Enabling features of the program atmosphere, such as an informal, welcoming and inclusive setting and a voluntary and flexible service (in terms of fit with their lives as young mums).
- Service offerings that provided access to opportunities and resources, including a brokerage fund to support goal pursuit, and connection to similar peers and organisations were also seen as important.
- The Peer Mentor's characteristics, including necessary skills, stood out as being critically important to the success of the model. The required skillset for the role, is wide-ranging and suggests a high level of professionalism and experience is needed to navigate the complex practice concerns and ethical risks that can arise in the role. For example, skills related to relational support, system navigation, stakeholder engagement, group facilitation, case planning and record management, and professional ethics. It was noted that the current Peer Mentor had exceptional leadership abilities and a unique constellation of qualities that made them particularly suitable for the role, but that it was still a very new learning space that challenged their existing skillset at times.
- The Peer Mentor's similarity and relatability to the participants as a young mum and SEPT graduate was identified as a key characteristic which, in the case of this pilot, was tied to the Peer Mentor occupying the same spaces to the participants, being linked to organisations they were already involved with and having pre-existing relationships with the participants. However, these established connections also created challenges around relationship and role boundaries that had to be carefully managed by the Peer Mentor with support from supervisors. In addition, while the similarity a Peer Mentor has with participants (in terms of age and life experience) facilitates less hierarchical power dynamics within the mentoring relationship, there can also be trade-offs in terms of professional maturity and depth of practice expertise.
- Complexity and risk can be managed effectively in Peer-to-Peer programs if the organisation has good supporting infrastructure around the Peer Mentor. This includes direct support of the Peer Mentor through frequent supervision meetings that provide the opportunity to debrief; clear role expectations that stipulate boundaries, and mechanisms that enable senior staff members to step in and intervene when practice issues move out of scope. In addition, there is a need for strong cohesion and communication amongst the supervisory team and clear lines of accountability within the leadership team, including with partner organisations. All of this requires team members to have sufficient capacity and resourcing to provide Peer Mentors with the support needed to enable them to learn, grow and be successful in the role. Further, place-based support at an adequate and accessible organisational site

KEQ1 HOW CLEAR, CONSISTENT & COHERENT IS THE THEORY OF CHANGE FOR THE PEER-TO-PEER MENTORING PILOT?

There was general consensus on the main components of the theory of change across interviewees and program documents, including:

- Recognition that some SEPT graduates need additional support to maintain momentum with their education and employment goals when other barriers have been addressed, their goals are clear and they are motivated to continue pursuing their goals.
- That program support could be flexible in terms of contact frequency and group-based or one-to-one sessions to meet the young parents' needs, but the scope of support should be focused on steps and resources to progress educational and employment goals and sharing informal advice about useful resources and services for young parents.
- That a unique mechanism of change for the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring program is the sense of sameness and mutuality that comes from connecting with someone who has shared lived experiences but who has also achieved high levels of success despite similar challenges.
- That participant outcomes related to agency, connection, and engagement in educational or employment opportunities are achievable through partnership with a highly knowledgeable and skilled peer mentor.
- That the safety and effectiveness of the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring program depends on the peer mentor having a wide range of relational and leadership skills, a high level of maturity, and high aptitude for professional social practice. In addition, there needs to be established organisational infrastructure related to onboarding, training and supervision; clear policies and procedures, lines of communication and accountability, role and scope of practice expectations; and sufficient resourcing and capacity to implement and maintain these supports.

There was some discrepancy across the data sources related to the professional vs. informal and light-touch nature of the peer mentor's role. The stepped-down program was meant to exclusively focus on educational and employment goals and sharing lived experience advice but, in practice, the Peer Mentor's support expanded into other areas. This made it difficult to differentiate the Peer-to-Peer program model from SEPT.

KEQ2 HOW PLAUSIBLE ARE THE PROPOSED EFFECTS OF THE PEER-TO-PEER MENTORING PILOT?

The findings of the logic analysis confirmed that the core components of Brave's Peer-to-Peer Mentoring theory of change are supported by existing evidence. Effects are very plausible, if there is strong fidelity to the proposed mechanisms of change and the success factors are carefully considered and addressed. Risks are heightened if strong organisational infrastructure is not first in place. This includes advanced program planning, a clear position description that differentiates the Peer Mentor role from the Brave Mentor role, clear policies and procedures, and intensive training, monitoring and supervision of peer mentors.

KEQ3

HOW WELL DID PILOT IMPLEMENTATION ALIGN WITH THE THEORY OF CHANGE?

There was evidence that the nature of support provided by the peer mentor crossed over into more complex practice territory than was expected. Collaborative work was done to address boundary management, but boundaries were complicated by close pre-existing relationships between the Peer Mentor and the program participants, as well blurred employment roles within the partner organisation, and overlap with SEPT program processes. The evidence also indicates organisational infrastructure was not as robustly implemented or as well-resourced as the theory of change and existing evidence suggests is needed for this kind of initiative.

KEQ4

HOW WAS THE PILOT IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCED BY THOSE WHO WERE DIRECTLY INVOLVED? WHAT WENT WELL & WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED FOR FUTURE DELIVERIES?

All those directly involved with the delivery of the pilot program observed benefits for the participants that were linked to the Peer Mentor's support. Interviewees also all perceived unique value from peer-to-peer mentoring connections. However, there were significant implementation challenges. Challenges were linked to the lack of advanced planning and development and insufficient organisational infrastructure to: account for existing staff workloads, clarify practice and partnership boundaries, address conflicts of interest, and provide adequate developmental and supervisory support for the Peer Mentor. Addressing these gaps would enhance the safety and success of the program, if it were to resume in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluative evidence from this pilot highlights risks that require careful consideration prior to re-introducing a Peer-to-Peer Mentoring program. If a similar stepped-down model were to be re-introduced, we suggest that additional resourcing and personnel would be needed to:

1. Screen and vet peer mentor candidates in line with a position description that matches the level of expertise and experience required for a clearly defined role.
2. Develop specific policies and procedures to clarify practice boundaries; reporting lines and oversight responsibilities; partnership expectations; escalation and follow up procedures.
3. Develop a robust onboarding and induction program, ongoing training and supervision schedule.
4. Ensure there is sufficient capacity within the organisation to provide the level of training and supervision required and to intervene when participant support needs extend beyond the scope of the peer mentor role.

In addition, there are implications to consider with regards to the Peer-to-Peer Mentoring program's differentiation from SEPT. Brave perceives competitive and reputational risks to SEPT if the stepped-down model and the Peer Mentor role are not clearly delineated from the professional Brave Mentor role. With regards to this, Brave recommends comparing the cost-effectiveness of a well-resourced stepped-down Peer-to-Peer Mentoring model to the use of existing processes to extend the length of SEPT for participant who are not ready to independently pursue their education and employment goals, after 12 months of support from a Brave Mentor – as this option is already built into the SEPT model. Further, the added value that comes from participants being able to connect with someone who shares their lived experience of young parenthood could be addressed through its inclusion as a desired selection criterion for future Brave mentor position descriptions, in addition to the existing key selection criteria.

Nevertheless, the evidence from this project also clearly highlights the added value that comes from participants being able to connect with peers who not only share their lived experience of young parenthood but also of the SEPT program and who are of a similar age. Peers with shared lived experience have been fruitfully involved in other initiatives to bridge access barriers to opportunities for young people who are marginalised and who adult professionals have not been successful in engaging. Further, peer mentors help to breakdown trust barriers that prevent young parents from being open and honest with adult professionals.

Accordingly, considering the value that Peer Mentors could bring to Brave through other avenues is recommended. For example, a step-in, rather than a step-down peer-to-peer engagement model. A step-in model would involve past SEPT participants in outreach to support young parents who are considering participating in SEPT to better understand what the program involves. Peer Mentors could also act as an additional touchpoint of support for participants during the program to convey feedback to Brave about aspects that may be difficult for participants to share directly with their Mentors. A step-in model could also be used to support candidate onboarding and scaffolding into higher levels of leadership within the Empowering the Voices of Young Parents (EVYP) Advisory Group. It is also noted that front-end planning, support and supervision would also be required for step-in models and also recommend building in monitoring and evaluation processes from the outset.

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Lived Experience

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