

The MECA Youth Mentoring Program

Evaluation Report



The MECA Youth Mentoring Program Evaluation Report

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List of Tables & Figures

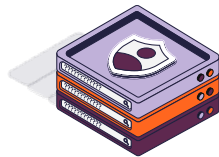
p6

Executive Summary

p9

Chapter 1 Background

p14



Acknowledgements

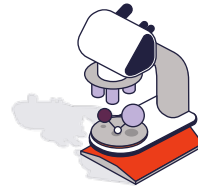
p8

MECA Youth Mentoring Program Infographic Summary

p10

Chapter 2 Methods

p24



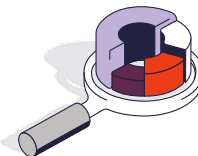
Chapter 3 Evaluation Findings

p28



Chapter 4 Interpretation of the Findings

p52



Chapter 5 Conclusions

p56



References

p62

Appendices

p68

Chapter 1

Background

1.1	The Mount Druitt context	16
1.2	Challenges for Young People	17
1.3	The Use of Youth Mentoring Programs for Intervention	18
1.4	Wellbeing and behaviour change indicators and outcomes in youth mentoring programs	20
1.5	Near-peer Interventions & Mentor Exposure	21
1.6	Evaluation Research Aims & Questions	23

Chapter 2

Methods

24

Chapter 3

Evaluation Findings

3.1	Program Reach	30
3.1.1	Young People (student participants)	30
3.1.2	Parents & Carers of Young People	32
3.1.3	Program Facilitators	33
3.2	Program Outcomes	34
3.3	Understanding of Mentoring	39
3.4	Strengths & Challenges of Near-peer Group Mentoring	40
3.5	Community & Professional Knowledge	42
3.6	Important Spaces for Participation	44
3.6.1	Spaces for Fun	44
3.6.2	Spaces for Learning	44
3.6.3	Safe & Secure Spaces	46

3.7	Program Organisation & Management	47
3.7.1	Recruitment of Young People	47
3.7.2	Young People's Attendance	47
3.7.3	Engagement with the Schools	48
3.8	Community Connections	49
3.9	Mentoring Model Benchmarking	50

Chapter 4

Interpretation of the Findings	53
---------------------------------------	----

Chapter 5

Conclusions

5.1	Summary	57
5.2	Recommendations for Program Replication, Expansion & Improvement	57
5.2.1	Recommendations for the Replication of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program	58
5.2.2	Recommendations for Areas of Expansion & Improvement for the MECA Youth Mentoring Program	60

References	62
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Appendices

Appendix One: Participant Information Sheet – General (Extended) - Parent/Carer Young People	68
Appendix Two: Consent Form – General (Extended) - Young People	70

List of Tables

Table 1.

Characteristics of young people who participated in the evaluation survey

Table 2.

Youth mentoring core components benchmarking

List of Figures

Figure 1.

The MECA Youth Mentoring Program within the bigger community context

Figure 2.

Parents' satisfaction with their child's participation in the MECA Mentoring Program

Figure 3.

Young people's impression of the usefulness of the MECA Mentoring Program

Figure 4.

Young people's satisfaction with their participation in the MECA Mentoring Program overall

Figure 5.

Young people's satisfaction with the mentors during their participation in the MECA Mentoring Program

Figure 6.

Young people's satisfaction with the guest speakers during their participation in the MECA Mentoring Program

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The research team acknowledges the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources, for funding the MECA Youth Mentoring Program.

In particular, we thank MECA staff and volunteers for their ongoing commitment to the community of Mount Druitt, collaboration with young people and their families, and their support of the associated evaluation including recruitment and participation, communications, research site availability, and regular information regarding ongoing developments within the broader MECA Youth Mentoring Program project.

We would like to further acknowledge all the present and former mentors/educators in the participating schools of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program (across all years of the program's

iterations) for their dedication to the care of young people and their networks within the Mount Druitt regions. We would also like to acknowledge the support of the Schools of Medicine and Social Sciences at Western Sydney University who provided the infrastructure and support services required to conduct this evaluation.

Lastly, and importantly, we extend our sincere gratitude and thanks to all service providers, community leaders, families, mentors and young people who volunteered their time and space to participate in the evaluation.

Your meaningful contribution to this research reflects your impact and aspirations for a thriving Mount Druitt, meeting young people where they are to help build a better future for them.

Executive Summary

The MECA Mentoring Program has been running for many years in the Mount Druitt area for young people at local schools. This program received government funding in 2021-2024 to boost its capacity and demonstrate its impacts. The mentoring program is led by MECA in partnerships with Global Skills, TAFE, Headspace, Western Sydney Local Health District, Western Sydney University, and several other community groups and service providers. Program facilitators (MECA staff, mentors, and guest speakers) deliver sessions in schools and take students for excursions to inspire young people and improve their exposure to careers, their employability, and social connections. The evaluation as conducted by Western Sydney University in 2023-2024 using surveys and interviews with the young people who participated in the program, their parents, program facilitators, and community leaders.

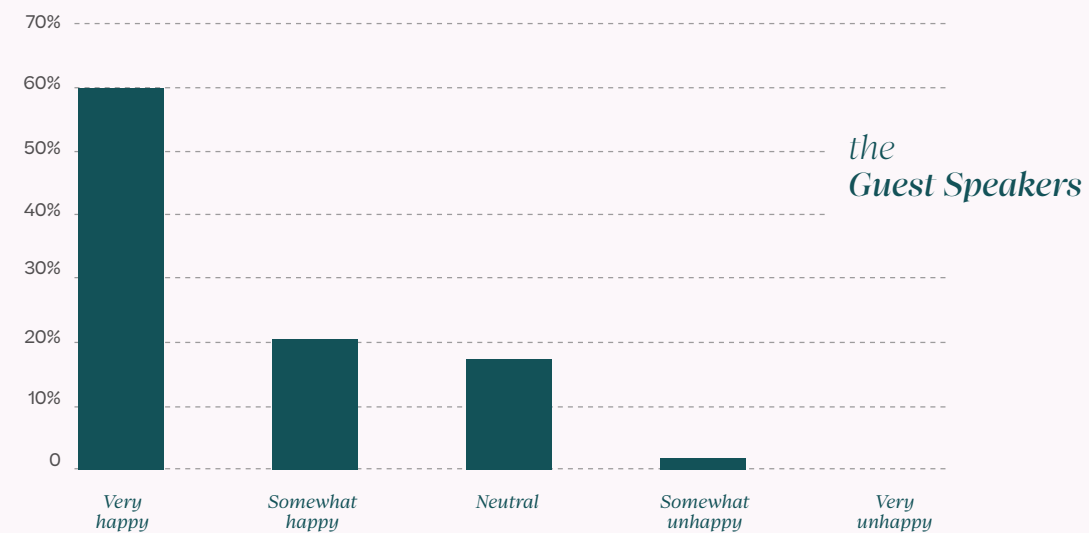
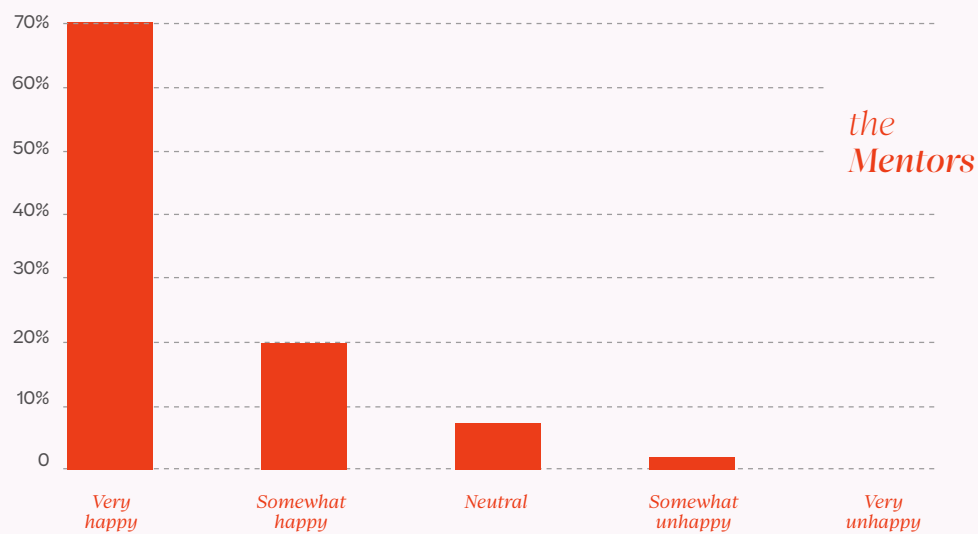
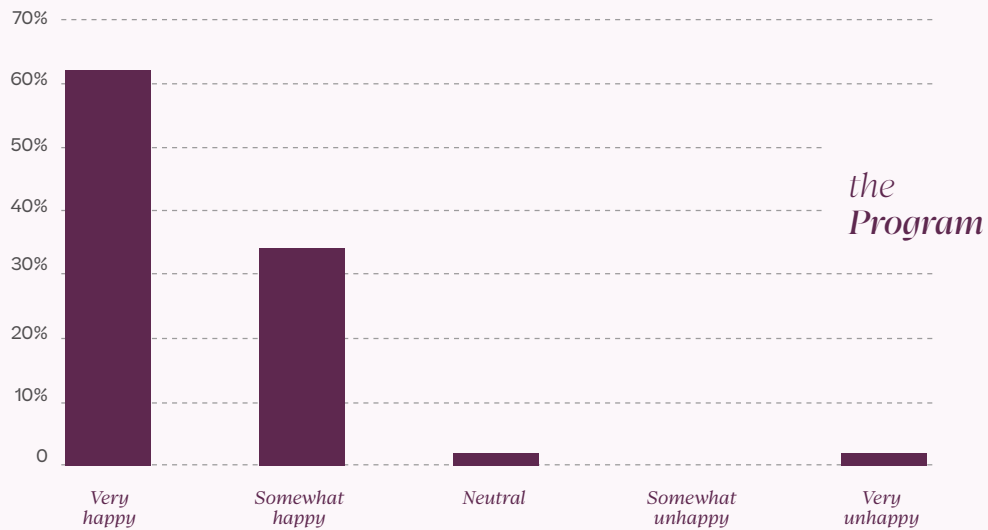
The MECA mentoring program design is suitable for the needs in the community and is well-accepted by the young people. The program is run within schools during school hours with strong support from teachers and principals. The young people reported that the program was useful for them, and they were satisfied with the overall program, mentors, and

guest speakers. Parents also expressed their satisfaction with their children's involvement in the program. Apart from the young people at schools, the mentors in the program (who are mainly young people and often come from the Mount Druitt area) also reported benefits of the program in their personal development. Having mentors who are slightly older but still close to the age of the participants created positive interactions, especially since some mentors share similar backgrounds with the program participants. The young people expressed positive appreciation for the space for fun, learning and safety provided by the MECA mentoring program at schools.

We have demonstrated the importance, suitability and positive impacts of the MECA Mentoring Program. The multi-service collaboration under MECA leadership needs to continue and be expanded. Engagement with more schools in the region, and stronger engagement with parents, are likely to improve the positive impacts of the program. The MECA Mentoring Program might work in other similar community settings with deep and continuing consultations with the local communities.

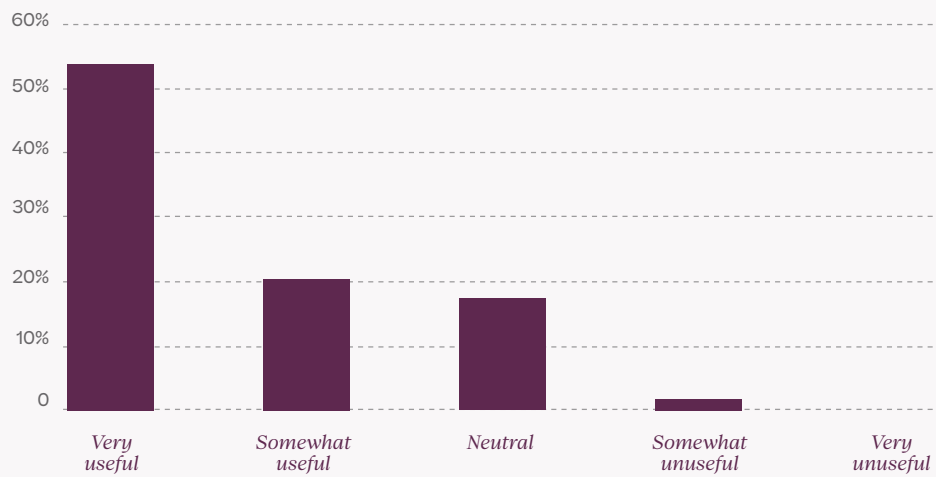
MECA Youth Mentoring Program Infographic Summary

Program Outcomes: How happy are you with the following?

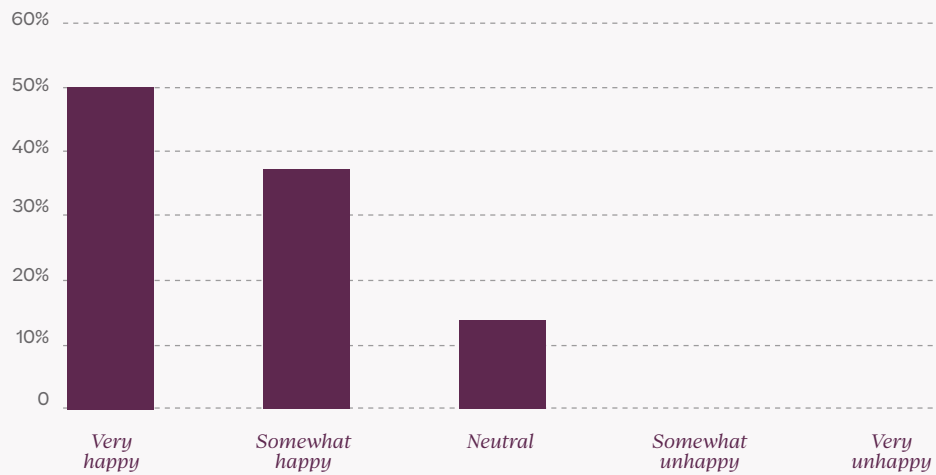


Program Outcomes: Participation in the program

How useful was the MECA Mentoring Program for you?



How happy are you with your child's participation in the MECA Mentoring Program?



Evaluation Themes

Understanding of Mentoring



“Help” “Empowerment” “Guiding” “Life skills” “going down a bad path” “issues” “falling out”

Strengths and Challenges of Near-peer Mentoring



I personally prefer the group approach rather than one-on-one approach. Not only are we able to get the message across to a lot more people, but the experience itself is much more enriching because we got so many different mentors, and different mentors come from different backgrounds, you know, whether it was linguistic or educational”

Community and Professional Knowledge



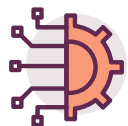
Some of these student-mentors continued their professional knowledge-building further into the mentoring program post-placement. There was an identified need to further efforts of community involvement, between parents and other community organisations.

Important Spaces



The mentoring program provided three important spaces for the participation of young people. These included spaces for fun, spaces for learning, and safe and secure spaces: “It goes quickly, we need more time”.

Program Organisation and Management



Perspectives of parents, program facilitators and community leaders about the organisation and management of the mentoring program highlighted a focus on young people’s recruitment in schools, their attendance, and engagement with the schools. Importantly, the success of this mentoring program relied on “passionate” champions of the program and “preparation”.

Community Connections



Young people were able to deepen connections to the Mount Druitt community, build their confidence, and obtain support for the development of their self-esteem and self-awareness: **“Because we are locally there, that we have a connection with the community”.**

Replication of the Mentoring Program

- 1 Ongoing place-based community partnerships with priority stakeholders across general health, mental health, social services, creative arts, sports, and multicultural services are required not only to build the capacity of the mentoring program but also to provide young people with the opportunity to address their holistic priorities.
- 2 Retain a dynamic program session structure, with varying modes of activity and support (discussion-based, interactive, problem-solving, food and breaks) amongst groups.
- 3 Onboarding near-peers, and where available former peers of participating schools, can positively impact young people's engagement and outcomes in the program as well as outcomes of people within the community.
- 4 Establish appropriate safe, stable and secure spaces for fun, including play and positive interactions between peers, open group dialogue and information sharing on health and education, thus improving the quality and care provided through a group mentoring approach.
- 5 To ensure developmentally appropriate program design, make necessary adjustments to program approaches across grade and age groups (in consultation with key stakeholders).
- 6 Provide external training across stakeholders (mentors and facilitators) that covers the principles of group mentoring, teamwork, and building cultural capability needed for working with students of varying ethnic/cultural backgrounds.
- 7 Community voice and leadership through the involvement of local (geographic, education and cultural) mentors was called for in multiple groups as a positive direction for change in the community.
- 8 Schools need to be positioned as central places to building community relationships and crime prevention approaches, including identifying teacher champions within schools for effective adoption of the program.
- 9 Recognition and engagement of MECA as a leading expert organisation (based on organisational lived experience) in the delivery of this group mentoring model for at-risk young people.



Full recommendations can be found in Chapter 5 of this evaluation

Expansion & Improvement of the Mentoring Program

- 1** To ensure the program is fit-for-purpose, there is a need to establish clear “shared governance” for the mentoring program going forward, which includes buy-in, youth-led frameworks, consistent mentoring definitions/understandings and transparency on commitment to program outcomes between all partners.
- 2** By exploring the involvement of social supports (i.e., friends or other identified peers) during program delivery, this may assist a greater number of young people to engage with the mentoring program, its resources and generate greater access to young people being placed on the margins.
- 3** Group sessions require extension in both time per relevant sessions, frequency of delivery per term, and balance of structured activities. With this, the mentoring program can strengthen participation and attendance as expressed by young people.
- 4** The mentoring program requires a greater focus on the areas of well-being, domestic violence, child abuse and bullying, as emerging and growing issues within the Mount Druit community.
- 5** Ongoing funding and infrastructure to strengthen the participation of parents and carers in the mentoring program and amongst each other, to be better school and community supports/champions for the program.
- 6** The matching and identification process of young people to the program, which is primarily in response to advice from teachers, should be expanded to other stakeholders.
- 7** Whilst there was anecdotal evidence of success amongst program participants and improved recognisability of MECA to the community, ongoing evaluation measurement following participation in the program and life outcomes should be funded for inclusion, ensuring the impact of the program is assessed and future iterations of the program are evidenced-based.



Full recommendations can be found in Chapter 5 of this evaluation

Chapter 1

Background





1.1
The Mount Druitt
Context

1.3
The Use of Youth
Mentoring Programs
for Intervention

1.5
Near-peer Interventions
& Mentor Exposure

1.2
Challenges for
Young People

1.4
Wellbeing & Behaviour
Change Indicators and
Outcomes in Youth
Mentoring Programs

1.6
Evaluation Research
Aims & Questions

Ch-1 Background

1.1 The Mount Druitt Context

New South Wales (NSW) has a large and vibrant multicultural and youth community, and this diversity and vitality is exemplified in Mount Druitt, in Western Sydney, where 30% of residents are under 19 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a).

More than 60% of Mount Druitt residents speak a language other than English and around 25% arrived in Australia in the last five years with Arabic, Turkish, Tongan, Tagalog and Hindi being the most prevalent first languages in this area (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a).

While Mount Druitt is a community with many strengths including pioneering community-centric initiatives and leadership, this region remains overrepresented across core youth development and engagement metrics and as an area of higher level of disadvantages associated with social and economic conditions placed on it over several years.

Unfortunately, the Mount Druitt region has shown a higher level of disadvantage (887.5) than Blacktown City (987.3) and New South Wales (1000.0) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b).

Mount Druitt has a long history of entrenched intergenerational poverty and social stigma with a history of high rates of unemployment, offending rates, pov-

erty and economic insecurity (Blacktown City Council, 2016; The Hive, 2023).

Previous research suggests that experiences of social, economic, and cultural disadvantage or marginalisation can lead to poorer outcomes in health, education, and employment (Robards et al., 2020).

Further, a higher percentage of school-aged young people report disadvantages in their daily lives and inequitable access to positive childhood experiences as having a great effect on their health and wellbeing (Samji et al., 2024).

According to the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), two in three children starting school in Mount Druitt were considered developmentally vulnerable, which was significantly higher than the national rate of one in five children.

The percentage of school-aged young people classed as “developmentally vulnerable” is increasing further with age, and so is the gap between children and young people living or studying in Mount Druitt and the rest of NSW (Australian Early Development Census, 2021).

Living in a region of socioeconomic disadvantage, these young people may have poorer life outcomes compared to children from other communities.

1.2 Challenges for Young People

The most recent Census data and crime figures highlight the compounding experiences of disadvantage present in and around Mount Druitt, which school-aged children directly experience.

Mount Druitt reports a higher rate of crime across multiple areas (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2021), including over double the state rates of drug offences, assault, robbery, and malicious property damage.

Unfortunately, there has been a historic trend of association of crime rates to the demographic characteristics of areas such as Mount Druitt resulting in stigma and top-down approaches to addressing such behaviours (Just Reinvest NSW, 2020).

Much less attention has been given to the personal, social, and environmental challenges which contribute to this trend and the possible emergence of anti-social behaviours.

According to Mission Australia's last two youth surveys in 2022 and 2023, the biggest personal challenges for

young people in NSW remained school challenges (54%), mental health challenges (28%) and relationship challenges (25%).

The provision of high-quality educational opportunities, supportive environments, and access to trusted adults or peers in a cohesive community and school environment are key to lifting the aspirations, behaviour change, and improving the life outcomes of young people living in communities most impacted by disadvantage (Barker & Harris, 2020; Clark, et al., 2023; Stefanski, et al., 2016).

These provisions also lead to enhanced mental health and wellbeing, and the adoption of life development skills.

Unfortunately, research on the environmental conditions that lead to disengagement (or risk of disengagement) from education, community, or family has concluded that these young people may have less opportunity to participate in positive childhood experiences necessary for development (Dang & Miller, 2013).

1.3 The Use of Youth Mentoring Programs for Intervention

One way of addressing behaviours and building key relationships for youth development is through mentoring.

The Centre for Evidence-Based Mentoring and leading scholars report that mentoring has evolved across both formal and natural (informal) models (Rhodes, 2005).

In both forms, youth mentoring relationships for school-aged young people can cost-effectively serve to build protective qualities and strengthen significant psychological attributes that are linked to positive outcomes in domains such as resilience, self-concept and anti-self-rejection, behaviour, life skills and academic achievement (DuBois et al., 2011; Kancheva et al., 2016).

Studies of the effectiveness of community and school-based youth mentoring programs have found young people (mentees) have a more positive attitude toward school, improved well-being and interpersonal relationships, and reduced likelihood to use illegal drugs or engage in violent behaviours (Farrugia et al., 2011; Eby et al., 2008; Karcher, 2005).

These outcomes were associated with key program characteristics including strong relationships between mentees and mentors which increases over time; provision of ongoing training and support to mentors; and involvement of family and community in the program (DuBois et al., 2002).

In formal mentoring models where an intervention program is established, mentoring relationships are built through matching mentees with either a near-peer or a peer.

This mentoring relationship can take the form of one-on-one, group, or hybrid models (Rhodes et al., 2023).

Examples of formal mentoring models such as the Compass program in Portugal (Martins et. al., 2024) have been shown to improve engagement and behavioural change through the formal structural approaches to the design of the program.

These improvements include detailed protocols for sessions allowing for clear goals to be achieved and ongoing quality assurance.

Formal models can reduce the ambiguity of a developmental mentoring program for young people and can provide clear outputs set out in the mentoring relationship.

Studies on the effectiveness of mentoring programs for school-aged youth have indicated a potential for behaviour change.

Raposa and colleagues' (2019a) analysis of 70 mentoring outcome studies (N = 25286, across all studies), shows a significant effect of the one-on-one mentoring programs delivered indicating these interventions do positively address youth outcomes.

Another review of 48 mentoring studies on youth outcomes demonstrated that targeted programs yielded more than twice the positive impacts compared to non-specific approaches (Christensen et al., 2020).

These results suggest that youth mentoring programs have the potential to foster positive outcomes, particularly when mentors implement tailored approaches that align with the individual needs of their mentees.

Current literature on mentoring is dominated by Western conventions on the models for the mentorship of young people (McMahon et al., 2023; Sanchez et al., 2023).

In addition, there is limited investigation on the differences between dyad- and group-mentoring designs in relation to the outcomes.

In a scoping review by McMahon et al (2023), the ownership of program material and involvement in the design of programs by First Nations people themselves was unclear, as was the embedding of cultural activities into program delivery.

This suggests that whilst cultural practices in mentoring are embraced, they may not influence/impact wellbeing and personal development.

The above point extends to a range of contextual influences in the development, delivery, and maintenance of mentoring programs that should be evaluated.

1.4 Wellbeing & Behaviour Change Indicators and Outcomes in Youth Mentoring programs

The use of mentoring programs has been used widely to address potential contact with justice systems. An evidence review by the University of Sydney and the Department of Communities and Justice found essential components of mentoring programs for crime prevention including mentor screening and matching, mentor training and support, engagement, personal and life skills development, social networks and community engagement (Youth Justice NSW, 2021).

Whilst there is commonality across programs, variation across youth mentoring programs and underrepresentation of Australian-based interventions of similar design highlights the need to investigate existing mentoring programs used in areas such as Mount Druitt.

Youth mentoring poses many positive impacts to lower reconviction rates for a community-based and family-focused intervention, including supporting youth desistance, improving family relations, and reducing substance misuse and re-offending (Bradley, 2018; Ryon et al., 2017; Tolan et al., 2014).

The contribution of community- and school-based mentoring programs to positive wellbeing outcomes remains contested because of the varying wellbeing indicators used across mentoring programs.

Reviews of mentoring literature advocate for the use of multiple indicators (Rhodes et al., 2023). For example, improved engagement with studies and education achievement (Herrera et al. 2011), social isolation (Keller et al., 2020), social skills and cooperation (Karcher, 2005), and behavioural interactions (Erdem et al., 2016) have all been identified as indicators where school-based mentoring impact can be observed.

Research has also shown the importance of connectedness and the adaptive capacity to seek support and social interaction for wellbeing and reduce behaviour associated with compounding social and economic challenges (Rose et al., 2024).

However, it is unknown whether this impact is always sustained beyond the end closure of the program given the time-limited relational intervention (Austin et al., 2014; Herrera et al., 2011).

Mentoring opportunities that are constructed with further participation activities (e.g., extracurricular) and more favourable academic, psychological, and behavioural outcomes, can assist in the expansion of networks at an earlier age that may otherwise become further engulfed by structural inequity (Heath, 2021).

1.5 Near-peer Interventions and Mentor Exposure

Youth mentoring programs can vary based on the mentors that may be peers (same age), near-peers (where mentors are just a bit older and more experienced than mentees), or adults, with varying degrees of “closeness” to young people (across a variety of dimensions such as geography, culture, socio-economic status, and education) and is usually based on the type of mentoring desired (Austin et al., 2020).

In an Australian school-based mentoring study, outcomes associated with improved engagement within the classroom were evaluated to uncover two key pathways that near-peer mentors use of support: direct pathways and holistic pathways.

Near-peer interventions are a tool to engage young people in areas historically marginalised to broaden thinking on the value of their “education, wellbeing, and communication skills”. (Meltzer et al., 2020).

This can provide further means of encouragement to engage in interest pursuits or support, where accessible in the fragmented system.

Young people described their experiences of mentoring as having “unlocked a padlock”, providing new perspectives and ideas. Weiss et al.’s (2019) qualitative study of a high school program supports this evidence, emphasising that mentor interactions can support guidance regarding future career options for high school participants.

Mentors can act as a key to core development outcomes either by focusing the

mentoring relationship on specific performance/achievement goals, or by exploring multiple life outcomes simultaneously.

While there was variability across studies on mentor-mentee characteristics, Raposa et al (2019b) provided evidence that racial and ethnic similarity or shared interests existed between mentee-mentor relationships resulting in longer match duration during intervention and positive impact post-intervention.

In addition, Raposa et al (2016) acknowledged that higher self-efficacy amongst mentors and previous exposure to youth in their communities led to greater success in working with youth from “high-stress” backgrounds.

However, there are challenges in finding ideal matches in mentoring programs (Raposa et al., 2019b; Spencer et al., 2014).

Overall, there is a need for a more thorough understanding of the range of possible pathways through which mentoring outcomes may be achieved in young people’s lives.

Initiatives such as the Mount Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency (MECA) Youth Mentoring Program in Mount Druitt, seek to reduce anti-social behaviours among young people in this region by engaging them in positive activities with local service providers.

The MECA Youth Mentoring Program is a program for supporting school engagement, life skills, mental health and wellbeing, with the hope of reducing young people’s contact with the justice system.

1.5 Near-peer Interventions and Mentor Exposure (cont'd)

The use of mentoring programs has been used widely to address potential contact with justice systems. An evidence review by the University of Sydney and the Department of Communities and Justice found essential components of mentoring programs for crime prevention including mentor screening and matching, mentor training and support, engagement, personal and life skills development, social networks and community engagement (Youth Justice NSW, 2021).

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1.6 Evaluation Research Aims & Questions

In 2021, MECA engaged researchers from Western Sydney University to conduct independent evaluation research to examine the process and outcomes of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program.

The MECA Youth Mentoring Program was proposed to provide life skills mentoring and early intervention activities to young people in Mount Druitt.

The evaluation research was designed to identify the program's strengths and areas for improvement, and to identify the value of the program and the potential to scale up in other communities.

This evaluation research was guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent does the MECA youth mentoring program improve young peoples' well-being, life skills, service, and community access in the Mount Druitt area?
2. What changes have been observed among the program participants and other stakeholders during and immediately after the program?
3. What are the strengths and areas of improvement of the program?

In 2021, MECA engaged researchers from Western Sydney University to conduct independent evaluation research to examine the process and outcomes of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program.

In Australia, there is a history of national mentoring benchmarking to assist in the planning of quality mentoring programs (Allen et al., 2007).

Since then, approaches to mentoring are understood to have been used in many formats across different school and community contexts. A coordinated, multi-pronged approach at the scale of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program has never been implemented in the Mount Druitt area.

Methods

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that the MECA Mentoring Program does not exist in a vacuum. The program is part of an ecosystem of interrelated community initiatives with a vast interwoven network of community services (Figure 1). The evaluation was focused on several key stakeholders, although regrettably some groups were unable to be engaged due to the reasons explained later in this chapter.



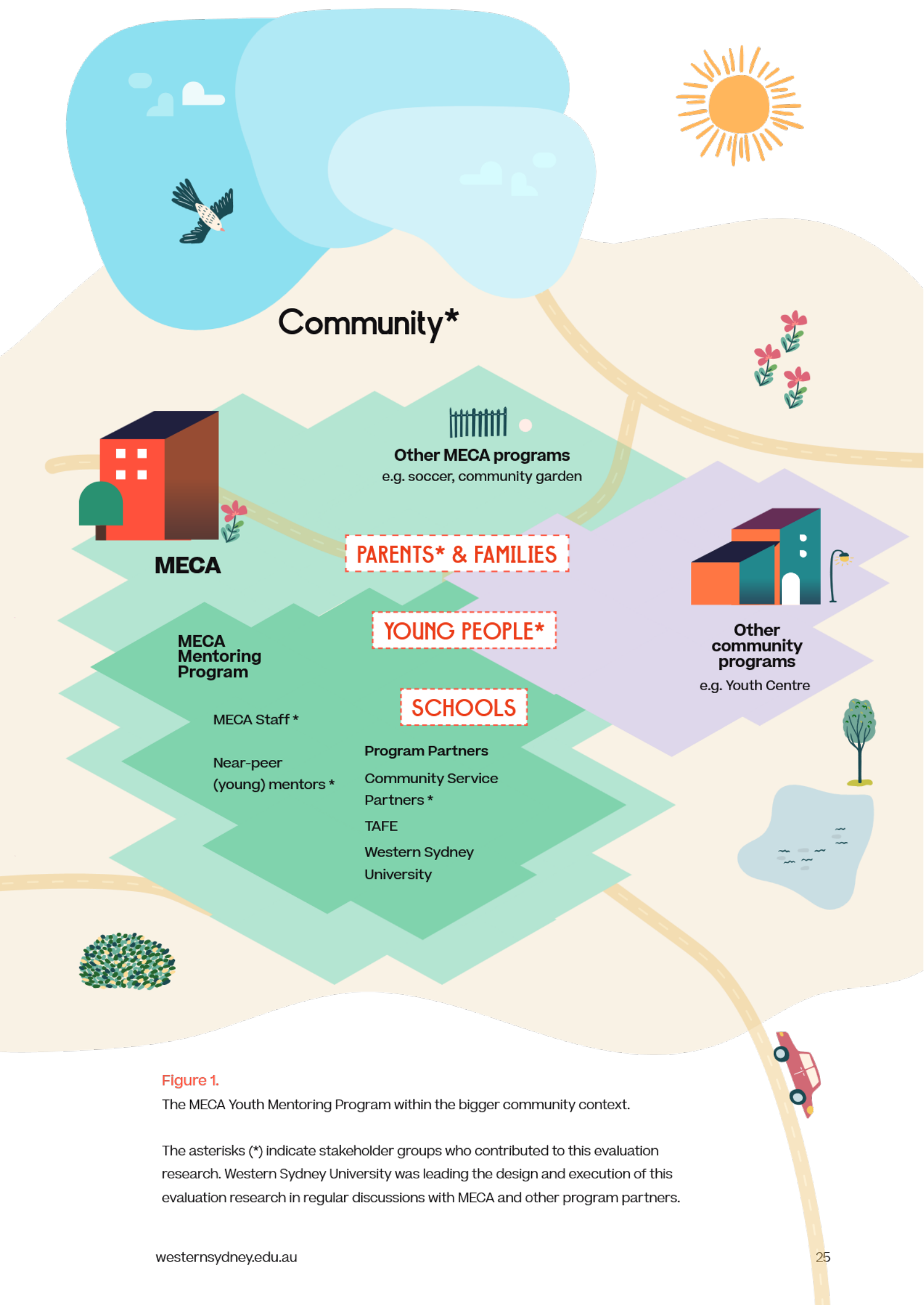


Figure 1.

The MECA Youth Mentoring Program within the bigger community context.

The asterisks (*) indicate stakeholder groups who contributed to this evaluation research. Western Sydney University was leading the design and execution of this evaluation research in regular discussions with MECA and other program partners.

Ch-2 Methods

This evaluation research used a concurrent mixed-methods design where quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (narrative) data were collected from stakeholder groups to answer the research questions. Evaluation data were obtained from program participants (young people), mentors, service providers/facilitators, MECA staff, parents, and community leaders.

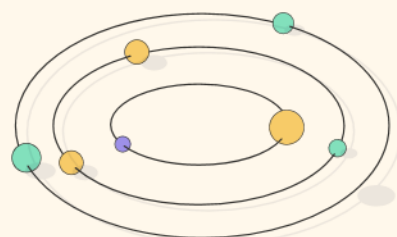
All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix One and Two), before consenting to partake in the study. Participants were asked questions that broadly explored their experiences of the mentoring program, their understanding of its purpose and impact, and the lessons learned for program development, and proposed planning for future programs.

Ethics approval for the research was obtained from Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: H15102). Participant recruitment and data collection were undertaken from September 2023 to June 2024. Data were collected across schools, community sites, and online video communications.

Quantitative (numeric) evaluation data were obtained from young people and parents and carers using an anonymous survey which was distributed in hard copies and electronically. Participation was voluntary and confidential and only minimal personal information were collected to avoid the identification of survey participants. Participants' completion and submission of the survey after reading the Participant Information Sheet was accepted as their implied consent to the study. Young person participants were asked to self-rate and describe their experiences of the mentoring program on a 5-point scale.

All quantitative data were analysed and reported descriptively. No statistical tests were performed, since the study aim was not to test any hypotheses. Assistance was provided by MECA staff to disseminate the survey to mentors, parents, and the young people. Due to constraints on ethics and recruitment, the samples were not extended to teachers as originally proposed.

Qualitative (narrative) data were obtained using individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, and open-ended



survey questions. Participation was voluntary, and participants provided written informed consent (Appendix Three, Appendix Four, and Appendix Five) after reading the Participant Information Sheet. Participants for the interviews and focus groups were recruited using purposive sampling, which is a common technique used in mixed-method research concerning population groups that experience marginalisation (Liamputtong, 2019).

The interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour, were conducted in person or online via video conferencing. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule which enabled fluidity in the conversation between researcher and interviewee but also worked to help maintain the focus of the interview. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with service facilitators and staff.

The focus groups, which lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, were conducted in person. The focus groups also followed a semi-structured focus group schedule which enabled group dialogue between participants and the researcher. Focus groups also allowed for

confirmation and differences of experience to be explored through the interactions of participants. Three in-depth focus groups were conducted with community leaders, mentors, and service facilitators.

The open-ended survey questions were embedded in the quantitative survey to allow study participants to provide their responses to the prompts and give details explaining why they responded as they had. These questions were designed to obtain additional information about the mentoring experiences, particularly around the study participants' engagement within and beyond the program.

All qualitative data were transcribed and the data was thematically analysed and organised by identifying topics and substantive categories within all participant groups in relation to the study's aims.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were synthesised after analyses were completed for both arms of the study. The Results section below presents the insights from this synthesis, which are reported as one integrated narrative.



Chapter 3

Evaluation Findings



This section summarises the program’s main achievements and opportunities for improvement against the main evaluation questions. The data below present the stakeholders’ perspectives on the nature of the program, the impacts of this mentoring approach, observed changes among stakeholders, and recommendations for future extensions/expansions of the program.

The data are presented under the following subheadings:

1. Program Reach
2. Program Outcomes
3. Understanding of Mentoring
4. Strengths & Challenges of Near-Peer Group Mentoring
5. Community & Professional Knowledge
6. Important Spaces for Participation
7. Organisation & Maintenance of the Program
8. Community Connections
9. Mentoring Model Benchmarking

Due to the close-knitted nature of the program stakeholders, quotes from study participants are coded as follows to avoid identifying the participants:

- The term young person represents the student participants of the mentoring program.
- The term parents and carers of young people represents parents and carers of student participants of the mentoring program.
- The term program facilitator encompasses MECA staff, mentors, program partners and other service providers who organised and delivered the mentoring sessions.
- The term community leader refers to cultural leaders of the communities where the student participants live.

3.1 Program Reach

3.1.1 Young People (Student Participants)

For the period from April 2022 to June 2024, MECA was able to build relationships with six schools within the Mount Druitt region. The total number of students participating in the program during this period was 398, across nine school terms.

The number and grouping of students in each mentoring period were based on the availability of teachers, availability of students, and advice from the school around the best approach for the participation of the students i.e., gender-based group allocations, year-group-based allocations, and the need for more personalised support from program facilitators to help the young people participate in ways they wanted to.

Evaluation data collection from the young people was delayed due to unexpected delays in obtaining the ethics approval.

Therefore, some evaluation data were captured well after the mentoring periods were completed. In the future, it would be best to explore the young people's experiences of the mentoring program at baseline, during and following participation in their allocated term of the program.

Evaluation data were obtained from 50 young people across 4 schools (Table 1). The numbers of participating students in each school varied based on availability and attendance to complete the paper survey or their receipt of the online survey.

The participants of the evaluation varied in age and year groups due to the slightly different recruitment approaches for the mentoring program used in each school, based on the school's advice.



Table 1.

Characteristics of young people who participated in the evaluation survey

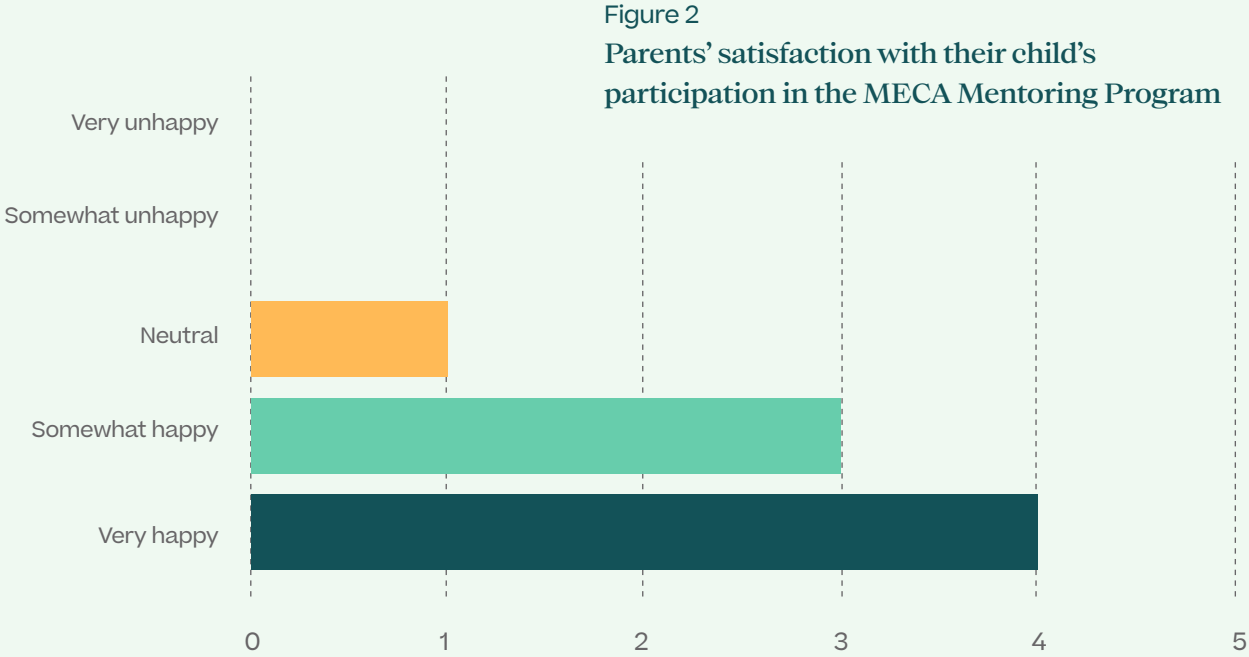
Characteristics		Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	21	43%
	Male	26	53%
	Others/Blank	2	4%
Grade	8	14	29%
	9	20	41%
	10	15	31%
Age	Minimum	13	
	Maximum	16	
	Mean	14.5	
	SD	0.9	
	Lower quartile	14	
	Median	15	
	Upper quartile	15	

Recruitment of schools into the mentoring program was challenging because of the availability of teaching staff, communications between the school and the community organisation, and capacity to plan for (or include) sessions that require longer planning (e.g., excursions). It was often easier to approach a school when some teachers had already expressed interest in the program and saw the program's potential/perceived benefits to the students they had direct interactions with, as opposed to directly approaching ('cold calling') the school principals. School principals were reported to be more likely to agree for their school to participate in the mentoring program when the teachers assured them about the benefits and that the teachers were able to manage the additional workload. A strong buy-in from the school was reported as vital to sustain the program

3.1.2 Parents & Carers of Young People

Despite extensive attempts to distribute the evaluation survey to all parents of young people registered in the mentoring program, complete survey data were only obtained from eight parents. Most parents were happy or somewhat happy with their child's participation in the MECA Youth Mentoring Program (Figure 2).

Engagement of parents and carers in the MECA Youth Mentoring Program was an ongoing challenge reported by program facilitators, who had attempted various approaches for engagement including through other connection points between MECA and the parents, such as the MECA soccer program:



“Yeah, and one thing, which is a big one actually is the engagement of parents to the school is the biggest limitation. So in all the evolutions we've done, as we, from genesis to evolving to now in terms of how we run mentoring, we always had a component of how do we engage parents at school. And that has been a struggle that we couldn't, yeah, it didn't work.” (Program facilitator)

“I wouldn't say I was super prepared because I didn't get extreme training, but because I did it through TAFE. I think when we got to the school we were mentoring at, we really had to use our initiative with the kids even if we practiced beforehand” (Program facilitator)

“I believe I was in half and half prepared but my life skills definitely helped push me and succeed with being a mentor” (Program facilitator)

3.1.3 Program Facilitators

The program facilitators in the mentoring program included six MECA staff members, 50 mentors, and seven partner organisations with a total of 22 staff members. Key partner organisations were recruited through MECA's existing service networks in the Safer Communities grant and other projects, and additional partner organisations were engaged in the project on an ad-hoc basis.

Mentors were recruited through existing MECA paid staff and volunteer base, educational institutions as part of formal placements, or general community notices. Students in educational institutions were allocated to MECA for placement (MECA was an existing partner to these institutions prior to the start of the evaluation).

Ten mentors responded to the evaluation survey: four TAFE students, four university students, and two MECA salaried staff. As cited by mentors, formal mentor facilitation training was delivered by TAFE as a “professional mentoring training” day. Prior to entry into the program sessions, mentors described feelings of apprehension and anticipation.

However, all mentors expressed anecdotal evidence of an increase in confidence and fulfilment following the conclusion of their mentoring participation stating, “personal growth” and “fun to watch students build a connection to mentors”. There was variation between the mentors regarding their impressions of the program design. Most mentors maintained that the model was “good”, which was attributed to the mixture of session topic areas, and practical activities that encourage separating learning styles. In terms of the program design, participants encouraged the maintenance of teamwork and relationship building amongst mentors themselves to form “group connection”.

No two mentoring days are the same with participants indicating sessions where “attention was lacking” and sessions where students were “very open to do things”. The extent to which mentoring training covered this is unclear.

Qualitative evaluation data were obtained from six program facilitators and are reported alongside data from other stakeholder groups.

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Qualitative evaluation data were obtained from six program facilitators and are reported alongside data from other stakeholder groups.

3.2 Program Outcomes

Overall, most stakeholders were in agreement that the program was effective. The most common achievements of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program, in alignment with the desired outcomes of the project grant, included assisting young people in the Mount Druitt region to:

The data are presented under the following subheadings:

- Stay engaged in their education
- Uptake in opportunities to participate in community activities such as sports, the arts, recreation, culture, and life skills/personal development activities
- Increase their social and community connections
- Experience high satisfaction with frequent school-based group mentoring approaches

The mentoring program was originally delivered via one-on-one mentoring for young people of refugee background in the community. The structure and model of the mentoring program was adapted to increase young people’s “sense of ownership” over the skills they develop and the program activities overall.

In addition, there was a recognition within the broader Mount Druitt community that there is an existing challenge of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds not being engaged in the skills they may previously have had: “Some people do come in from refugee migrant backgrounds, or young people, they have some really good skills. Some of the refugee background, they’re like, engineers, lawyers, you know, they’ve got skills”. The mentoring program thus continued to focus on the development and ownership of employability skills as a program outcome to help young people identify “leadership skills” and skills where there may be “room for improvement”

regarding preparation for the future and community participation. MECA partnered with local employment services to increase young people's awareness of community support services as well as develop awareness of issues of importance to young people. To support employability, the mentoring program provided opportunities for developing resume writing skills, communication skills required for employment, and opportunities for discussion about employment pathways and opportunities within school and outside school:

“We had some kids who didn't know what a resume was at all, had never seen one, never had one. Then we had kids who had resumes, jobs, their parents worked and all the above. When we did the interview training, for example, and we were talking about, what do you wear to an interview? Thongs? Normal shoes? No. So it was training them and mentoring them on what's right because they don't have that person at home. Maybe mum and dad don't work, at a lot of these schools, so no one at home could tell them what's appropriate, what's not appropriate.”
(Program facilitator)

Multiple mentoring sessions on employment within a school setting was seen as a secure place for learning. As one program facilitator shared, “I think it's a forgotten piece within the school system”. As such, the development of employment skills and participation in the workforce is anecdotally evidenced through the visibility of young people in the workforce within the Mount Druitt regions:

“And then when I do go there, and I come across someone who's working at Kmart, or one of the things is like, yeah, no, sir. I'll be like, oh. They are like, Oh, you remember me? [And then I say] Of course, I remember you. And they're like, Oh, yeah, I'm doing real estate, I'm studying this, and I'm doing that.” (Program facilitator)

The majority of stakeholders reported that because of the mentoring program the young people became more engaged with their studies, leading to better academic results. The stakeholders also reported that the mentoring program also reduced the disengagement and negative social pressures the young people may be experiencing because they had allocated time to discuss and explore identity, values, aspirations, and other topics relating to the next stage in their life.

The evaluation data indicated that the mentoring program was also beneficial for mentors and other program facilitators. They felt they had become better able to provide targeted program support to young people by using their professional expertise in youth practice, employment, or health and fitness, or being able to apply their knowledge about the history of Mount Druitt to the program's design. Program facilitators expressed satisfaction with the mentoring program and the desired outcomes for the young people participating in the sessions across each term. They highlighted the positive impact of providing social support to young people, particularly in those jurisdictions with greater social and economic stigma.

The evaluation found positive impacts for young people, specifically their mental health, wellness, and social relationships, as reported by young people and observed by parents and stakeholders.

As a result of establishing connections with near peers and providing a “presence” (mentor) within schools, the mentoring program afforded the young people the ability to have more social time with friends, participate in activities of interest, and focus on their personal development. In essence, the mentoring program developed the capacity of young people who might otherwise be categorised as “high risk” by delivering a program with a youth-centric focus and flexibility to adapt to the social and personal needs of this specific cohort of young people moving into adulthood.

The majority of young people in their surveys reported the safe and dynamic learning space of the mentoring program led them to more opportunities like participating in further activities outside school, exposure to otherwise unknown areas of health and employment, and contemplating preparing or even pursuing a highly skilled or professional career post-secondary education. In their words, the mentoring program was *“Teaching us about the real world”* (young person).

The mentoring program had a powerful effect on increasing the young people’s sense of self-worth as a result of being recognised for their achievements, relationship building, and reinforcement provided by peers and near-peers. Some

interview participants reported the lack of support for young people in the Mount Druitt area, as described by a community leader, they think *“we can’t - we find ... hard to know about [the system] ... more ... difficulties. But ... MECA ... helps us.”* The mentoring program was cited as a significant source of recognition that the young people were important to the overall Mount Druitt community. It was suggested that a longer-term implementation and evaluation study of the current model may reveal the achievement of intended impacts in positive self- and community regard, mental health, crime prevention, employment and better life circumstances into adulthood.

Most of the young people found the mentoring program very useful or somewhat useful (Figure 3) and expressed a high level of satisfaction with the mentoring program overall (Figure 4), mentors (Figure 5), and guest speakers (Figure 6). This satisfaction was further expressed in young people’s responses regarding what they learned and their favourite aspects of the mentoring program. In the free-text responses of the survey, young people expressed positive elements of the mentoring program on their own lives and/or for other young people they perceived to be the primary recipients of the program. One young person stated, *“I think it is a good program for trouble[d] youth”*. Another young person commented, *“Blessed to have this program in my life. Been helping me out heaps”*.

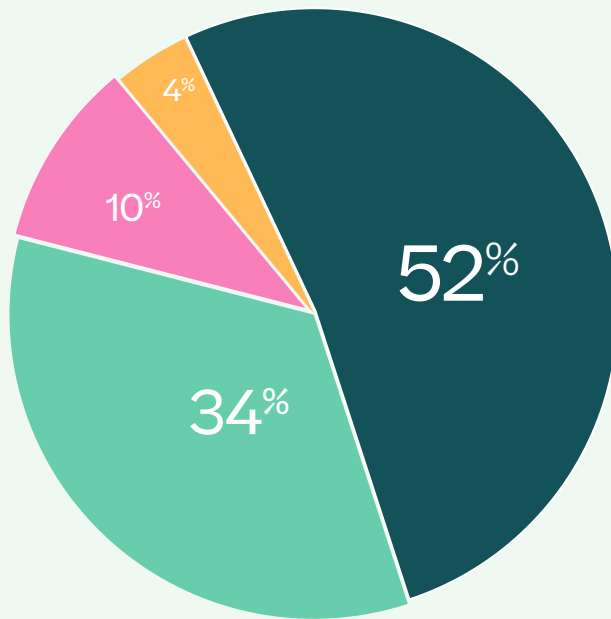


Fig 3.
**Young People's
 Impression of the
 Usefulness of the MECA
 Mentoring Program**

Key

- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Neutral
- Somewhat unuseful
- Very unuseful

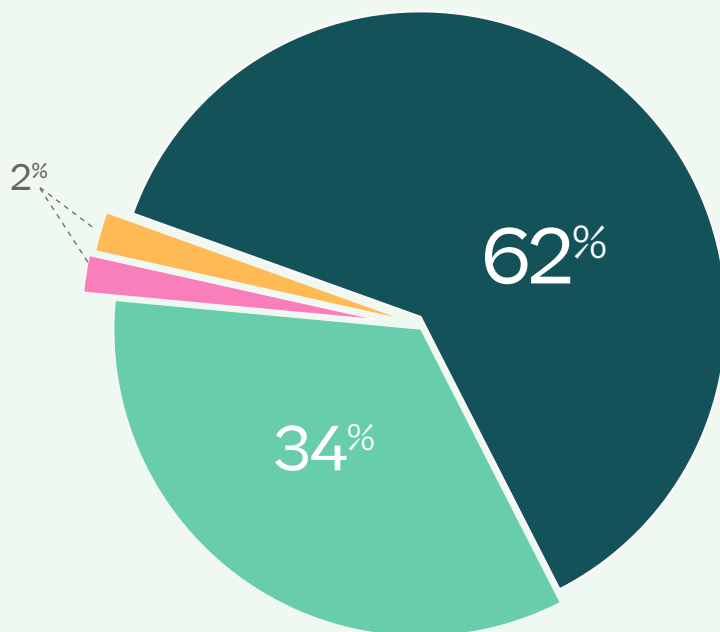


Fig 4.
**Young People's satisfaction
 with their participation
 in the MECA Mentoring
 Program overall**

Key

- Very happy
- Somewhat happy
- Neutral
- Somewhat unhappy
- Very unhappy

Fig 5.
Young People’s satisfaction with the mentors during their participation in the MECA Mentoring Program

Key

- Very happy
- Somewhat happy
- Neutral
- Somewhat unhappy
- Very unhappy

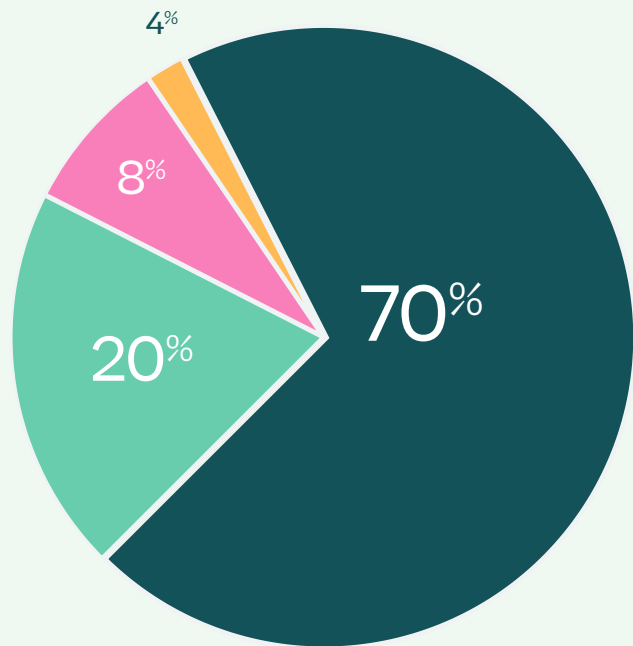
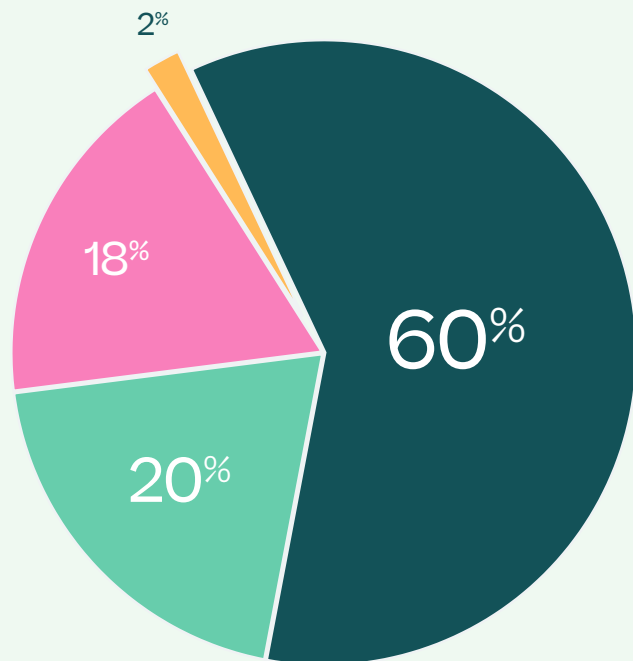


Fig 6.
Young people’s satisfaction with the guest speakers during their participation in the MECA Mentoring Program

Key

- Very happy
- Somewhat happy
- Neutral
- Somewhat unhappy
- Very unhappy



Several study participants identified a need for a more robust, effective, and continuous assessment in determining who, from the pool of young people within the Mount Druitt community, are the most in need of the mentoring program, based on their engagement in school and community. They also expressed the need to identify who among the young people in the schools will experience significant impacts from the mentoring program on their pursuit of positive pathways for development, which was recognised as an important strategy for youth crime prevention.

3.3 Understanding of Mentoring

The understanding of the focus of the mentoring program differed slightly across participant groups. The overwhelming majority of young people understood this mentoring program to be primarily focused on receiving *“help”*, which was conceptualised as help to other students, young people who have *“issues”*, and support regarding their own identity and personal growth. Young people also defined mentoring as developing a sense of responsibility to others through assistance and listening received in the group mentoring format. They further expressed mentoring as providing opportunities for development and growth, particularly within the areas of *“life skills”*, improved school attendance and engagement, and decision-making for the future.

While the young people’s understanding of the mentoring program was supported by the overall sentiments of mentors and parents, these two groups focused the

concept of mentoring on the idea of *“empowerment”* and engagement regarding the future, capacity building, and general *“guiding”*.

Program facilitators tended to focus their definition of mentoring on either a strengths lens exploring *“linking”* students to opportunities and people, or a risk lens focusing on *“falling out”* or *“going down a bad path”*. However, the mentoring program’s nature as early intervention or prevention-focused was unclear for some stakeholders, as expressed by a program facilitator: *“All I would mention is just a school-based program that assisted children with out-of-school needs.”* These mixed findings suggested a need for a clearer communication across all stakeholder groups, including the young people, about the aim and main features of the mentoring program, to avoid discrepancies in expectations and approaches.

3.4 Strengths & Challenges of Near-Peer Group Mentoring

A consistent theme across all focus groups was the strong sense of community in the MECA Youth Mentoring Program and across the Mount Drutt area.

Despite their acknowledgment of social stigmas and negative stereotypes about the community, stakeholders across each group shared a clear perception of the importance of *“role models”* and near-peer mentors for young people. Young people in the surveys emphasised their likeness to mentors who were perceived as relatable. One mentor described this likeness as the following:

“The thing is just me being myself in there. If I can be myself as a mentor and that positive role model for young people, I feel like the young people can then do the same and they won't have to be shy or scared or nervous of their own person”.

This sentiment was confirmed by a large number of repeated statements in survey responses, naming the mentors as one of the three aspects enjoyed by the young people attending the program, such as *“I like MECA! I like the fun stuff and I like the mentors. They are funny.”*

Group mentoring was perceived as an effective model for engagement, rather than one-on-one, as it allowed mentors to “interact with different young people at a

time” and generate greater comfortability or safety with larger numbers of participants. However, mentors also acknowledged that being close in peer age and experience, and the large groups settings, may cause distractions. They suggested that during the delivery of the program the ability to *“get to all young people”* is restricted. In one example from a focus group, group sizes were not always regulated and impacted the preparation and delivery of a session:

Program facilitator 1:

Then the group of 50 was mixed. So there also wasn't consistency in the volume of kids in classes or the mix of the kids.

Program facilitator 2:

There wasn't consistency... I think some of that really goes to your point about the skills of running groups. So it's very different...

Program facilitator 1:

That poor staff member was scarred after that session.

The near-peer group mentoring model was reported to not only benefit young people but also the mentors involved in the program. Comments in the focus groups pointed to the benefits of teamwork and team building across several generations and people with similar geographical experiences from having lived in Western Sydney.

Near-peer mentors revealed that the program contributed to developments in their sense of identity within the local community as adults. Collaboration across mentors, MECA staff, and other program facilitators with different backgrounds was praised as working *“really well”* with the ability to *“gel together”*. This experience of personal and professional growth was illustrated by one of the mentors who started out as a student undertaking placement in the mentoring program:

“I learned things in the mentoring program as I went in placement, but then I think towards the end is where I really pushed it to be a team member.”

Some stakeholders, including young people, stated that the school-based mentoring program using a group-based approach allowed for a culturally safe environment in an accessible community location. Community leaders expressed that mentoring with matching of cultural/racial background should be considered, but rather than aiming for identical cultural match, they suggested mentors’ flexibility and openness to understand different cultures, expressed as *“...someone who can understand the [young people’s] background”*.

Some program facilitators similarly described the program as being suited for collective cultures, offering a place

of potential familiarity and awareness of best practice approaches to encourage the engagement of young people from both similar and different cultural backgrounds.

Some program facilitators identified themselves as having insiders’ cultural and community knowledge about the appropriate setting and activities that stimulate young people positively. They viewed their rigorous recruitment of a diverse pool of volunteers through local outreach and institutional partnership as building a team with skills suitable to group session delivery:

“Coming from [a CALD] background, I’ve seen, like, in my own terms as a young person, I’d say a lot of [people from my ethnic background] [prefer group mentoring] because of the focus on community” (Program facilitator)

“I personally prefer the group approach rather than one-on-one approach. Not only are we able to get the message across to a lot more people, but the experience itself is much more enriching because we got so many different mentors, and different mentors come from different backgrounds, you know, whether it was linguistic or educational.” (Program facilitator)

3.5 Community & Professional Knowledge

One main outcome of the project was to support project partner organisations and local communities to strengthen their capacity and enhance their community and professional knowledge in adolescent crime prevention.

An approach to this was to look at increasing the life chances of socio-economically disadvantaged and multicultural young people, sessions focused on better health, education, and employment.

The program was also intended to encourage ongoing volunteering to give back to the local community. The program facilitators stated that some mentors were onboarded as placement students (social work, youth work, community services) from TAFE or university.

Successfully, some of these student-mentors continued their professional knowledge-building further into the mentoring program post-placement.

“So with our students becoming mentors, they are here for like three months ... but some of them have stayed longer... some mentors have finished

their hours or finished their course and go, Hey, I want to stay in mentoring. So they come in and be a volunteer with us. And then they're here for like, however long they can be.” (Program facilitator)

Some program facilitators were interested in understanding the impact and outcomes for young people to inform future iterations of program sessions.

An area for improvement of the program was ensuring the provision of comprehensive and longitudinal feedback on the impact of the mentoring program on students, as expressed by a program facilitator below:

“I don't know how [the young people] are now. I don't know how any of the children and people went. Some of them are probably finishing up school now... For example [at one of the schools], they would be finished now. I don't know what's happened to them. I would love to know if maybe they used the [skills] that we gave them... [or] if any of them need more help. We're happy to touch in and help them again... I want to know that now they know how to use those skills that I spent hours delivering and training. So maybe if there was

something like we meet back around at the end of the program, [MECA] invite all the guest speakers back and all the trainers back and maybe there's some good news stories that they could share at the end of it, just so you feel - you can see the results as well and feel like you've gone there to help.” (Program facilitator)

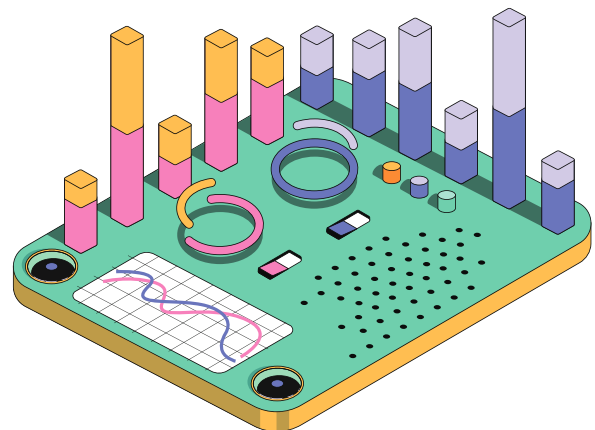
Similarly, community leaders and program facilitators agreed that the knowledge and perspectives of parents connected to the MECA Youth Mentoring Program was significantly limited.

Parent groups are needed for capacity building, to support confidence building in settings other than school following mentoring, and greater community involvement.

Opportunities to facilitate the development of self-esteem, self-awareness and connection in the community were championed from parents in the community leaders' focus group. This process would, as one parent stated, help right the wrongs of parents and past generations and build relationships across parent-groups, that are critical to the prevention approaches.

The challenge of addressing the structural social divides and social isolation experienced by young people then involves hearing from those who have experienced it, is important. One community leader who also happened to be a parent explained:

“I think parents think about their children. The other parents of the school can meet in the same room and can discuss about their own problem with their children without their children of course. Maybe kids sometimes feel shy to talk about what are they [facing] ... with their parents or their friend's parents. So maybe a friend's day and meeting, like all ... families and discuss about their problem to learn from each other.” (Community leader)



3.6 Important Spaces for Participation

The importance of spaces for participation was identified across all participant groups. Three types of spaces were reported to have been provided by the mentoring program. Below are the details of the spaces, the location of these spaces within a school environment, and their existing and potential significance.

3.6.1 Spaces for Fun

Young people described the mentoring space as a place for fun where they could do group activities that evoked laughter and relationship-building with peers. One young person stated, *“We get to play games, we sit down in groups, we sit and do activities”*

In some cases, young people expressed preference for these places being provided outside their school schedule as opposed to the existing structures within school timetabling citing the opportunity to *“miss out on class”* due to the time being replaced with activities of interest.

The mentoring program was also described as a space for activities that could be enjoyed by all in attendance: young people, program facilitators, and teaching staff. The young people described hopes for the mentoring space to be open for longer durations of time, as the current allocation of time per session

was considered “small” for the provision of a variety of fun and engaging activities because *“It goes quickly, we need more time”*. One young person summed up their impression: *“It has been so fun and happy because we play uno and [program facilitators] us*

3.6.2 Spaces for Learning

Across the focus groups, it was appreciated that the mentoring program provided space and opportunities within the school to share information and to critically engage with topics that were not readily available outside of the school environment or accessible to a diverse cohort of young people.

Community leaders confirmed the need for such learning spaces as they shared their frustration regarding where young people could receive community information and services, which they reported as not offered consistently within and outside school.

School-based mentoring was considered an effective primary place for information on areas of health that the community and children in the community require.

“So maybe some psychology trained to [meet them] at school, like one hour per week is good for the kids and learn about how to make a conversation with

their family, with their parents, and tell them about what they are facing so that the kid may be more social with his parents and his friends. His self-confidence will increase [unclear] time.”
(Community leader)

The community leaders also stated that, outside of regular school notices and letters, there was no other central place for asking general questions regarding future aspirations and goals.

Program facilitators reported their impression that the young people appreciated places like the “mentoring space” and access to conversations on topics to support their development and ongoing query into their senior secondary school years:

“How to answer [practical] questions as well, they didn't have any idea. If they were asked what shifts they could work, what do they say? How do they get home? How do they look up the bus timetable? A lot of them live locally, so there was a lot of questions. The kids that stayed back as well, the kids that didn't [immediately leave the sessions], they had a lot of questions as well. A lot of them wanted to talk more about [the session contents]. The questions, take home the sheet that we gave them.”
(Program facilitator)

The young people also reported that the aspects of the mentoring program that they enjoyed being mostly practical and application-based activities.

Similarly, community leaders cited sentiments on the benefit of the mentoring program to the community in facilitating opportunities for young people to investigate their social and life skill development amongst each other:

“Instead of having a theory base in class ... kids have all experienced something and then - like excursions or something to go outside to gain that experience. ... something so they can get that social and mental wellbeing.” (Community leader)

An increase in information and support focused on mental health issues, school refusal, and decreased involvement in community/family activities were also noted by community leaders that the mentoring program could support further.

3.6.3 Safe & Secure Spaces

When asked about the strengths of the school-based model of the mentoring program, partners, parents and community leaders described the schools as important landmarks for safety and security in the community because they are “set for you”.

It was generally felt that the school environment was a controlled and secure place where help could be extended to young people through invited programs.

The presence of friends as identified by the young people’s survey data provided security in numbers and a secure place for some young people to have positive interactions. This notion was supported by observations from a parent: *“[The young people] tell me that they enjoy the program. It makes them feel happier...”*

The security of a group mentoring setting in schools was also reported as a suitable environment for allowing young people to explore personal aspects of the mentoring program such as *“identity”, and “values”, and letting them “learn about the past”.*

This program model was described as enabling mentors to engage in a safe, secure space with the young people. The young people in turn felt and acquired a sense of ownership within their school, acknowledging it as ‘their’ space. This type of space was compared to a public space which may not facilitate outcomes desired by the program as participation is set in an unknown space.

“You keep showing up, they know that you're gonna show up even if they don't get what they are doing. Like if they leave their classes they keep and keep showing up. Then they are in for you. But in the community, even though we can have those things, it might not be as organised as the environment of the school.” (Program facilitator)

3.7 Program Organisation & Management

The perspectives of parents, program facilitators and community leaders about the organisation and management of the mentoring program highlighted a focus on young people's recruitment in schools, their attendance, and engagement with the schools.

3.7.1 Recruitment of Young People

Stakeholders noted that the program overall was designed to target those young people most "in need" and the program's design was curated successfully for this group. One parent reported the good fit of the sessions for her daughter: *"She likes when the guests come into the room to teach them and she has told me some great things about the heart and keeping healthy."*

Teachers selected and recruited students into the program based on their deep familiarity with their students. Program facilitators identified the target group as young people in school who were characterised as "disadvantaged", *"at risk"*, or *"jigging"*.

The program was able to recruit through both teacher and peer recommendation to identify the students not going to class, or not attending school. In some schools, program facilitators reported that they could clearly see the *"at risk"* nature of the young people who were recruited into the mentoring program.

However, one program facilitator stated that they were unsure as to the process of selecting students into the program, which impacted their perception on the sessions they ran: *"I actually questioned,*

were these students even bad kids? They just listened, sat down. There was no disruption. They were really, really good."

Clarification about the program facilitator's recruitment process, and any other questions about the program, is potentially accommodated in the regular meetings for coordination and development with program facilitators.

It was unclear to what extent these opportunities were taken up by stakeholders; but the potential of these meetings was praised by a program facilitator: *"There were regular meetings that you could attend and there was - you could speak and update and have conversations... I think we were well supported and listened to a lot."*

3.7.2 Young People's Attendance

Program facilitators discussed young people's attendance at length, describing it as a priority in the design and implementation of the program and the activities that were chosen for each week of the term. They reported that the program was well attended, even on days which were not normally preferred such as Fridays:

"One way we can measure really well is attendance. And that has been really good. Because the teacher will tell us, those kids don't show up on Fridays."
(Program facilitator)

This attendance in school has been increasing *"slowly"*, but not all program facilitators had the same level of visibility to these outcomes.

3.7.3

Engagement with the Schools

One of the reasons the schools provided access to young people was because the program focused on retention. A limitation of this approach is not reaching young people who have already left school or choose not to engage with the MECA mentoring program at school.

Program facilitators reported that the mentoring sessions were conditional on the school, such as the access provided within schools to technology and additional resources: *“Some of the logistics at the schools. A lot of your space didn't have access to technology.”* They also shared that the effectiveness of the program was further dependent on the identification of the school's needs.

“The needs of the schools are different. You know, some schools say that, you know, we want you to, even though we tell them, Okay, this is what we've got, this is what the program is, they will ask you to emphasise more on, it could be on mental health and wellbeing, you know, yeah, so for those who say, just run it the way you've got it, that's fine. So then some schools might ask you to run things differently. But and also, at different schools, the behaviour of the students that have been selected is different.” (Program facilitator)

Multiple stakeholders cited the need for all participating stakeholders (excluding young people themselves) to *“come to*

the table” for the purposes of arranging program logistics with full transparency and clarity on outcomes to be achieved. While the general outcomes of the program were communicated, there was some lack of clarity in setting out the plan for each session, which could have given the young people a purview into the program ahead so they could prepare accordingly.

In addition, sudden changes to the school's and teachers' availability were reported to negatively impact the program delivery plans and targets. Program facilitators agreed that successful implementation of this school-based mentoring program was contingent on the presence of *“passionate”* teachers who could commit to the duration of the program: *“We realised that for such a programme to exist in schools and be successful, you need at least one teacher who's going to champion that cause”.*

They also agreed on the importance of clear communications prior to session delivery. Unfortunately, these pre-requisites were not consistently available across the implementation period:

“The teachers not connecting to us on time is the biggest problem... which makes it very hard for us to prepare for the term.” (Program facilitator)

3.8 Community Connections

Program facilitators and community leaders agreed that the mentoring program provided opportunities for the young people to feel deeper connections to the Mount Druitt community, build their confidence, and obtain support for the development of their self-esteem and self-awareness. These benefits were primarily identified as being achieved through increased motivation to engage in ongoing volunteering, building peer relationships, and the increasing the profile of MECA in the community.

The evaluation data showed that a key outcome in the project, which was increasing the capacity of stakeholders to connect to the broader Mount Druitt community, was met. Unsurprisingly, a greater need for like-minded friendships and confidence-raising that meet the personal wellbeing needs of young people at greater risk of marginalisation was central to their connection. Young people shared that the program was facilitating friendship formation, as one young person described: *“I get to meet my friends more times”*.

Program facilitators reported a connection to the young people in the program through observations of their development over time. Some mentors expressed that participation in the mentoring program was also contributing to their ongoing development in their academic and professional pursuits. Following initial participation in the program, the program built a greater sense of

connection and a sense of contribution to the development of young people who experienced marginalisation by allowing program facilitators to be both *“engaging in the community and student placement [as a mentor]”*. Some mentors expressed a need to assume a position of “guidance” within the community and identified that volunteering in group mentoring was a good model for achieving this. As one mentor shared, *“My main reason for becoming a mentor was to be that support person and that positive role model to young people within my community.”*

A young person shared, they learned about *“traditional custodians”*, community leaders and program facilitators also confirmed the benefit of having mentors for young people as a tool for regaining a sense of purpose and direction for their lives, citing the mentoring program as necessary for building a connection to cultural and religious practices.

“Some of them lose connection with church over time, and especially that cultural play in, which church like it could be a big thing in their culture... I've seen young people go to church more often because of our programme and just us sharing. It's important like, yes, it's our culture, but at the end of the day, it's your decision if you want to go. And I see that change, constantly.” (Program facilitator)

3.9 Mentoring Model Benchmarking

The following table describes the MECA Youth Mentoring Program benchmarked against similar mentoring programs delivered for young people. The core components and flexible activities of the mentoring programs identified follow from an evidence review of youth mentoring programs that divert youth from justice involvement and anti-social behaviours by Wright et al. (2021), examining the

components that have a high level of evidence in delivering outcomes for young people at-risk of contact with the justice system. These components have also emerged as key practices embedded in the MECA Youth Mentoring Program that are understood to be significant for effectively delivering positive outcomes for young people who are specifically from the Mount Druitt context (see Table 2).

Table 2
Youth Mentoring Core Components Benchmarking

Core Components	Youth Mentoring Program - MECA	Youth Frontiers - Core Community Services Fairfield target group	Linked-In Mentoring Program – Inner West
Population	<p>Young people (12-17 years of age across Year 7-12) at risk of contact with the justice systems.</p> <p>Attending a school located in the Mount Druitt region.</p>	<p>Young people (10-17 years of age) at risk of contact with the justice systems. For this target group the population was specified for girls as well.</p> <p>Living in or have connection with Fairfield LGA</p>	<p>Girls (12-15 years of age) experiencing disengagement in school.</p>
Intervention	School-based, group mentoring	Community based, one-to-one or group mentoring.	School and community-based, group mentoring program.
Mentor Screening & Matching	<p>Screening mentors for their experiences within the areas of youth, social and community work, relationship to the Western Sydney area, connections to any relevant cultural knowledge/groups etc.</p> <p>In accordance with group sessions, mentors may be matched to the schools (based on availability) and matched for group activities within sessions only (based on rapport building and connection).</p>	<p>Screening and matching mentors with mentees is a critical step in this program to ensure young people get high-quality support to make positive changes in their lives.</p> <p>Matching is tailored to the local context and client needs.</p>	<p>Mentor applicants undergo a selection process that includes completing a registration form, participating in an interview, and reference checks.</p>

Core Components	Youth Mentoring Program - MECA	Youth Frontiers - Core Community Services Fairfield target group	Linked-In Mentoring Program – Inner West
Mentor Training or Support	<p>Voluntary (with opportunity for TAFE and University placement where identified).</p> <p>Mentors provided training and mentoring certification from TAFE and ongoing training from previous mentors.</p> <p>Partnership with 4-6 schools, community agencies, education institutions, and health-related organisations.</p>	<p>Paid or voluntary (dependent on the target group and the organisation)</p> <p>Training provided through Core Community Services.</p> <p>Training is consistent with the requirements of the</p>	<p>Voluntary.</p> <p>Mentors provided training and mentoring certification from TAFE.</p> <p>Partnership between local council, Project Shine, TAFE and two secondary colleges.</p>
Mentor-Mentee Relationship	<p>Weekly 1-1.5 hour sessions across one term per matched cohort.</p> <p>Consistent school space identified for in school-sessions.</p>	<p>Weekly 1hour sessions for 12 months (52 hours of mentoring support).</p>	<p>Weekly 1.5 hr sessions across one school term.</p>
Education & Skills	<p>Specialised curriculum with education sessions focus on identity (goal setting, culture, family and personal expression), values, empowerment, mental health and stress, school exchange and participation (incursions and excursions).</p>	<p>Flexible activities based on practical and life skill building; improving wellbeing; Youth-directed goal setting and coaching.</p>	<p>Specialised externally designed curriculum focusing on areas of health, wellbeing, and social relationships for girls and young women.</p>
Extending Pro-social Support Networks	<p>Group mentoring to form connection to near-peer mentors and fellow school peers within the Western Sydney community; Engagement with cultural exchanges cross-schools, university excursions and social development activities (including driving lessons); Building social networks and connections to external providers in health, education, and employment services; Parent/carer hampers.</p>	<p>Young people having supportive relationships; young people having access to the services they need.</p>	<p>Group mentoring with female-identifying near-peers, to support their prosocial interactions and engagement with young people in school and outside school; physical, art-based and meditation activities designed to support their ongoing confidence and positive outlook.</p>

Chapter 4

Interpretation of the Findings



Almost all parents and carers expressed high subjective happiness (“somewhat happy” or “very happy”) with their child’s participation, suggesting a positive orientation to the mentoring program. Similarly, young people expressed being happy with the mentoring program overall. When comparing the results relating to happiness with the mentors and guest speakers, there was a slightly lower satisfaction recorded for facilitators with almost one in five being neutral or somewhat unhappy (compared to one in ten for mentor satisfaction).

However, the majority of young people (almost nine in ten) surveyed felt that their participation in the mentoring program was of personal value to them (“useful”).

Participants in the youth mentoring program often encountered mentors who they saw as positive role models.

High relationship quality has been recognised in youth mentoring studies as a key indicator of mentoring effectiveness due to its correlation with various outcomes (Kanchewa et al., 2016, Poteat et al., 2009).

From a relational mentoring standpoint, similar to that observed in the results of this study, mentoring relationships are seen as dynamic because they evolve, influenced by the experiences and interactions between mentors and mentees during their partnership (Mitchell et al., 2015). Research confirms that best practices in maintaining high relational quality consider objective factors (e.g., interpersonal skills and abilities to demonstrate empathy, personal or familial environ-

ments, and intersectional identities) and subjective factors (e.g., personality, motivations, psychological experiences) (Albright et al., 2017; Doty et al., 2019). Mentors, who hold the primary role in establishing relational connections within mentoring programs (Doty et al., 2019; Feng et al., 2024), frequently aim to support youth by fostering relationships, presenting opportunities, and enhancing competencies. Mentors in the evaluation felt, and indicated awareness of, this positive reception from young people (confirmed by young people’s qualitative survey responses) and built this into the strategy for rapport and ongoing community connection.

Mentors play a crucial role in helping youth gain general life experience by adopting an approach characterised by advocacy, cultural humility, and continuous learning about the perspectives and needs of young people (Feng et al., 2024). Mentor participants felt that training and greater teamwork would enable appropriate (culturally and developmentally) and targeted mentoring sessions.

This stance of support and further development of their purpose as mentors, allows them to better provide an appropriate scaffold for youth, enabling them to explore the world while fostering self-realisation. As such, mentors help youth develop strong character, establish potential future aspirations and goals, and attain a deeper understanding of their life’s meaning, and in turn for their own selves and their own personal outlook.

Ch-4

School-based group mentoring models are perceived as a valuable approach to support and development for young people in Mount Druitt. Schools are considered places for shaping individual character, with this concept being frequently championed by schools and also various stakeholders including family, community members and broader society (Jeynes, 2019; McQuillin et al., 2013; Whitlock, 2024).

The aim is to develop students' traits and values, while also shaping their behaviour. Participants shared experiences and progressed in knowledge-building, showing that young people want to actively seek respectful and informed spaces, where they can feel safe/comfortable, which are often spaces where they feel and can be particularly vulnerable and open.

As reported earlier in the evaluation by Meltzer et al. (2019), young people typically reported that their mentors followed either a direct (concentrating on the development of specific skills and goals) or a holistic pathway (social and emotional development), but not always both pathways simultaneously. As a result, these pathways become different methods of their own in enhancing young people's engagement. However, in the MECA Youth Mentoring Program, both pathways for mentoring were interchangeably used and considered effective.

Young people increased knowledge about personal identity and values, school subjects, peer support, social connectedness, career aspirations, and building

their skills and talents, contributing to a sense of competence, help-seeking, problem-solving, etc. This suggests that in a formal mentoring structure without a clear matching process and a diverse student cohort, flexibility of pathways for mentoring students should be explored. The programs and activities that were received positively were focused on both. This included a focus on personal identity and values, gamified activities, and employment skills, which were evenly offered through various project partners.

The mentoring program was perceived to be, and experienced as, overwhelmingly important developmental spaces, despite there being different interpretations of "at risk" young people across stakeholders envisioned for the program. As such, many participants expressed gratitude when engaging with the mentoring program.

Stakeholders argued that addressing young people's needs required all participating stakeholders to establish a receptive school environment, recognise and respond to the mentoring program, and work to curate its goals for delivery. Similarly, Martins et al. (2024) further highlight the significance of the school environment and partnerships in enhancing the effectiveness of formal mentoring programs.

School-based formal interventions should give importance to the context used for promoting young people's development for wellbeing (Reschly & Christenson, 2012), and scan school conditions and resources that can be best implemented

for programs (McQuillin et al., 2013). In this evaluation, several issues contributed to the mentoring programs in/ability to access schools including availability of staff and schools, communication difficulties, limited program frequency, and financial restrictions.

Reflections on collaborations with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders underscored their recognition of the intricate network of interactions and support systems essential for fostering and sustaining profound, enduring relationships with young people mentees (Lakind et al., 2015). Ambiguous boundaries of mentoring and community roles might impact the level of empowerment of all program facilitators to intervene in the lives of young people.

The effectiveness of mentoring programs often focuses on mentees and mentors, and this can lead to a limited approach (Lakind et al., 2015). Strong connections with parents and carers and other influential individuals in local communities can amplify the effectiveness of mentoring and in turn, deepen and authenticate the bond between mentors and mentees in groups, activate existing supports for youth, and strengthen familial and communal systems (DuBois & Karcher, 2013; Spencer et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2014).

The mentoring program has the potential of becoming an avenue for community members to advocate for youth and community needs/supports and become more involved in local developments. In this way, becoming a collective community program that retains its school-based

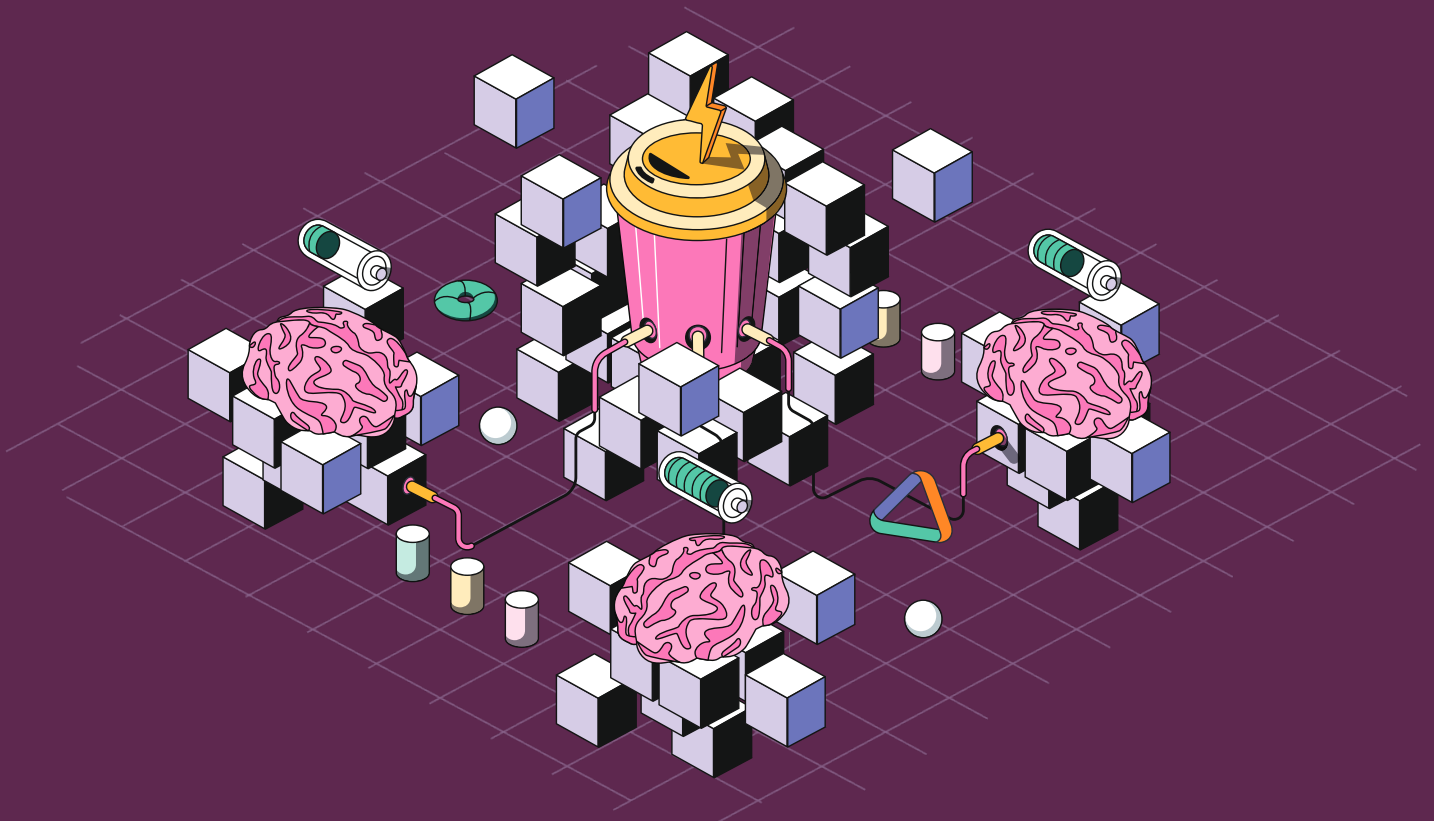
and group structure. Regular community evaluation should involve the active and meaningful participation of both young people and parents, and other community members with cultural expertise. This suggestion from the data is in line with research that states that several prerequisites are needed to form the foundation for developing an effective mentoring program which Komosa-Hawkins (2010) suggests include using data to inform decisions, ensuring alignment between the program and its environment, and establishing a clear mission and goals across a diversity of groups that align with measurable outcomes.

All participants were unified in their focus on wanting opportunities to grow and build young people's life skills, including group mentoring being a path to finding what they are good at, communicating what they need, and participating collaboratively. This positive orientation provides an opportunity to build a very distinctive program in the MECA Youth Mentoring Program that may be influential for other programs that aim to reduce the cycle of exclusion leading to closer risk of contact with the justice system.

This evaluation has revealed that the school-based group mentoring model is suitable for the Mount Druitt context. In addition, from the outcomes and themes identified, this model may be suitable for similar contexts with common elements of the program being directly transferable, with the buy-in from the local community.

Chapter 5

Conclusion



5.1 Summary

This evaluation aimed to examine and understand the experiences of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program. Young people in the Mount Druitt area require support to realise their aspirations and goals, as well as achieve positive outcomes. The provision of a group mentoring and school-based program model for secondary students has emerged as a successful place-based and strengths-focused approach, effective in supporting this cohort.

The findings indicate that the young people continue to experience improved help-seeking behaviours and expanded living skills through the group mentoring model, which impact their health access, engagement, and coping outcomes. Assumptions on the fit of students to crime prevention programs emerges from perceptions of teachers. While this process can assist organisations including MECA to better identify young people for mentoring sessions, this process may fail to consider young peoples' varied needs and intersecting cultural identities.

Young people in this evaluation expressed the mentoring program as being able to develop knowledge and skills to strengthen their ability to participate in their local community, such as developing teamwork, communication, decision-making and leadership skills. Young people responded positively by considering and adopting strategies in

school, such as applying listening skills in class, attending on days usually less preferred by students and completing assessments.

These findings point to a relationship between affirming young people's experiences and an enhanced sense of connection, health and wellbeing. Importantly, this model of mentoring was found to impact holistically, at the individual, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

5.2 Recommendations for program Replication, Expansion, and Improvement

Overall, the suggestions from various stakeholder groups centred on coordination, expansion, and further activities for young people concerning desired outcomes for mental health, participation in education and broader crime prevention.

The following recommendations capture suggestions for replication of the program model, expansion of the model and areas for improvement relevant to further engagement with young people in Mount Druitt and other surrounding areas.

5.2.1

Recommendations for the Replication of the MECA Youth Mentoring Program

1

Ongoing place-based community partnerships with priority stakeholders across general health, mental health, social services, creative arts, sports, and multicultural services are required not only to build the capacity of the mentoring program but also to provide young people with the opportunity to address their holistic priorities.

2

Retain a dynamic program session structure, with varying modes of activity and support (discussion-based, interactive, problem-solving, food and breaks) amongst groups. This includes piloting program activities before sessions and interweaving a focus on wellbeing, identity, and employability, as these were frequently cited as important aspects of development for young people and a source of stability for the future.

3

Onboarding near-peers, and where available former peers of participating schools, can positively impact young people's engagement and outcomes in the program as well as outcomes of people within the community. This whole-of-community approach can generate feelings of connection and belonging, building confidence, increasing social and cultural capital, and exploration of pathways amongst people with likeness or role models, which was cited amongst participants as necessary for crime prevention amongst youth at risk.

4

Establish appropriate safe, stable and secure spaces for fun, including play and positive interactions between peers, open group dialogue and information sharing on health and education, thus improving the quality and care provided through a group mentoring approach. These spaces should be designed in consultation with young people, mentors, and schools.

5

To ensure developmentally appropriate program design, make necessary adjustments to program approaches across grade and age groups (in consultation with key stakeholders). This allows the need for matching to be applied where relevant, rather than using approach where fixed matching is applied before the program's delivery.

6

Provide external training across stakeholders (mentors and facilitators) that covers the principles of group mentoring, teamwork, and building cultural capability needed for working with students of varying ethnic/cultural backgrounds.

7

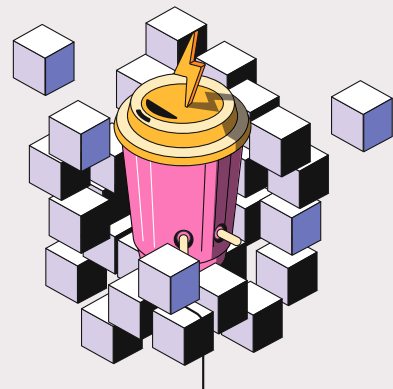
Community voice and leadership through the involvement of local (geographic, education and cultural) mentors was called for in multiple groups as a positive direction for change in the community.

8

Schools need to be positioned as central places to building community relationships and crime prevention approaches, including identifying teacher champions within schools for effective adoption of the program.

9

Recognition and engagement of MECA as a leading expert organisation (based on organisational lived experience) in the delivery of this group mentoring model for at-risk young people.



5.2.2

Recommendations for Areas of Expansion and Improvement for the MECA Youth Mentoring Program

1

To ensure the program is fit-for-purpose, there is a need to establish clear “shared governance” for the mentoring program going forward, which includes buy-in, youth-led frameworks, consistent mentoring definitions/understandings and transparency on commitment to program outcomes between all partners. This arose from synthesis across multiple stakeholders on the challenge of connection to key informants in the program, retention of schools in the program for longer than one school term, pre- and post- program operations and supervision, and involvement of teachers in the delivery of the program.

2

By exploring the involvement of social supports (i.e., friends or other identified peers) during program delivery, this may assist a greater number of young people to engage with the mentoring program, its resources and generate greater access to young people being placed on the margins. The provision of participation and volunteering opportunities across all aspects of the model may improve the retention of mentors and establish defined pathways for growth and career development in youth work/practice.

3

Group sessions require extension in both time per relevant sessions, frequency of delivery per term, and balance of structured activities. With this, the mentoring program can strengthen participation and attendance as expressed by young people. Suggestions for balance of activities were the inclusion or increased frequency of physical activity-based and external sessions including sports, excursions and team-building exercises. This positive orientation towards a diversified program may be influential for other programs which are more ‘needs-based’ rather than ‘top-down’.

4

The mentoring program requires a greater focus on the areas of well-being, domestic violence, child abuse and bullying, as emerging and growing issues within the Mount Druitt community.

5

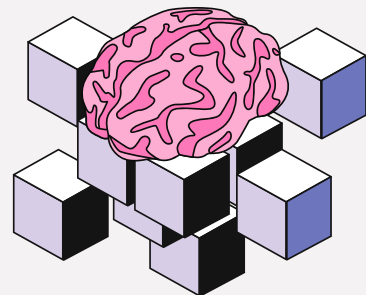
Ongoing funding and infrastructure to strengthen the participation of parents and carers in the mentoring program and amongst each other, to be better school and community supports/champions for the program. There requires a new approach to sharing of information with parents (via co-design), in order to ensure parents are aware of topics covered during the mentoring term, check-in with their child participating and discuss topics they have been learning.

6

The matching and identification process of young people to the program, which is primarily in response to advice from teachers, should be expanded to other stakeholders. This will ensure the matching process of mentoring shifts from a deficit approach to a strengths-based approach focusing on perceived similarities and aspirations of young people.

7

Whilst there was anecdotal evidence of success amongst program participants and improved recognisability of MECA to the community, ongoing evaluation measurement following participation in the program and life outcomes should be funded for inclusion, ensuring the impact of the program is assessed and future iterations of the program are evidenced-based.



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Appendix One

Participant Information Sheet – General (Extended) – Parent/Carer Young People

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Participant Information Sheet – Parent/Carer (Extended)

MECA Youth Mentoring Program Evaluation

Project Title: Evaluation of MECA's Make Your Mark Youth Mentoring Program

Project Summary:

Your child is invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Professor Gabrielle Drake, Associate Professor Brahm Marjadi and Professor Auntie Kerrie Doyle. The researchers are interested in understanding your child's experiences of MECA's youth mentoring program to improve the program.

How is the study being paid for? The project is funded by the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources.

What will my child be asked to do?

Your child will be asked to participate in an anonymous survey and if they agree, an interview either in person or via zoom.

How much of my child's time will he/she need to give?

10 min survey; 30-60 minutes for the interview (if they agree to an interview)

What benefits will my child, and/or the broader community, receive for participating?

Your child will assist the researchers and MECA improve the youth mentoring program.

Will the study involve any risk or discomfort for my child? If so, what will be done to rectify it?

It is unlikely that your child will experience discomfort during the interview, however if they become upset the researchers will provide immediate support and referral to local services such as Headspace Mt Druitt, if appropriate.

How do you intend to publish or disseminate the results?

It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that your child cannot be identified.

Will the data and information that my child provides be disposed of?

Please be assured that only the researchers will have access to the data your child provides. However, their data may be used in other related projects about youth mentoring for a period of 5 years.

Can I withdraw my child from the study? Can my child withdraw from the study?

Your child's participation in the study is entirely voluntary and they are not obliged to be involved.

If your child does withdraw, any information that has been supplied in their interview will be deleted. If your child has completed the online survey this data will not be deleted as it is anonymous.

What if I require further information?

Please contact Professor Gabrielle Drake at g.drake@westernsydney.edu.au should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.

What if I have a complaint?

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.


If you agree for your child to participate in this study, you may be asked to sign the Consent Form. The information sheet is for you to keep and the consent form is retained by the researcher/s.

This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is H15102.

Appendix Two

Consent Form – General (Extended) – Young People

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Consent Form – General (Extended) – Young People

Project Title: MECAs Youth Mentoring Program

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University. The ethics reference number is: H[insert number]

I hereby consent to participate in the above named research project.

I acknowledge that:

- I have read the participant information sheet (or where appropriate, have had it read to me) and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s
- The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to:

Participating in an interview

Having my information audio recorded

I consent for my information to be used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time.

I understand that my involvement is confidential and that the information gained during the study may be published and stored for other research use but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

I understand that my participation in this study will have no effect on my relationship with the researcher/s, and any organisations involved, now or in the future. I understand that I will be unable to withdraw my data and information from the online survey, however I can remove information provided from my interview.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

Return address: *[Remove if not relevant]*

What if I have a complaint?

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au.

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

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