

Executive Summary



Unlocking Doors:

Research on Mentoring to Strengthen Skills & Support Career Pathways for Racialized Young Adults



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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

About the cover illustration:

There are many paths and opportunities available for youth in their lives, but some are much harder to access than others, particularly due to systemic barriers facing racialized youth. Youth should have the autonomy to choose which pathways to take, which doors to open, and with whom they make that journey. To best support youth, mentors can help illuminate the path youth choose and work together with them to overcome obstacles in the way. This illustration captures common themes expressed by research study participants: young adulthood is a time of opportunity but also transitions, which can be both exciting and daunting. Racialized youth express a desire for mentors who walk alongside them and help them open doors to the future they envision for themselves. A draft version of this illustration was presented to research study participants, who agreed that it accurately represents their experiences and ideas about early adulthood and mentorship.

We are deeply grateful to all the participants who generously shared their time and experiences for this research. Your contributions are instrumental in the success of this study.

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Project Overview

In this report, we present findings from our mixed-methods research with racialized young adults (ages 18–30) and stakeholders in the mentoring field. Our study, funded through the Government of Canada’s Skills for Success Program, examined how mentoring can strengthen transferable skills—such as collaboration, adaptability, and problem solving—and support access to meaningful early-career employment.

Guided by a community-based, participatory approach, we carried out multiple phases of work over 18 months: a literature review and expert consultations, a national survey of 3,110 youth (including 1,618 racialized youth), and qualitative interviews with 23 racialized young adults and 13 mentoring stakeholders. We gained important insights into how racialized youth experience mentoring, what qualities they value in mentors, and how programs can be designed to meet their needs.

Our team, led by SRDC in partnership with Mentor Canada, included two peer researchers who self-identified as racialized youth, and an external academic advisor with expertise on race, equity, and mentoring. We recognize that our own diverse identities and institutional mandates influenced the research. We sought to remain reflexive while centering the voices of racialized youth as the authorities on their lived experiences.

Key Recommendations and Implications

Racialized youth strongly value mentorship as a tool for navigating adulthood, careers, and systemic barriers. Despite this, **more than four in five of them report facing at least one barrier to accessing mentors**, including not knowing how to connect with natural or program mentors or being unsure of mentorship's usefulness. This highlights a significant mentoring gap.

- 1. Expand access and outreach.** Youth often do not know how to find mentors or what mentorship offers. Programs should proactively engage racialized youth in accessible spaces such as schools, workplaces, and online platforms.
- 2. Position mentorship as a complement.** Youth see mentors as additions to family and community support, especially for career exploration and skill-building. Mentors should provide guidance in areas where familial support may be limited, such as career navigation.
- 3. Focus on empowerment, not prescriptions.** Racialized youth want mentors who “walk alongside them,” ask questions, and collaborate on setting goals, rather than dictating paths.
- 4. Balance instrumental and emotional support.** While career guidance is important, and may be what draws youth toward mentoring initially, youth also value encouragement, validation, and being “seen and heard” by their mentors. Longer-term, trust-based relationships are particularly impactful.
- 5. Train mentors in cultural humility and anti-racism.** Youth should not bear the burden of educating mentors about racism. Programs must equip mentors to listen, learn, and create safer, identity-affirming spaces.
- 6. Adopt nuanced matching.** Shared racial identity can help, but many youth prioritize common career interests, lived experiences, and values. Giving mentees a voice in the matching process increases effectiveness.
- 7. Provide support at critical transitions.** Mentors are especially valuable during life changes such as moving to post-secondary, entering the workforce, or beginning to manage personal finances. A significant gap exists for young adults aged 25–30.
- 8. Reduce pressure, foster balance.** Many racialized youth feel acute pressure to succeed, especially in the face of systemic racism and inequities, underrepresentation, and stereotypes. Mentors should normalize failure, model resilience, and help mentees develop coping strategies and healthy work-life balance.
- 9. Broaden beyond social capital.** Mentorship should also foster aspirational, navigational, linguistic, and resistance capital, supporting both personal growth and systemic change.
- 10. Value natural mentorship.** Since most youth will not participate in formal programs, communities, schools, and employers must also support organic, natural mentoring relationships.

Research Findings

Views of Success

Our research shows that racialized youth define success in the context of school and work in holistic and interconnected ways. While financial stability emerged as a central theme—often tied to the ability to support a family, own a home, or pursue passions beyond “survival jobs”—youth also emphasized that money alone was not enough.

“Success doesn’t only come from your career, but other things in your life being fulfilled... once I’m stable in life financially and mentally, that will help me to achieve other things.”

Many echoed that success meant balance: being mentally and physically healthy, having supportive relationships, pursuing hobbies, and maintaining freedom. One participant illustrated this link between success and autonomy by saying,

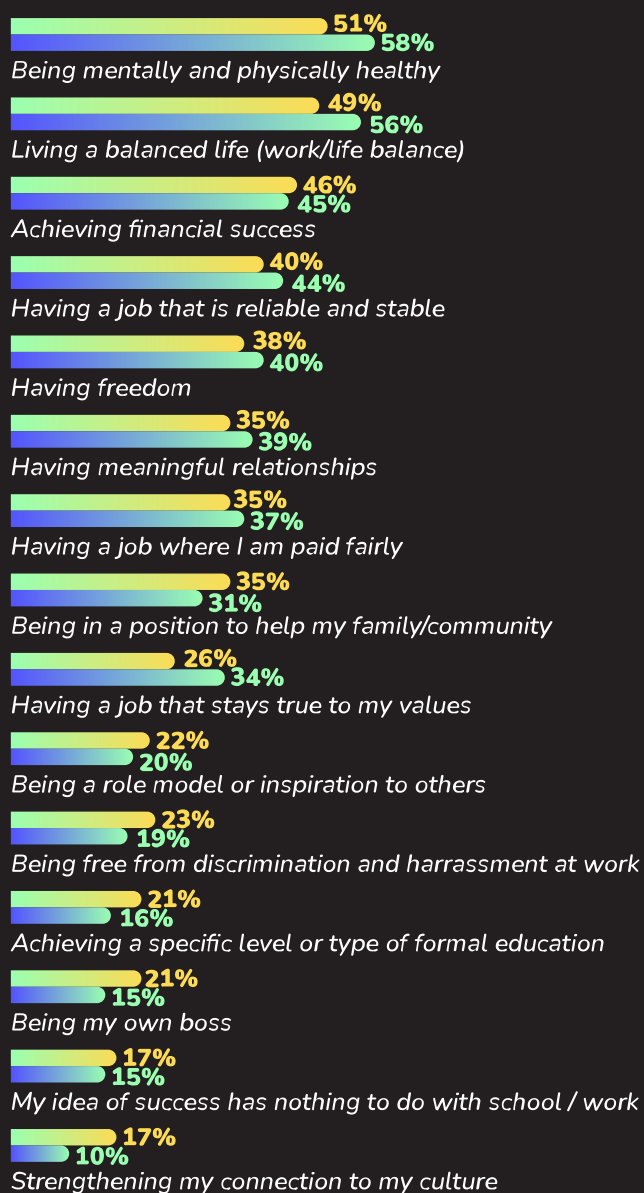
“If it was a perfect world, I wouldn’t have any schedule, and I’d just wake up and do what I wanted that day.”

This demonstrates how stability is often viewed as a stepping stone toward self-determination and well-being.

Racialized and white youth generally define success at school and work in similar ways

Racialized Youth (n=1618)

White Youth (n=1492)



(Findings from national survey with n=1618 racialized youth and n=1492 white youth)

Dedication to Social Impact

A notable finding was the deep commitment youth expressed toward making a difference in their communities. Many described social impact as central to their definition of success, with career and volunteer pathways shaped by lived experiences of racism and injustice. One youth explained her persistence in a predominantly white artistic field as a way to prove,

“It’s not just for white people. It’s not just for rich people, and it’s not for the educated either.”

Others described giving back as a lifelong practice, emphasizing the importance of keeping a “cycle of generosity” alive. Across stories, youth framed their dedication to social change as both a strength and a responsibility, reinforcing the idea that their vision of success extends far beyond individual achievement to collective well-being.

Skills & Strengths: Skills for Success & Beyond

Our research shows that racialized youth bring a wide range of strengths, many of which are cultivated outside formal education. **Youth in our national survey reported learning critical skills through life experience, family, and self-directed learning, with 21 per cent crediting mentors.** In interviews, youth identified skills such as communication, multilingual ability, and digital literacy as important skills, but also emphasized empathy, persistence, adaptability, and community building. As one youth reflected,

“If you let life happen to you it will be shitty. It takes energy to cultivate joy and opportunity... you need to cultivate your own joy.”

Resilience, Resourcefulness & Optimism

Mentoring stakeholders consistently highlighted the resilience and resourcefulness of BIPOC youth, developed in response to the need to navigate systemic racism and inequities. As one mentoring stakeholder explained, reflecting on their own experience as a racialized youth,

“It forces a racialized youth to become resourceful. We learn how to carve out our little space.”

Resilience, while “hard-won,” fuels empathy and strength, enabling youth to persist despite barriers. Importantly, mentors also observed a powerful optimism and commitment to change.

“It doesn’t stop them from being optimistic about the change that they can bring.”

This optimism, paired with adaptability, drives many youth to seek leadership roles, dream big, and contribute to social impact.

Lived Experiences

Racialized youth described life events such as immigration, growing up with financial insecurity, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as pivotal. Many spoke about navigating systemic racism and stereotypes, with one Black youth noting,

“from a very young age [as a Black girl] you’re made to feel like you need to be super aggressive... I wish that there was more space to just be little girls.”

Indigenous youth similarly described needing to “prove” themselves against ingrained stereotypes. Mentoring stakeholders emphasized that these lived experiences shape racialized youth into critical thinkers, deeply attuned to systemic barriers, because they have first-hand experiences of facing these barriers in their own lives. BIPOC youth often approach community work as a collective responsibility, combining critical awareness of systemic inequities with hope for social impact:

“We acknowledge that it’s not a great system, but we have some kind of faith and hope in the system.”

BIPOC survey respondents reported applying their resistance skills into action: 65 per cent of racialized survey respondents reported speaking up when they witness discrimination or racism and 64 per cent reported taking action to create a more equitable society. Respondents with mentoring experience were even more likely to use these skills.

Education and Work Experiences

Youth shared a wide range of experiences in education, highlighting the importance of supportive teachers, programs, and advocates. For some, individual teachers and academic advisors played pivotal roles:

“She reached out to me and did more than the bare minimum... she definitely made me feel like I could accomplish way more than I limited myself to.”

Others benefited from programs that opened doors, such as gifted programs or

specialized schools that provided mentorship, extracurricular opportunities, and a strong academic foundation. One youth reflected,

“Getting into that school changed the trajectory of my life... there were a lot of teachers there who really cared about me and made sure that I did well.”

At the same time, not all youth felt comfortable or supported in school. Some described schools as “just a place of education,” lacking safety for self-expression, while others faced outright racism and microaggressions from teachers and professors. A recurring theme was the pressure to excel academically, which led many to burnout, self-isolation, and anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic further deepened feelings of disconnection:

“I didn’t get the full high school experience... I had a big burnout phase. I think I isolated myself a lot when I was going through burnout.”

Youth described navigating part-time jobs, internships, and precarious work while balancing school and financial responsibilities. Early work experience was seen as formative:

“It taught me how to work with people... by then I knew how to deal with workplace conflict, how to file my taxes.”

Seventy-one percent of racialized youth surveyed reported high levels of career decision-making self-efficacy – their belief in their ability to complete tasks such as information gathering, planning, and problem-solving to make effective career decisions.

Decision-making around career paths often evolved with time, shaped by financial pressures, family expectations, and exposure to new opportunities. One youth explained,

“I don’t want to waste [university]... it was such a gift, and I still don’t know what I want to do with it. That’s my biggest struggle.”

Engagement in job searches was described as challenging and uneven. Youth reported relying on networks, internships, volunteering, and online platforms like LinkedIn, but also highlighted barriers such as unpaid labour and precarious contracts. Some shared experiences of racism in placement programs, underscoring gaps in support for racialized youth. Across these narratives, supportive managers played a critical role in shaping positive work trajectories by offering mentorship and clear guidance. As one youth put it,

“Not only is [my manager] thinking about what I could do now, he was already thinking about... in two years’ time, in five years’ time.”

Collectively, these experiences reveal how youth navigate complex decisions, shifting aspirations, and uneven opportunities in building their careers.

Where Mentors May Fit: Areas Where Racialized Youth Want Support

Mentorship as Complementary Support for Youth

Our research shows that mentorship does not replace existing supports in youth's lives but rather complements them. As one youth put it,

"I don't think there's ever going to be a time that I don't need a mentor. And I also don't think that every aspect of my life needs mentorship."

Youth need to be able to count on many sources of support and mentors to navigate the transition to adulthood. As one youth stated,

"support can come in many different forms and it's needed in many different aspects of life."

Youth described drawing on supportive teachers, managers, extended family, and especially peers when navigating education, work, and transitions. Friends often filled critical gaps, particularly for newcomer youth whose parents could not guide them through systems like post-secondary admissions. One young person recalled,

"My friends were giving me advice... like an IELTS versus a TOEFL [English proficiency tests], like which one would be better fit for you? My parents really have no idea. We were all kind of like new."

Older siblings, cousins, and even therapy—though often limited by cost—were also identified as essential sources of care and guidance.

Support from Family

Youth draw on family, cultural, and peer networks for support, grounding them in shared knowledge, motivation, and resilience. As one mentor noted,

"Family is such an important factor on their education... it can help drive their life and set them up really well for their future progress."

Parents played an important role in youth's journeys, though in different ways. Some guided their children toward education:

"One key decision that brought me to where I am today would be just focusing on school... my mom's emphasis on doing well in school... was very big for me."

Others, particularly newcomer parents unfamiliar with Canadian systems, sometimes provided freedom of choice but with limited direction, such as one youth who recalled their parents saying,

“You can do whatever you want... as long as it’s within home distance.”

While this lack of pressure allowed independence, youth sometimes wished for more structured guidance, especially as many parents themselves struggled with underrecognized credentials and difficult work transitions.

At the same time, mentors noted that BIPOC youth often face intense family and cultural expectations around education and career. Understanding these pressures is a crucial factor in understanding youth experiences, as they can shape decision-making, aspirations, and feelings of agency.

Our national survey data show that among racialized youth interested in mentorship, those whose parents have a high school education or below are slightly more likely to report wanting a mentor to help them develop resistance skills, compared to youth whose parents have post-secondary credentials. This finding underscores how parental educational background can shape mentorship needs and aspirations.

Social Media as a Way to Connect to Mentors

Social media offers BIPOC youth avenues to access mentorship and resources, often supplementing formal education. One youth noted,

“I learned like 90 per cent of my first-year content from YouTube videos, because professors were just not doing it for me.”

Indigenous and Black YouTubers also provided para-social mentorship, helping youth navigate post-secondary pathways:

“[YouTuber] shares very practical things about going to university [as a Black person]...that’s genuinely the person who changed my life.”

Social media also facilitates discovering programs, professional networking on platforms like LinkedIn, and peer connections, though youth caution about algorithmic impacts on mental health and the potential for shallow online interactions. Mentoring stakeholders echoed these benefits, emphasizing social media as a tool for broadening access, opening dialogue, and validating youth experiences, particularly for isolated BIPOC youth. One stakeholder explained,

“For young people having that online space has been really, really good.”

Discord and other platforms were used to engage youth through informal activities

while fostering connection. Yet, some mentors stressed that in-person engagement remains crucial for meaningful relationships.

Navigating Transitions & Career Decision-Making

Youth described struggling most during key transitions—finishing high school, entering post-secondary, moving away from home, and entering the labour market. These shifts often coincided with personal changes, such as managing finances, time, and independence, which could feel overwhelming. One youth reflected,

“Grade 11... that’s when it started to get really stressful for me because of university admissions... I was studying all the time.”

Others described early university years as difficult:

“I had too much freedom, no restrictions... in terms of academics, I was not prepared at all.”

Career transitions were equally challenging, from entering the workforce to navigating layoffs or promotions, highlighting the potential for mentorship to ease these stresses. Mentoring stakeholders emphasized strengthening career decision-making self-efficacy, especially for younger youth. They framed mentorship as helping youth “find purpose” and align with meaningful paths. As one noted,

“They can find purpose, a sense of responsibility and fulfillment... doing work they actually care about.”

Mentorship in Navigating Systems, Racism, and Identity

Mentoring stakeholders emphasized the importance of helping racialized youth navigate predominantly white institutions where they often feel invisible, alienated, or compelled to work “twice as hard” to be recognized.

“It hurts to exist in a structure that was not created for that person to thrive.”

Mentors can offer critical knowledge about systems—scholarships, work-study programs, immigration rules, or Canadian workplace norms—equipping youth with tools to succeed. Just as importantly, mentors provide space for youth to grapple with identity and belonging. Many described youth struggling to “fit in” without losing their “true self,” or facing stereotypes that undermine their confidence in interviews and workplaces.

“There’s a lot of work to be done to ensure that racialized youth feel safe, belong, and can reach for the stars.”

Racialized Youth's Experiences with Mentorship

The Value of Mentoring

Among racialized youth, mentorship is highly valued, particularly when mentors share professional interests, lived experiences, and values.

In our national survey, only 19 per cent of racialized youth without prior mentorship report no interest in having a mentor, compared to 28 per cent of white youth. Of those uninterested, more than half of racialized youth prefer to solve problems independently, while white youth most commonly feel they do not need a mentor.

Racialized youth are slightly more likely to experience mentoring compared to white youth:

- 59 per cent of BIPOC youth have had at least one mentor before the age of 18 compared to 52 per cent of white youth.
- 64 per cent of BIPOC young adults have had at least one mentor since turning 18 compared to 58 per cent of white youth.

A little less than one in five (18 per cent) of racialized young adults have participated in a formal mentoring program while the majority of youth with mentorship experience develop natural mentoring relationships with supportive adults and peers in their surroundings.

Importantly, nearly one-third of racialized youth do not have access to a single mentor, a significant gap considering the many benefits associated with mentorship that our study and many others found.

Qualities of Good Mentorship

Youth often defined mentorship in career terms.

“a mentor is someone who... uses their experiences and knowledge and connections and resources to help the mentee achieve their individual goals.”

At the same time, youth acknowledged the value of receiving mentorship focused on personal growth and emotional support. Good mentors were described as consistent, nonjudgmental, and committed, guiding rather than imposing and building trust by “just showing up.”

“In terms of being a successful mentor, I think she was really good at understanding what my goals were and rather than imposing like her ideas or goals, she would always listen to what I wanted to do, talk through all of my options and help me come to a conclusion as to what I should do next.”

Mentor-Mentee Matching

Shared understanding and trust between mentors and mentees were highlighted as essential, particularly for navigating systemic barriers and creating spaces where mentees can show their authentic selves. BIPOC mentors can reduce the emotional labour of explaining racialized experiences:

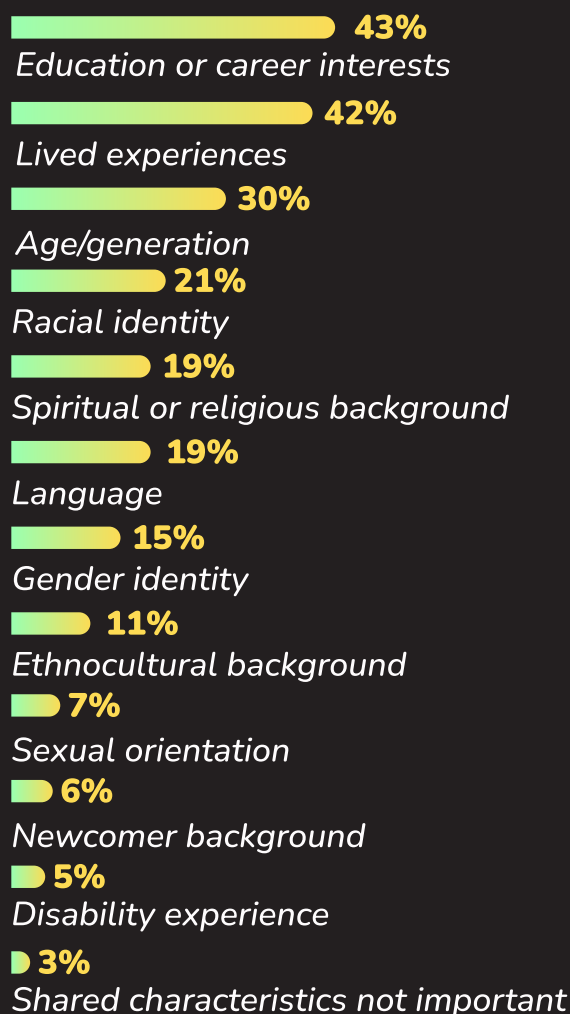
“I think a white mentor might not be able to...understand on the same level that a BIPOC one would.”

Shared racial or ethno-cultural background with mentors is also important for representation and helped youth imagine what is possible for their future.

While shared racial or cultural identity can foster trust and safety, youth emphasized that communities are heterogeneous, and effective mentorship is not solely defined by identity. Some noted that a mentor with a different background could still provide meaningful guidance,

“I don’t feel like it’s a big issue if you match with someone who’s not from your culture... I mean just because they look like me doesn’t mean they’re the best [mentor] for me

Shared professional interests and lived experiences are important identity markers of ideal mentors for racialized youth



(Finding from national survey with n=1618 racialized youth and n=1492 white youth)

... the [mentor-mentee matching] survey that we took kind of demonstrated that.”

Intersections of gender and class shape mentoring needs. Young women in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as STEM, benefit from gender-matched mentors who understand workplace challenges:

“All of my mentors have been female... they understand sort of the struggles and I don’t have to explain the whole thing.”

Mentors from differing socioeconomic backgrounds provide exposure to new networks and opportunities, helping youth navigate spaces previously inaccessible.

“I think it’s important that a good mentor is someone who can relate to you in some capacity.”

In addition to shared identities and lived experiences, professional connection remains a primary factor in mentor-mentee matching. Youth value alignment with career interests and a sense of personal connection:

“It’s just how I connect with [a mentor] too... it really is about the vibe.”

Effective mentorship balances professional alignment, shared values, trust, and understanding of systemic barriers. While racial, gender, or cultural matching can enhance support, mentors’ commitment, cultural humility, and ability to provide guidance and access to knowledge and opportunities remain key to fostering youth’s resilience, agency, and connection to both professional and community networks.

Racialized Youth’s Mentoring Priorities

Racialized youth in Canada prioritize mentorship primarily for career guidance, valuing mentors in the same field who can share expertise, job market insights, and practical support.

“Looking back at my journey, I think, yeah, a mentor would have actually helped me in making a fast decision about what I’m actually going to be doing after high school like, am I going for engineering or architecture?”

Career-focused mentorship is especially sought during periods of transition, including post-graduation or role changes, with youth seeking advice on time management, work-life balance, and navigating professional choices:

“As soon as I started working, post-graduation, I would have benefited from a mentor to help me with my career trajectory, having a consistent, successful person in my life to help me get on a good track.”

While mentorship is often career-oriented, some youth also desire socio-emotional support, connection, and validation, particularly if such support is lacking in family or peer networks.

“It would be nice to have someone to talk to more about just personal things... I think it would be good for me to have that.”

Youth emphasize the importance of maintaining boundaries, distinguishing mentorship from therapy, and sometimes seeking multiple mentors for different areas of life: professional, skill development, or racial/cultural identity development.

Mentorship can also address systemic inequities, providing access to opportunities, scholarships, and networks previously unavailable to BIPOC youth.

“I would want somebody who isn’t just like telling me what to do, but literally taking me to the doors that need to be open and unlocking them.”

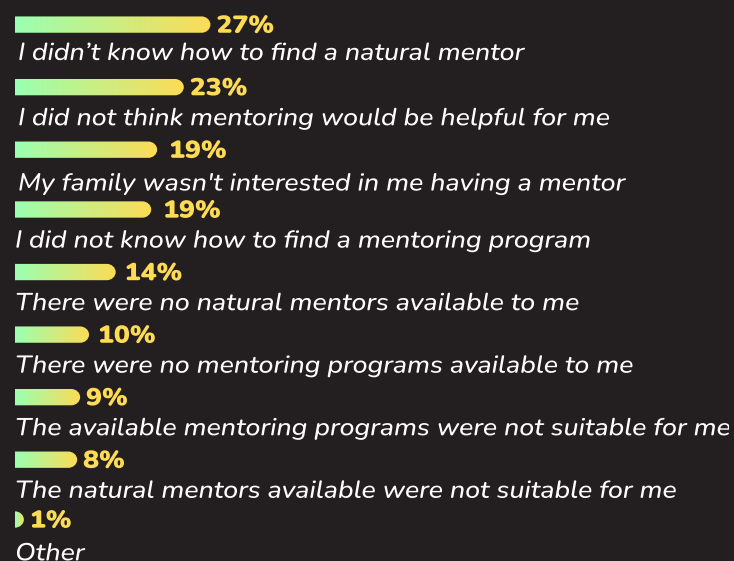
Skills development is a common goal, ranging from technical abilities like coding to communication and entrepreneurial competencies, often framed as a reciprocal exchange. Overall, mentorship for racialized youth serves as a crucial resource for career progression, skill-building, social networks, and access to opportunities while supporting personal growth and validation.

The Mentoring Gap: Barriers to Access

Despite widespread interest in mentoring, barriers are significant.

Our national survey data show that among racialized youth, 85 per cent reported at least one barrier, compared to 80 per cent of white youth. Common obstacles include not knowing how to find a natural mentor, uncertainty about program usefulness, family disinterest, and lack of awareness about mentoring programs.

Not knowing how to find a mentor is the most common difficulty reported by racialized youth in developing a mentor relationship



“I never knew of any mentorship opportunities...if there was the opportunity that knocked at my door, I think I would have asked my mom to be a part of it.”

Additional barriers include logistical challenges such as transportation, housing instability, lengthy application processes, and programs being inaccessible to older or working-class youth. Youth also cited social pressures and cultural stereotypes that made them hesitant to seek support, particularly in STEM contexts under the “model minority” myth.

Challenging and Negative Experiences

Some youth reported challenging or negative mentoring experiences, often tied to infrequent communication or a lack of meaningful connection. One youth explained,

“There wasn’t as [much] support that I would have liked...meetings weren’t frequent...and our communication through text...wasn’t great either.”

Some expressed hesitation toward mentorship when relationships felt inequitable or mentors appeared superior, emphasizing that mentorship should be a collaborative effort:

“I think it should just be a partnership.”

Others noted frustration when programs referred them to external services instead of offering in-house support, highlighting the need for integrated wrap-around resources.

Mentoring stakeholders highlighted systemic challenges in programs. Career-focused mentorship struggles to remain current in a rapidly evolving labour market. Funding cuts, particularly post-COVID-19, reduce program quality, increase waitlists, and contribute to mentor and administrator burnout. Volunteer mentors help, but limited screening and availability can compromise mentee-mentor matching. Racial representation among mentors is also difficult to ensure:

“We’d rather pair them with somebody that isn’t racialized than nobody at all.”

Programs also face barriers in youth awareness and engagement. Stipends, food, or other incentives are key to encouraging participation and reducing accessibility gaps. Overall, while mentorship offers substantial benefits, structural and relational challenges persist in delivering consistent, equitable, and effective support.

Impact of Mentoring on BIPOC Youth's Lives

What Mentors Support Youth With

Our national survey data show that over 90 per cent of racialized youth with mentors reported developing their adaptability, communication, and problem-solving skills with the help of their mentors, while 81 per cent gained digital literacy, compared to 68 per cent of white youth.

Mentors provided advice and guidance (87 per cent), helped racialized youth set and reach goals (84 per cent), and introduced youth to new experiences and opportunities (81 per cent).

BIPOC youth's mentors also provide practical support, including transportation or housing assistance (83 per cent vs. 75 per cent for white youth).

Youth with mentoring experience, whether through formal programs or informal relationships, reported receiving support in multiple areas, particularly career development. Mentors guided them through post-secondary applications, career pathways, job searches, resume building, interviews, and navigating workplace challenges.

"I feel like I hit the jackpot with my mentor...She connected me with so many people in different industries that I would have never considered."

Peer mentors were also valuable, helping newcomers navigate exams, course selections, and access resources. Mentorship extended beyond career guidance to cultural connection, mental health support, housing, artistic skills, team management, goal setting, and financial literacy.

Mentors supported the development of BIPOC youth's critical consciousness and skills to navigate discrimination and work for social change. Mentors provided a safe space for youth to process their experiences of discrimination (89 per cent), helped youth cultivate pride in their racial identity (85 per cent), helped them think critically about racism and injustice (85 per cent), and helped them take action for social change (77 per cent).

Mentors also helped youth understand systems and advocate for themselves and their communities. One mentoring stakeholder emphasized mentorship as a tool to "challenge these systems of oppression and racism," highlighting the importance of sponsorship:

“Who is willing to stick up for me? Like actually say your name when opportunities are discussed and you’re not there?”

Mentorship fostered critical thinking, independent learning, and community engagement.

Support for healthy coping and wellness was also crucial. Mentors encouraged social-emotional learning and guided youth away from unhealthy coping strategies, including excessive screen time, by introducing meditation, breathwork, and grounding exercises. One Indigenous mentor noted,

“Being strong, physically strong...The emotional and mental are almost on overload because of what we see on social media...let’s go pick medicine. Let’s go build a sweat. Let’s go make a fire...That could benefit their life immensely.”

Mentorship bolstered confidence and self-esteem, enabling youth to advocate, network, and perform professionally. Mentors addressed imposter syndrome and helped youth express themselves, particularly for English language learners. As one stakeholder explained,

“Confidence and knowledge...go hand in hand...The more knowledge you have about things, the more opportunities you have, the more confidence can build and grow.”

Role-playing and knowledge-building helped youth prepare for academic and professional interactions. Mentors also supported communication skills, from introductions and conveying ideas to navigating intergenerational differences. Trust-building allowed youth to feel comfortable sharing challenges. Networking and information-gathering were emphasized as key skills. Mentors taught youth to pursue opportunities and build connections, with one stakeholder noting,

“Sharing your story...asking people the right questions...‘I really want this opportunity, how can I get it?’”

Youth who developed these skills gained access to opportunities otherwise unavailable, sometimes even bypassing formal hiring processes.

How Youth Have Benefitted from Mentorship

Mentorship appears to hold significant benefits for racialized youth’s well-being, connectedness, and education and career journeys. Our national survey data show that racialized youth with mentorship experience—before or after age 18—are statistically more likely than their peers without mentoring experience to have excellent mental health, better overall wellbeing, higher resistance

capital to challenge inequity, greater social capital, and a stronger sense of belonging in their communities. Youth mentored before 18 also report better educational belonging, feeling able to speak up, ask for help, and be their authentic selves at school. Youth mentored before 18 are also more likely to be engaged in education or employment in early adulthood.

Interviews confirmed that mentorship had a profound impact on many youth, providing emotional support, encouragement, and guidance. One youth noted,

“I was one of the lucky ones who got a mentor...she would ask about my life... she was really helpful during those times in grade 12.”

Mentors helped youth navigate academic and career decisions, boost confidence, and validate feelings during transitions. Personal stories of resilience inspired mentees to “do it scared,” fostering self-trust, self-worth, and empowerment. Support extended beyond formal advice, offering encouragement, career opportunities, and personal growth. Mentorship helped youth make informed decisions aligned with their goals, build confidence, and develop emotional resilience, showing lasting positive effects on wellbeing, belonging, and personal development.

Overall Interpretations of Our Research Findings

Taken as a whole, our research findings inform a comprehensive understanding of an ongoing mentorship cycle for racialized young adults, recognizing that mentoring needs evolve across educational and career transitions. Central to this cycle is the acknowledgement that racialized youth bring valuable strengths, assets, and lived experiences of navigating systemic barriers. As Yosso (2005) argues, rather than viewing them through a deficit lens, these youths’ community cultural wealth—resilience, social networks, and aspirational capital—becomes a foundation for mentorship.

Access to mentorship depends on both opportunity and openness. Opportunities must be low-barrier and actively reach youth, while openness reflects courage in seeking support, often despite prior negative experiences with institutions (Weiston-Serdan, 2023). Youth emphasized choice in mentor matching, whether based on identity, lived experience, or professional background.

The mentoring experience is most impactful when youth-led and reciprocal, echoing literature on critical and culturally responsive mentoring (Hurd, 2024; Weiston-Serdan, 2023). Rather than prescriptive advice, mentors should support

youth in setting their own goals. Youth also viewed relationships holistically, encompassing career, personal, and cultural dimensions—challenging siloed approaches in traditional mentoring research (Eby et al., 2008).

Representation and trust are critical. Studies show racial similarity between mentor and mentee can foster trust and self-esteem (Sánchez et al., 2014; Garcia-Murillo et al., 2023). However, youth in our study also stressed that effective cross-identity mentorship is possible when mentors practice cultural humility and adopt anti-oppressive approaches (Albright, 2017). Trust emerges not only from shared identity but also from a mentor’s demonstrated commitment to equity.

Mentor training and screening are vital to prevent harm. Racial bias and unexamined privilege can damage relationships (Albright, 2017). Best practices emphasize anti-racist and decolonial training. Recent work suggests cultural humility—critically examining worldview and power—may be more effective than static notions of competence (Anderson & Sanchez, 2022). Youth in our study echoed the need for ongoing training for mentors and youth involvement in matching processes.

Program design should reflect youth input and community engagement. Critical Mentoring frameworks (Weiston-Serdan, 2023) highlight co-developing goals with youth, recruiting racialized staff, and embedding anti-oppressive training. Some youth may benefit from Youth-Initiated Mentoring (Schwartz et al., 2016), though this may not be as accessible for youth with fewer networks or lower trust. Youth also called for targeted programs, particularly for Black and Indigenous participants, as well as wrap-around supports and paid opportunities—reflecting systemic inequities in education and employment (Gowdy, 2022).

Finally, mentoring is cyclical: youth who benefit often become mentors themselves, creating continuity and reciprocity. However, the cycle carries risks: unmet needs, inaccessible opportunities, or harmful relationships can cause youth to disengage. Intentional outreach and flexible design are necessary to sustain the cycle and expand access. In sum, effective mentorship for racialized youth requires centering their voices, recognizing their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and embedding practices of reciprocity, representation, and structural accountability. By doing so, mentorship becomes not only a tool for individual growth but also a collective practice of belonging, resistance, and empowerment.

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Appendix: Research Methods

We began the project with a literature review and expert consultations. We heard about the importance of trust, cultural safety, and careful mentor training, as well as the risks of harm when these elements are absent. Experts talked about the structural conditions shaping youths' opportunities, including systemic racism, racial capitalism, and neoliberal ideals of "success." Racialized youth navigate these barriers through resilience strategies such as code-switching and advocacy, with intersectional identities—race, immigration status, and geography—shaping access to opportunities and mentoring. Together, these insights from the first phase of our project underscored the need for equity-focused, youth-centered approaches to mentoring that recognize and build on the strengths of racialized young adults.

In the next phase of research, we collected data through a national quantitative youth survey, followed by qualitative youth interviews, and mentoring stakeholder interviews. All research methods and protocols were reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Office in July 2024.

The youth survey was collaboratively developed by SRDC, Mentor Canada, and peer researchers, drawing on validated measures (e.g., Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, Flourishing Scale, SCALE Measures, and career adaptability tools) as well as new items reflecting themes of community cultural wealth and resistance capital (ability to challenge inequity). The 20-minute survey, available in English and French, covered six areas: demographics, school and work, skills, social networks, wellbeing, and mentoring. Recruitment was managed by Maru Matchbox, who invited 18–30-year-olds from their national panel to participate between July and August 2024. After data quality checks and weighting to Statistics Canada benchmarks, SRDC and a peer researcher analyzed the data using STATA.

For youth interviews, semi-structured guides were co-developed with peer researchers and focused on education, career experiences, and mentoring. Recruitment was conducted through a widely circulated screener (July–October 2024) distributed through Mentor Canada's network of partners. In total, 23 BIPOC youth participated in interviews, reflecting diverse geographies, identities, and mentoring experiences. Interview recruitment focused on the diverse range of experiences participants had, but the sample of qualitative participants is not considered representative. Interviews were conducted virtually and were peer-led and trauma-informed. Interviews transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted using Quirkos and NVivo.

Mentoring stakeholder interviews were conducted with 13 practitioners recruited through a similar screener and organizational outreach. These semi-structured interviews were also conducted virtually and analyzed using the same thematic coding approach

as the youth interviews. Stakeholders tended to speak both from their professional and personal experiences, with many mentoring stakeholders also self-identifying as racialized themselves.

Our research team conducted an initial analysis of the research data and then facilitated two interactive workshops with advisors, experts and previous participants (n=22) to further validate and contextualize our analysis and co-develop our final interpretations of the study's findings. On the whole, this mixed-methods, participatory research provides a comprehensive understanding of mentoring for racialized youth in Canada. In the following section, we present overall findings.