***Design and Delivery of an Ideal Mentoring Program: From Insight to Action***




# Unlocking Doors:

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

Mentor Canada

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***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.***

# Introduction

The Unlocking Doors mixed-methods research project, conducted in partnership between the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Mentor Canada, explored how mentoring can strengthen skills and support career development among racialized young adults aged 18-30. For the qualitative portion of the study, we interviewed 23 Black, Indigenous, and young adults of colour (also termed BIPOC young adults, for short), and 13 mentor stakeholders, many of whom also identified as racialized.

Both youth and mentor stakeholder interviewees were asked to describe what an ideal mentoring experience would be like. To do so, they reflected on their actual mentoring experiences – what they liked and did not like – and imagined new and innovative ideas for programs that they would hope to experience if they could.

This practical guide translates these research findings into clear, actionable steps for designing or adapting a mentoring program. It provides evidence-based recommendations on how to structure mentoring programs to best serve racialized young adults and ensure they strengthen skills for success and access meaningful opportunities. We also show where youth and mentor stakeholders converge and differ in relation to designing future mentorship experiences for racialized young adults. Although there is much overlap in ideal visions of mentoring, the variety of descriptions shared highlights how there is no one-size-fits-all approach; different youth value different things at different times in their lives. Thus, having a variety of mentoring options to choose from helps ensure that everyone finds something that serves them well on their current path.

## *Notes on Terminology*

Using racialization as a concept denotes the social process through which certain bodies are read as 'having race,' and that race is a socially constructed concept, but that it also profoundly impacts people's lived experiences and sense of identity. We recognize the limits of using the racialized as a term, as well as 'BIPOC'; these terms can lack specificity and risk erasure or conflation of distinct identities and experiences. However, we did find that study participants used both terms – 'racialized' and 'BIPOC' – to self-identify. Throughout the study and in our analysis, the research team worked to be attuned to the realities of young adults' lived experiences, racial identities and experiences with racism, including the specific ways anti-Indigenous racism and anti-Black racism operate. Our goal was to centre the lived experiences and voices of Black youth, Indigenous youth and youth of colour. Through the study, including this guide, we hope to inform the work of mentoring organizations, employers, and educators who develop and deliver programs and policies for these groups of young adults.

# Mentorship Needs to Come to BIPOC Youth

Many youth are simply unaware of mentorship opportunities and what mentorship can help with at the times they need it most. Interview participants highlighted the barriers that prevent BIPOC youth from seeking mentorship, including fear of rejection, lack of trust, and deeply ingrained social expectations that discourage them from asking for help.

Many youth shared that they do not know who to turn to or how to ask for support. Some attributed this hesitation to being 'shy', or from not feeling safe or knowing who to trust due to their experiences in predominantly white institutions. One youth participant reflected on how family dynamics played a role in this mindset, explaining that they were actively discouraged from seeking help and instead taught to figure everything out on their own. This sentiment was reinforced by others who felt the pressure to be self-sufficient, not always due to a lack of confidence, but because they had learned over time that asking for help does not always lead to support.

Structural factors also contribute to this hesitancy. Many youth recognized that systems of racism and marginalization shape their experiences, making them wary of mentorship programs that are not specifically designed for them. This cyclical nature of racism affects how young people navigate their environment, leading some to wear a mask to avoid further discrimination, but this masking also makes it harder to connect with opportunities and mentors.

Mentor stakeholders agreed that BIPOC youth can find asking for help to be overwhelming and scary, based on lived experiences navigating racially hostile systems and environments.

> ***Just making that ask takes a whole lot of confidence... that mental barrier.***

Programs need to have simple admissions processes and be as low barrier as possible for youth to enter, recognizing that many youth feel burned out and struggle to connect.

> *"They're tired. Like, why would I go to one more meeting? Why would I sign off for one more thing? I just want to zone out. I'm so tired. That fatigue. Which is weird because they want more connection, connection makes you feel better, but then people are so tired that you don't feel connected."*

> *"[The youth] was so worried signing up for this program because it's another commitment [they are] taking on, and [they were] glad to not have it become a burden, but an addition."*

Learning how to approach and connect to a potential mentor to establish an informal mentoring relationship is a skill that youth can be taught and is empowering. Mentor stakeholders shared that youth should be introduced to mentoring early, ideally in high school, and provided with direct opportunities to develop help-seeking skills, through workshops, networking events, or career coaching classes that introduce the concept of mentoring and normalize and teach the process of connecting with mentors. Sharing real world stories of youth who successfully connect to informal mentors can reduce the intimidation youth may feel.

> ***Last week I attended a conference and I saw a presenter there and I approached her and she's a woman of colour too. And when she was sharing her story, it really resonated with me how she navigated workspaces. So I approached her and I asked her if there's any way we can have a virtual coffee chat, just so I can get some ideas.***

**It is well documented that Black youth experience being steered into 'applied' programs in school, limiting their academic and career opportunities** *(Paragg 2023; Shiza et al., 2020). Similarly, societal biases often lead to different interpretations of youth's 'shy' or 'quiet' behavior: shyness is racialized and based in racist tropes (e.g., Asian youth's shyness is viewed 'cultural'; Black youth are misdiagnosed with 'learning disabilities'; Indigenous youth 'lack motivation').*

**To bridge this gap, mentorship needs to be proactive rather than passive. Instead of waiting for racialized youth to seek help**, *programs should actively reach out to BIPOC youth and be structured in ways that recognize historical and systemic barriers. Therefore, a targeted approach that recognizes what happens to BIPOC youth in systemically racist and predominantly white institutions is needed. This can be framed as another a key aspect of cultural humility (Fisher-Borne et al. 2015) – understanding the experiences of BIPOC youth in white settler societies (e.g., being humble about white settler culture and its limitations). Further, this approach needs to be one that does not place the burden on racialized youth to overcome deeply ingrained barriers alone but instead meets them where they are and provides them with the tools to navigate spaces that have excluded them.*

Some mentor stakeholders talked about the importance of connecting to family as well as to youth. Ideal mentorship programs would appeal to parents/family directly, to show them that their children will get career development support through mentorship that they may not otherwise have access to. Parents can benefit from support and recognizing that they are not alone in carrying the burden of helping their children navigate Canadian systems. Mentoring programs can also extend some of the same supports that youth receive to parents and/ or family, so that they also have access to educational and career development opportunities when needed.

*"Letting parents become aware of the skills, the knowledge that their children have or will acquire through such a program because they have somebody else who has gone through the system, understands a lot and can help them navigate. So it's not just having the racialized youth to sign on to the program, but parents also getting the knowledge that if you can't support your child in career development just because you come from a particular race or you're immigrants and you don't know the way, make use of this program. Enroll your children in this program. So I think that that can also help where it's not only focused on the youth but opportunity for adults, seniors, whoever it is family members to get access to some of these programs and just to let them know that they don't have to carry the burden of helping their children or their family members settle into Canada when they have no knowledge. When they themselves don't know how to even settle in Canada, it's up to certain programs or institutions to handle that. So I think that's the last thing I would say that on a wider or in a general sense, such a program has the potential of changing and breaking down a lot of stereotypes. It has the potential of changing how, as a society, we think of certain people from certain racial backgrounds, we would be more welcoming of them if education we give them is also given to those who are closest to them."*

## Timing of Mentorship Matters: Needed at Key Life Transition Points

Youth shared that mentorship is most needed, and therefore most impactful, when it aligns with key life transitions, providing guidance and reassurance when youth face uncertainty or major changes. Interview participants stressed that mentoring should not only be available but also accessible at the right time, such as during educational shifts, career advancements, and/or personal development milestones.

Both youth and mentor stakeholders agreed that early interactions, such as mentorship programs introduced in elementary, high school, or the early stages of post-secondary education, could help youth navigate challenges like understanding application processes, financial aid, and letters of recommendation. It would also allow students to develop key career and life skills early on, ensuring they are better prepared for post-secondary education and the workforce.

Multiple participants reflected on the barriers they faced when applying to post-secondary, including difficulties in understanding institutional systems and accessing the right support to prepare application materials.

Some youth were of the view that offering mentorship on campus in post-secondary settings could help remove logistical barriers such as scheduling conflicts and transportation challenges, making it easier for more students to participate. By integrating mentorship into academic environments, programs can provide structured support at critical stages, ensuring that guidance is available when students need it most.

# Program Characteristics

## Long Term

Youth noted that a key characteristic of an ideal mentorship program is its ability to provide long-term support rather than a single meeting or short-term engagement. Many youth expressed the need for mentors who remain present throughout different stages of their journey, offering consistent guidance as they navigate career, education, and personal growth.

> ***I think a mentor has to be slightly more longitudinal. Where they're part of your life and helping you for a longer amount of time instead of just like a one-time meeting.***

This perspective pinpoints the value of mentorship as an ongoing relationship, one that evolves over time, allowing mentors to provide personalized support, encouragement, and insight as mentees face new challenges and opportunities.

A structured, long-term mentorship model ensures that youth receive continuous guidance, helping them build confidence and develop resilience strategies as they work toward their goals.

Similarly, mentor stakeholders envision an ideal mentoring program that is holistic and responsive to the fact that BIPOC youth hold multiple intersecting identities that influence how they live and navigate the world around them. Mentoring programs should offer opportunities to create and develop a range of skills in different parts of youth's lives, recognizing how career, personal, and relational aspects of youth's lives are interwoven.

## Safer Space

One recurring theme that emerged from youth was the importance of mentors creating a safer and supportive environment where youth could freely express themselves without fear of judgment. One youth spoke about the need for trust-building between mentors and mentees, emphasizing that mentorship should include opportunities for social connection and personal development. They described an ideal program as one where they could "feel heard, seen, [and] validated," reinforcing the idea that mentorship should foster both emotional and practical support.

The ability to discuss personal and systemic challenges without stigma was also seen as essential. One newcomer youth reflected on the difficulties of supporting family back home, sharing that many people do not fully understand the weight of this responsibility. They stressed the importance of a space where financial struggles could be openly

discussed without judgment or harmful assumptions. Another youth envisioned a mentorship program tailored to racialized youth who face unique systemic barriers, as shared cultural or lived experiences may create a greater sense of belonging and understanding amongst peers. For many BIPOC youth, mentorship should go beyond solely providing career advice, offering a space where youth feel truly seen, supported, and empowered in navigating both personal and structural challenges.

> ***Just a supportive program where I just feel heard, seen, validated, this is a safe space.***

## Experiential Learning

Opportunities to explore different career pathways through hands-on experiences were also seen as important aspects of mentorship programs. Some youth emphasized the value of being able to "try on" different roles before making long-term commitments. One youth shared how volunteering, internships, and job shadowing can provide them with a chance to sample different career options, helping them make more informed decisions about their future.

Gaining firsthand exposure to various industries and fields can make youth feel more confident in selecting educational and career paths that align with their interests and strengths. As such, practical experiences can be seen as a bridge between academic learning and professional development, making career choices feel less overwhelming and more intentional.

Mentor stakeholders also emphasized the importance of experiential learning for BIPOC youth. They suggested that an ideal mentoring program would include opportunities for work placements, so that youth can gain workplace experience, practice applying their skills at work, and receive pay.

> *"Creating that environment where they can actually do and try different things while being mentored and coached as they do it provides constructive feedback to see what they do well and where they need to improve. That would be ideal mentorship."*

## Flexibility

Several youth underlined the importance of flexibility in mentorship programs, recognizing that BIPOC youth may be balancing work, school, family, and community commitments. A structured yet adaptable program was seen as essential to ensuring that mentorship remains accessible to a diverse range of participants. Mentor stakeholders also discussed the value of a structured but flexible curriculum that can be adapted and customized for the wants and needs of the mentee. They suggested the importance of variety in terms of the topic areas and types of support addressed, with a mixture of

group and one-on-one mentoring, and different types of mentors available. Programs could help youth build a team of mentors for themselves to meet their unique needs.

There's so many nuances that have to be captured. Get as many [mentors] as possible on board based on their knowledge, experiences, academic background, professional experiences. Offer multifaceted programming.

Some youth envisioned a model that includes mandatory in-person gatherings held at intervals, ensuring meaningful connections are maintained while allowing mentees to engage at a pace that fits their schedules. Between these sessions, optional career and personal development workshops such as resume building or interview practice could be offered with both in-person and virtual attendance options.

Others emphasized the need for mentorship opportunities to be available outside of traditional working hours, particularly on weekends or during school breaks. Virtual mentorship options were also seen as valuable, providing greater accessibility for those who may not always be able to attend in person. By offering a range of engagement opportunities, mentorship programs can be more inclusive and responsive to the realities of young people's lives.

Flexibility was also emphasized through highlighting the importance of mentees being able to switch mentors without judgement if a pairing turned out to not be the right fit.

## *Less Formal*

Several youth expressed a preference for less structured, more casual mentoring arrangements, finding that an informal approach can foster stronger connections and reduce pressure. They described informal **less structured** mentorship as a space where they could feel more at ease, build relationships organically, and engage in meaningful conversations without rigid expectations.

Some youth felt that shared backgrounds and familiar professional interests made natural or informal mentorship even more effective, as it allowed for quicker rapport and a more natural exchange of experiences. Others noted that highly structured mentorship programs could feel intimidating or restrictive, making it harder to open up and fully engage.

## *Wrap-around Supports*

For many youth, ideal mentorship goes beyond one-on-one relationships and should include additional resources in the form of practical supports that can help them fully engage in the program. Some youth stated that unreliable or costly transportation can be a major barrier to consistent participation in mentorship activities. Offering financial supports for commuting costs or providing easily accessible meeting locations could help remove these challenges. Others stressed the importance of funding for skill-building opportunities, such as paid internships or professional development workshops, to make mentorship more equitable. By addressing these logistical and financial

barriers, mentorship programs can create a more inclusive environment where all youth regardless of background or resource access can fully benefit from the support and opportunities provided.

## *BIPOC Focused*

For many youth, mentorship programs designed with the specific experiences of BIPOC individuals in mind were crucial. Participants highlighted the need for scholarships, specialized funding, and targeted opportunities to help counteract the discouraging messages they have often received about their career aspirations. Mentor stakeholders also emphasized the value of creating a tailored mentoring experience for individual youth, noting they "need fine-tuned, tailored support – generalized support does not work at all".

Some youth envisioned mentorship programs that provide hands-on learning experiences, such as access to labs or industry-specific training, particularly for those who have been discouraged from pursuing certain fields. Creating spaces where BIPOC youth can explore their interests without barriers or bias was seen as an essential step toward increasing representation and access to opportunities.

A mentorship model that actively acknowledges and works to addresses systemic challenges can help youth build confidence, gain exposure to new possibilities, and feel supported in breaking into fields where they are underrepresented.

Some youth highlighted the value of being surrounded by peers from similar backgrounds, which can create a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. One participant described how cultural connections with fellow mentees fosters a "we're all in this together" mindset, making it easier to navigate shared struggles. Others felt that mentorship programs specifically designed for racialized youth would better address the systemic barriers they face, offering guidance that is both relevant and empowering. For some, mentorship programs that cater to specific cultural communities were also seen as more appealing than general initiatives. They believed that having mentors and peers who truly understand their experiences could make mentorship feel more meaningful, relatable, and impactful.

Some mentor stakeholders also suggested that mentoring programs should offer BIPOC youth chances to learn and connect to culture. An Indigenous mentor stakeholder said that an ideal program would involve an Elder and include cultural ceremony.

> ***"Youth may have never had an older person outside of family to teach culture.***

## Group vs. One-on-one Mentoring

Some youth found that one-on-one mentorship provided a deeper, more personal connection, making it easier to open up and build meaningful relationships. One participant reflected on their experience in larger group settings, explaining that they sometimes felt the need to "blend into the wall" rather than actively participate. They shared that smaller groups or individual mentorship allowed them to "be [their] own person, develop those kinds of bonds, and feel more comfortable standing out." At the same time, others valued the sense of community fostered in group mentorship.

Multiple youth found value in mentorship programs that bring peers together, creating a sense of community and shared experience. They described how interacting with others on a similar journey, especially those with shared racial and/or ethno-cultural backgrounds, helps build connections and foster mutual understanding. One youth reflected that BIPOC youth are on the same path together, explaining that group-based mentorship makes it easier to relate to one another and support common goals. Being surrounded with peers facing similar challenges provided a source of encouragement and shared learning. As such, group settings were seen as beneficial for building networks, exchanging experiences, and gaining diverse perspectives.

## Streamlined Platform

For mentorship programs with an online component, participants stressed the importance of a well-organized and user-friendly platform to ensure accessibility and engagement. They noted that a clear, easy-to-navigate system would help facilitate communication between mentors and mentees, making the experience more effective.

A structured yet flexible digital space was seen as essential for keeping participants connected, particularly for those balancing school, work, and other responsibilities. Having a centralized hub for scheduling meetings, accessing resources, and tracking progress would help mentorship remain efficient and convenient while still fostering meaningful relationships.

## Mentor Appreciation

Several mentor stakeholders discussed the importance of mentor appreciation. In an ideal mentoring program, mentors would receive a certificate or a letter of appreciation as a way of expressing gratitude, showing respect for mentors' time, and supporting their career advancement – "something they can add to their profile."

> ***"As a mentor, if you're putting in time, you also need some sort of acknowledgement and you know recognition for your time too, because obviously my time is very precious.***

## Evaluation

Mentor stakeholders recognized the importance of incorporating evaluation into an ideal mentoring program, as a way of improving transparency and accountability. One stakeholder said programs should assess mentee satisfaction. Another said that it would be helpful to check in with mentors and mentees on a regular basis to monitor the mentoring activities that had (and had not) taken place.

# What Makes an Ideal Mentor

Many youth acknowledged that while shared identity can be meaningful, the quality of mentorship ultimately matters most. A supportive, knowledgeable, and understanding mentor regardless of background can provide valuable guidance. For many, the key was ensuring that mentors practice cultural humility, understand and hold frameworks like decolonization and anti-racism, and are equipped to support diverse experiences, allowing mentees to feel seen and understood in their personal and professional journeys.

Mentor stakeholders described mentors as guides and role models who are non-judgemental and believe in the youth they mentor.

> *"[Mentors are] people who can encourage you and champion you and believe in you."*

> *"We provide reading and math tutoring, but the heart of what we do is giving kids encouragement and giving them a role model... To say 'you can do this, I believe in you, you should believe in yourself too.'"*

One mentor stakeholder emphasized the importance of mentorship as a "casual relationship" so that youth do not feel like their mentor is "another person I have to try to impress."

## Peer-to-peer

Many youth expressed a strong preference for mentors who are close in age or at a similar life stage, as this can make mentorship feel more relatable and accessible. One youth shared that having a peer leader or someone who has recently graduated was particularly valuable, as their experiences were still fresh and directly relevant. Another youth expanded on this idea, noting that being surrounded by peers who are navigating similar problems fosters a greater sense of unity and mutual understanding. Having mentors who can relate to their current struggles, whether academic, professional, or personal, makes the mentorship experience feel more authentic and engaging.

## Reliable and consistent

Ideal mentors are described as being reliable and consistent to their mentees,

demonstrating through their actions that they are equally as invested in the mentoring relationship and respect mentees' time. This includes responding to mentees in a timely manner, scheduling regular meetings while remaining flexible to accommodate youth's schedules, and proactively checking in, all key to building trust over time. Mentor stakeholders said ideal mentors demonstrate professionalism and strong organizational skills.

> ***"Just being there without being prompted, checking in, everyone having that consistency.***

## Empathy

Mentor stakeholders emphasized that ideal mentors show empathy towards their metees by being an active listener, showing compassion and being patient. One mentor stakeholder explained that empathy is a skill, as well as a choice and decision. Mentors can demonstrate empathy by being responsive and open to their mentee's goals, while also finding opportunities to 'kindly push' youth toward their goals.

## Safer space and trust

Some youth participants expressed that having mentors who share their racial or cultural background can create a greater sense of comfort, trust, and relatability. Seeing mentors with similar lived experiences was viewed as beneficial in fostering deeper connections and providing guidance that resonates with the realities BIPOC youth navigate.

Mentor stakeholders noted that ideal mentors should foster safe, inclusive, identity-affirming spaces for their mentees to feel comfortable, understood, and supported throughout the mentorship process. Mentees should feel safe to self-direct meetings with their mentors and choose how often to meet. Mentors should provide guidance and support to youth as they engage in decision-making, rather than directly advising mentees on what to do. They should ask youth's permission before providing constructive feedback, and always couple their feedback alongside positive, uplifting messages of encouragement. Safer spaces allow conversations to feel nurturing and healing and can be a chance for mentees to practice new skills in a safer environment with someone that they trust.

> *"We're providing kind of a safe space for them to talk about [their values] and be themselves and share their stories, where other professional environments may not make them feel as comfortable in doing so. And they might feel like they have to hide their true opinions or their true motivations. Their stories might not feel totally appropriate in all professional contexts. But in this one, they're encouraged to talk about that. You might not be able to talk about how you felt discriminated against at your place of work with your professor or someone you worked with in the past. But you could do it with a mentor who specifically is matched with you through*

*the social justice mentorship program, right? That feels like a safer space to share those stories."*

One Indigenous mentor stakeholder talked about the importance of engaging in cultural practices such as smudging as a way of "setting the tone" for mentorship and fostering a safer space. This stakeholder recognized the importance of helping youth to be at peace with themselves. Offering a space to talk about and connect around identity can be cathartic for BIPOC youth as they come to recognize how identity impacts their life experiences.

Mentor stakeholders further shared that an ideal mentor should be a relatable person that the youth can see themselves being in the near future. Mentors should be willing to share both successes and their failures, and how they overcame them. Mentors need to be willing to open up and show that they are also human, and that making mistakes is normal. This is particularly important as many BIPOC youth feel pressure to achieve perfection. Conversations about failure in a safer space can alleviate stigma in a powerful way.

*"The standard to be perfect is common in racialized communities. [Mentors] talk through their mistakes as an opportunity for learning."*

> ***As mentors, role modeling what it's like to show up as ourselves.***

Mentor stakeholders saw trust as a key part of curating a safer space for youth. Mentors must be trustworthy and must ensure that the information youth share with them is kept in confidence. Trust can be built over time by engaging in reciprocity, meeting youth as equals, and getting to know youth on a personal level.

> ***Youth need to trust you. You need to be trustworthy for me to be my authentic self with you.***

*"In the initial session I just told [the youth] that we're not talking business over here. I just want to know you as a person, who you are. Take me as a friend. We are an equal partner in this because it's not that I'm your boss or I'm your leader. I'm nothing like that. I'm your friend and I'm just here to help you and support you. Listening to their journey, who they are in their personal life, who they are in their professional life. What are their goals? What are their aims? What do they want to achieve? What are their hobbies? It's about getting to know them first and then establishing their goals and figuring out what they want to achieve and what can I do to help them achieve that."*

# *Ideal Approach to Training*

Youth emphasized the need for mentors to be well-prepared to support youth from diverse backgrounds and experiences. They highlighted the importance of equipping mentors with the knowledge and skills to practice cultural humility, navigate mental health challenges, and confront the systemic barriers that BIPOC youth face. Without this foundation, mentorship can feel disconnected or ineffective. Several youth stressed that well-trained mentors are better able to offer meaningful, tailored guidance rather than broad, generic advice. Ensuring that mentors receive proper training allows them to foster stronger relationships, provide relevant support, and create a more inclusive and impactful mentorship experience.

Mentor stakeholders also recognized the value of training for both mentors and mentees in an ideal mentoring program. Opportunities for training and development should be available throughout the mentoring program, whether through professional development workshops, cultural learning experiences, or convening events. Mentor stakeholders recognized the value in offering mentors chances to connect with and learn from each other.

Mentor stakeholders emphasized the importance of specific, focused learning opportunities,such as an Indigenous mentoring summit or a training event focused on youth in care. Mentors need time and space to engage with these training topics, because "there is no shortcut to understanding that experience." Training and learning cannot be seen as a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process to actively engage with over time, with no quick fixes.

> *"I think the expectation, the expectation that we're just going learn something, come up with that thing and then fix a thing that's not really how this works.... It's a continuum of adaptation, calibration, and evolution."*

Several mentor stakeholders said that mentees can also benefit from training in an ideal mentorship program. Training can help foster a mutual understanding between mentors and mentees on what a mentorship program/relationship entails, recognizing that mentorship is a time commitment with responsibilities on both sides. If mentors and mentees are going to commit to a program in full, and not break the relationship or drop out, they need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to build and maintain a successful relationship.

> *"I think from a mentor side and a mentee side, it can be a large time commitment and it may not always click instantly and it is something you have to work on and build on and skill-building does take time and energy, so I think it is from both sides a time investment."*

# Mentor-Mentee Matching

A carefully designed mentor-mentee pairing process stood out as another key aspect of an effective mentoring program, with several youth noting the importance of aligning both professional and personal interests. Foundationally, mentor stakeholders also felt that mentoring for BIPOC youth should "offer a connection built on shared identity and shared values."

One youth described a mentor-mentee matching survey that they filled out as part of a program that was mostly career-focused. They were surprised at how accurate the survey was, and said it helped to set the foundation for a beneficial mentoring relationship. They also noted that having a mentor from a different field was not necessarily a disadvantage, as long as there was enough common ground to foster meaningful connections.

Other youth stressed the importance of keeping the matching process simple and accessible. One youth recommended, "don't have a confusing matching process," highlighting the need for clarity and ease of use. Another youth suggested that matching should go beyond just career objectives, incorporating shared hobbies or personal goals. They envisioned a process where mentors and mentees could connect not only through professional aspirations but also through common interests such as the arts, strategies for managing stress, or exploring cultural communities in Canada.

Mentor stakeholders offered some insights into the ideal approach to mentor-mentee matching. One mentor stakeholder commented that ideally, a team of people would be available to dedicate time and effort to ensuring a successful match – that the matching element was so important to get right and also very difficult. Other mentor stakeholders said that in an ideal program, a selection of mentors would be available so that youth could be matched based on the criteria that mattered most to them. One mentor stakeholder noted that youth often seek a same-gender match.

Several mentor stakeholders emphasized that an ideal mentoring program for BIPOC youth would include BIPOC mentors and staff, bringing an important element of relatability, connectedness, and understanding of systemic barriers.

> *"When you work with others who share a similar background, you can relate for [to] a lot of things and that makes you stronger and you're also able to see gaps in the system a lot better."*

> *"I think the biggest strength that comes from having racialized folks in these mentoring positions or even in our staff positions is that they bring to the table lived experience and they have a better relationship with peers from a similar background and also with peers from a different background, from different cultures, but the shared similarities of that lived experience. It's a cultural barrier or a cultural difference than a 'non-racialized person' would have. It brings to the*

*table an added layer of connectedness that a mentor can have with their mentee."*

One Indigenous mentor stakeholder talked about the importance of mentor-mentee matching for Indigenous youth, while also noting that they encourage youth to find value in any relationship they have.

> *"I try to tell young people, every teacher will teach you something. Every person will teach you something. And you don't always have to embrace those teachings, if it's not working for you, leave it there. But somehow, it enhances your life. Embrace it."*

## BIPOC Mentees as Active Participants and Co-Designers

Mentorship works best when it is built on mutual engagement, where mentees play an active role in shaping their experience rather than just receiving advice. Youth expressed that mentorship should be a process where they feel genuinely seen and supported, rather than a one-way relationship where guidance is given without understanding their specific needs.

> *"A mentor to me is someone that could not only see your potential but believe that you could overcome [barriers]. And not only with platitudes but actually give you concrete advice that's specific enough to your circumstances. It's not just general things that they have probably heard from [somewhere else] like, 'you can do it.' [It's more] that they see you and then, to the best of their ability, help you move past where you're stuck"*

Mentorship should be personalized, intentional, and responsive to the realities that BIPOC youth navigate. Generic motivation is not enough: mentees want mentors who are invested in their growth and willing to offer specific, actionable guidance that reflects their lived experiences.

Additionally, BIPOC youth interviewees shared that mentees should have agency in shaping their mentorship experience, from choosing mentors who align with their needs to having input on how the mentoring relationship is structured. Rather than a top-down dynamic, an ideal mentorship program would create a space where youth feel empowered to voice their concerns, set their own goals, and take an active role in their personal and professional development. When youth have a direct role in shaping mentorship programs, it helps ensure that these programs reflect the needs and priorities of those who they are meant to support. As a result, programs remain relevant, adaptable, and better aligned with the real needs and aspirations of the mentees they serve.

Mentor stakeholders also recognized the importance of involving youth in multiple aspects of the design and delivery of mentoring initiatives. In an ideal mentoring program,

youth would be asked for their feedback about what they want from the mentorship experience. There would be space for mentees to choose from among various options for mentoring activities, and to suggest their own ideas for mentoring activities too. Youth would also be involved in actively choosing who their mentor would be.

> ***Youth getting together and discussing what they want and being open about it... and even bringing up for example, here's a plan of what we hope to accomplish in these eight [mentoring] sessions. Is this what you're looking for? What feedback do you have?***

One mentor stakeholder talked about the value that youth advisors bring to mentoring programs.

> *"A lot of our projects and programs have advisors and so we are very intentional on having young folks join us as community advisors, which they get a paid honorarium for, to support the design and development of the research project or the program that we're launching or the conference and events, so they can really have an informative take on what that should look like, espcially for it's an audience that's very connected to their to their identity and their age range."*

## Conclusion

Through this guide, we provided a summary of the most important practical recommendations that emerged from our qualitative research interviews with youth and mentor stakeholders, related to designing and delivering an ideal mentoring program for racialized youth.

Taken as a whole, these recommendations are a reminder to policymakers and practitioners that there is nothing 'wrong' with youth if they are not pursuing or responding to mentoring. There are broader reasons that BIPOC youth may not actively seek out opportunities (e.g., not being made to feel safe, having previous negative experiences), and it takes great vulnerability and courage for youth when they do reach out. Programs should make it as easy as possible for youth to access them and engage in active outreach to youth, as well as create opportunities for reciprocity. Youth may be more willing to take up mentoring opportunities if they see it as an opportunity to give back or an opportunity to volunteer their own skills to help others. Framing programs as mutually empowering could be a key strategy for engaging BIPOC youth.

In the survey portion of our overall research study (more information on how to access those findings below), we found that nearly one-third of racialized youth have never

had access to a single mentor. However, 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. Further, as mentioned above, many racialized youth self-described as 'shy' and hesitant to seek help, and also felt ashamed of feeling this way. Instead of thinking of 'shyness' as an inherent characteristic, we frame 'shyness' as perceived shyness or socially constructed shyness. Youth may not access mentor programming because of a well-founded lack of trust and lack of safety. While this may look to white people in white programs and institutions that BIPOC youth do not want to step out of their comfort zone, the reality is that racialized youth live in a world where they are constantly made to be and feel uncomfortable and unsafe, and it is important for programs to consider these realities when planning outreach.

Overall, this guide highlights the value of hearing directly from mentees and mentors about their ideal mentoring experiences. Programs should consult with youth and co dsign programs with the youth who they are trying to serve, so that they can know what supports and approaches youth will respond to and find most helpful.

For more details on the study's findings and recommendations, please see the Executive Summary, the Final Research Report, and Data Dashboards: https://mentorcanada.ca/en/new-research-reveals-critical-link-mentorship-closes-opportunity-gaps-racialized-youth-confirmed

The research methods and study protocols (including both the quantitative survey measure and the qualitative interview guide) were reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Office in July 2024.

Note that the quantitative youth survey dataset is available to researchers interested in pursuing further analyses. Contact Reuben Ford, SRDC Research Director, at rford@srdc.org for details.

To learn more about Mentor Canada's mentoring research and the Unlocking Doors project, contact research@mentorcanada.ca or visit mentorcanada.ca for more information.