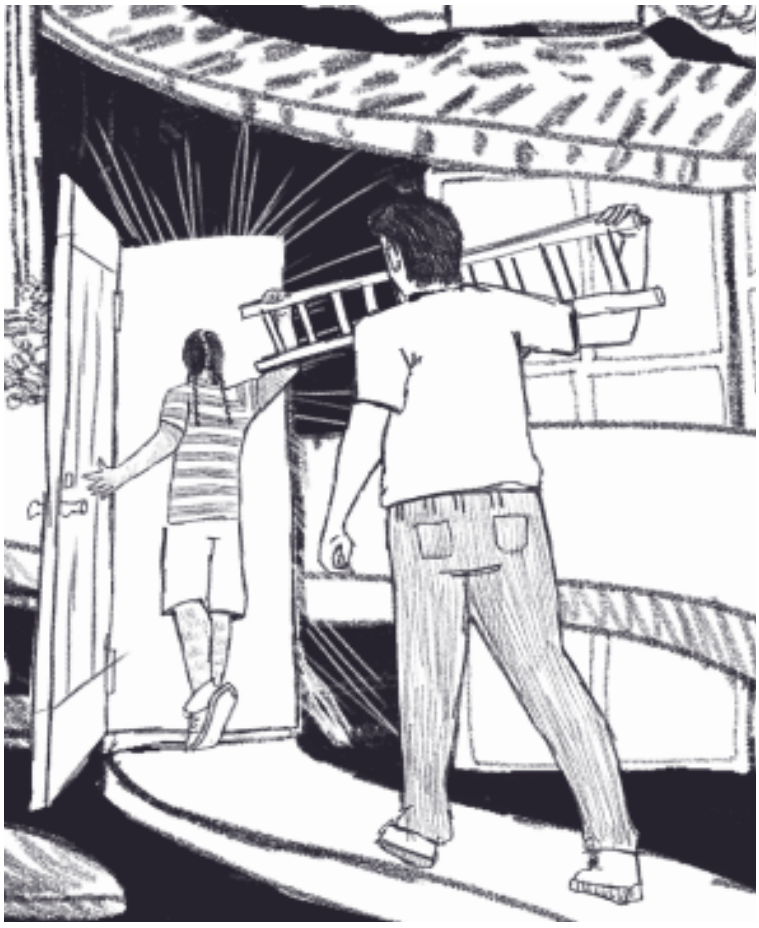
Spotlight on Indigenous Youth

Unlocking Doors:



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

Mentor Canada

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About Mentor Canada:

Mission & Vision: To accelerate and scale world-class mentoring in Canada.

We envision a Canada where mentoring is valued and accessible to all – grounded by evidence, rooted in collaboration, and driven by a dynamic ecosystem that unlocks potential, fuels opportunity and strengthens communities. Our impact is clear, and our reach is nationwide.

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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What is Mentorship and Why Does It Matter for Indigenous Youth

Mentorship can provide a way to support Indigenous youth as they move through the world. In a context where systemic inequities too often limit access to networks, representation, and opportunity, mentorship can create pathways that affirm identity and further possibility. As momentum builds through research, community leadership, and policy investment, the importance of centering Indigenous youth in this work has never been clearer.

Mentorship can be defined as a relationship in which a caring, trusted, more experienced person provides guidance, support, and advice to help a young person develop skills, knowledge, confidence, and navigate life transition. Mentorship can be important for youth success in personal, educational, and professional domains. Two main types of mentors include:

- **Natural mentors** – organically developed relationships with trusted individuals such as extended family, teachers, community leaders, co-workers
- **Program mentors** – structured, organizationally matched relationships with set goals and timelines

Mentorship can also play a role in addressing systemic barriers faced by Indigenous (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) and racialized youth (i.e., Black and other youth of colour), as well as serve as a tool for young people to build social capital, career readiness, and resilience.

Focusing on Indigenous youth and mentorship is important due to historical, social and systemic factors stemming from settler colonialism, that impact mentorship access and outcomes for Indigenous youth, as well as issues around representation in formal and informal mentoring contexts. Further, there are gaps in the existing mentorship literature, with limited research focused specifically on mentorship for Indigenous youth in the Canadian context. While emerging work in Canada integrates systemic analysis with program design, and takes decolonial and anti-racist approaches (Murry et al, 2022), there is a need for further work, including more attention to informal and natural mentoring and its impacts on Indigenous youths' lives.

Research Overview

The purpose of this report is to share findings from mixed-methods research conducted with young adults aged 18–30 with racialized identities. This spotlight report builds on a broader study examining how mentorship supports racialized youth and focuses on the lived experiences of Indigenous (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) youth from within the larger sample of the overall study. This report shares findings based on a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with youth about their lived experiences (including educational and career experiences) and their mentorship experiences and preferences. Interviews were also conducted with mentoring stakeholders. What follows is an overview of the project, its purpose, design, and the insights it contributes to the broader conversation on supporting Indigenous youth through mentorship.

Project Summary

This work forms part of a larger national project exploring the relationship between mentoring, building and retaining Skills for Success, and racialized young adults' access to quality work early in their careers. The impetus for the project came from earlier national studies, which identified the need for more culturally responsive approaches to help racialized youth connect to meaningful employment through mentoring. The goal was to better understand the skills needed in today's labour market and to design mentoring programs that not only build foundational and transferable skills but also reflect the distinct strengths and experiences of racialized young adults. The overall research question guiding the project was: What is the relationship between mentoring, building and retaining Skills for Success, and youth and emerging racialized adults' access to quality work early in their careers?

*An analytical framework that the research team drew on for the survey data analysis is **The Grandmother Perspective**, an offering by Gwen Phillips of the Ktunaxa Nation, who is a BC First Nations Data Governance Initiative Champion through BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. Through this approach "disaggregated data is merely a tool (to be utilized depending on the context and aim) and it must be accompanied by a process that supports the purpose of reducing systemic racism and oppression and achieving equity" (BCOHRC, 2020, p.9)*

The study applied a mixed-methods design. A nationally representative online survey (conducted in English and French in 2024 via Maru Matchbox) reached 3,110 youth and young adults (18–30) across Canada, including 1,618 who identified as racialized. The Indigenous youth subsample, which is the focus of this spotlight report, included 178 participants.[1] The survey was co-created by SRDC, Mentor Canada, and peer researchers, drawing on validated measures from previous studies (e.g., Who Mentored You?, Mapping the Mentoring Gap, Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, Flourishing Scale, SCALE measures, career adaptability). New items were also developed to capture community cultural wealth and resistance capital (ability to challenge inequities). The survey covered six domains: demographics, school/work experiences, skills, social networks, wellbeing, and mentoring experiences.

1 To note, the combination of survey weights and rounding can sometimes result in counts that are slightly different from unweighted survey data or proportions that total more than 100 per cent. Further, the sample was largely urban, and had a large representation of 2SLGBTQIA+ young adults.

Semi-structured interviews and discussions were conducted online by peer researchers and SRDC with 23 youth and 13 mentoring stakeholders (individuals/organizations working with Indigenous and racialized youth). The Indigenous subset of interviewees included two youth participants and one mentoring stakeholder. Recruitment occurred through youth-serving agencies, social media promotion, and peer networks and snowball sampling. Youth conversations explored participants' life experiences since age 18, personal definitions of mentorship, qualities of effective mentoring relationships, experiences with or absence of mentors, and recommendations for effective mentorship programs.

Why an Indigenous-focused report?

This spotlight report draws specifically on the Indigenous youth subset of the study to highlight insights that can inform program providers and practitioners. By focusing on Indigenous youth within the broader study of racialized youth, the intention is to ensure that mentoring supports can be designed and delivered in ways that are responsive to the distinct realities, strengths, and needs of Indigenous young adults. Please see the study's full report for findings from the study as a whole.

The findings were first presented at the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring (SIYM), focused on Indigenous mentoring on July 31, 2025 at the University of Calgary, where discussions focused on the study's limitations and promising areas for future data analysis, including how the data can support mentoring programs working with Indigenous youth. Many thanks to the SIYM participants for the feedback and guidance they provided to the project team.

This report expands on that presentation to provide a fuller account of the research and its implications.

It is important to note that while a number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth participated in the study the study tools were not specifically designed for Indigenous youth engagement. Additionally, the study team members were non-Indigenous. Further, First Nations, Métis or Inuit community leadership or Elders' were not engaged from the outset, so the study design was not directly informed by community or Elders guidance.

Recommendations & Implications

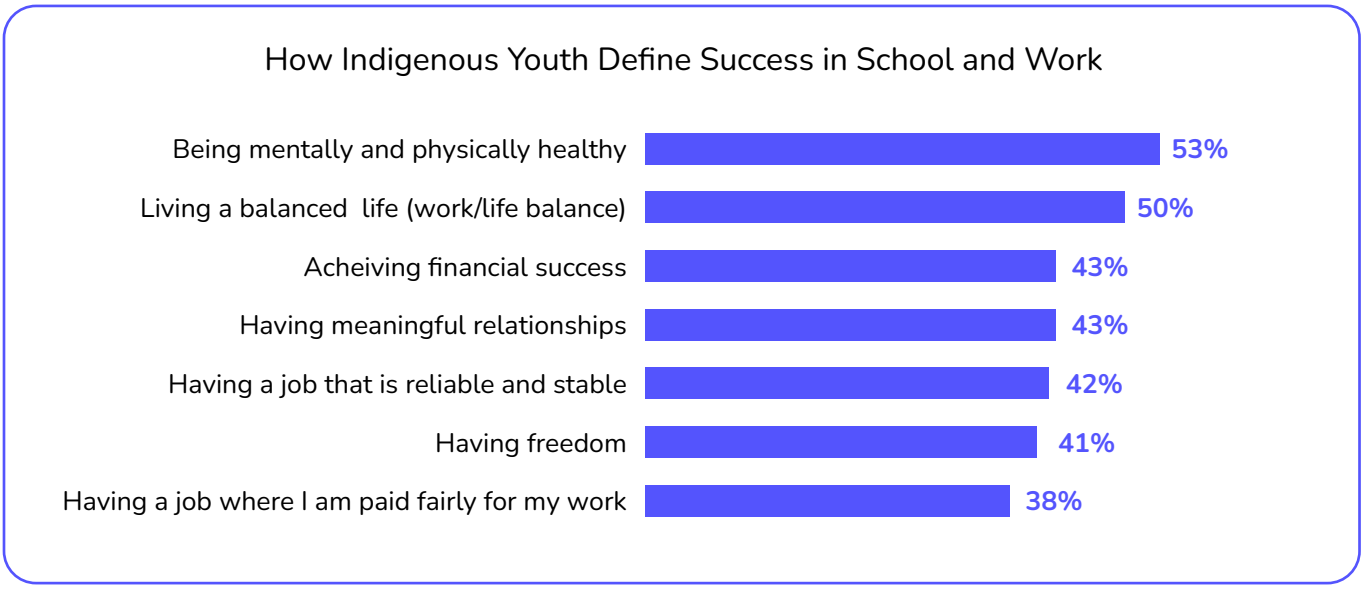
- Mentors can help youth develop skills, as well as a positive sense of self and ability to understand and act in the face of racism and discrimination.
- The different types of support that youth may need as mentees must be considered. There is no one-size-fits all or homogenous approach.
- Mentees must be centred in mentoring programs. Mentors should meet youth where they are and prioritize what supports they are looking for as individuals.
- An understanding of the impact of white supremacy on mentorship programs is needed, including to challenge white saviour mentalities.
- Mentors and mentoring programs must support practices that challenge anti-Indigenous racism in multiple spaces.
- It is important for mentorship opportunities to offer youth with options to learn and connect to their culture
- When developing programs, practitioners should draw on Indigenous developed mentorship frameworks, which also map on in part to supports from mentors which Indigenous youth survey respondents shared they are looking for, including Murry et al.'s (2022) Indigenous Mentorship Model, as cited across this report's findings. Other frameworks include:
    - Circle of Courage Framework (Brendtro et al., 2013)
        * Generosity: Mentorship can help young people discover their purpose, be caring and compassionate, and, ultimately, develop their character.
        * Belonging: Mentorship can promote belonging and positive connections with others and culture. Mentors can help protégés feel that they matter.
        * Mastery: Mentorship can offer young people a supportive environment in which to discover and develop their strengths, overcome challenges, and grow.
        * Independence: Mentorship can empower young people by offering them a supportive environment to develop their decision-making skills, as well as a safe space to practice personal responsibility and accountability.
    - 4Rs Framework (Kirkeness et al., 2001)
        * Respect
        * Relevance
        * Reciprocity
        * Responsibility

Findings

Lived Experiences

Definitions of Success

Indigenous youth conceptualize success in school/work in a variety of ways. In the survey, when asked what success in school and work means to them, youth's most common response was "being mentally and physically healthy," with over 50 per cent of Indigenous youth selecting this option as one of the ways they define success. Having a work/life balance and achieving financial success were also common responses.



Racialized (Black and other youth of colour's) definitions of success were consistent across these categories as well, however Indigenous youth selected 'having meaningful relationships' at a higher rate than other racialized groups. Indigenous youth did not choose the following 'success' answer options in larger proportions:

- Being in a position to help family or community
- Being a role model or inspiration
- Strengthening connection to culture

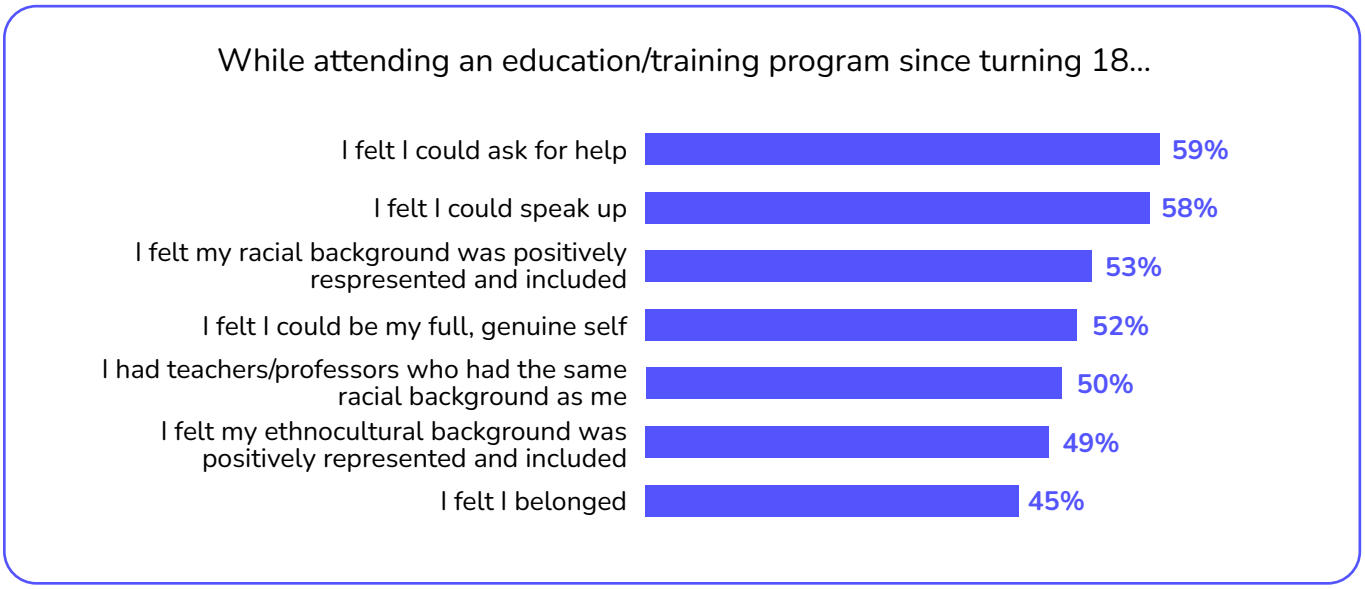
Additionally, less than 20 per cent of Indigenous survey respondents define success in relation to their sense of belonging and giving back to their communities. However, youth's survey responses must be considered in relation to the context in which the question about success was asked. The focus of the question was on school and work, and within a survey that was framed as being about supporting career pathways for young adults, which likely impacted how respondents in turn framed their responses.

*In their Indigenous Mentorship model, Murry et al. (2022) posit that taking a **mentee-centred** focus includes supporting different definitions of success.*

In the qualitative interviews, one Indigenous youth spoke of the boundary that she has between career and cultural experiences:

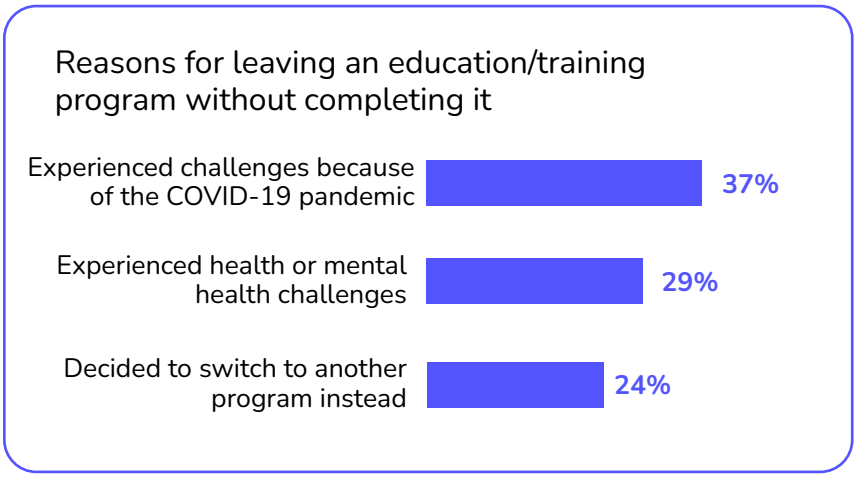
> ***I need connection with my culture. Like I really do and I crave it all the time. But I can get that in my free time. I can get that when I'm at home, I can get that when I'm in my community…I want to focus on having my cultural experiences be for myself and not for my career.***

The boundary between career and cultural experiences expressed by the participant could also potentially speak to one reason why survey participants defined success in the ways that they did, along with the framing of the study as a whole around education and work.



Educational Experiences

Indigenous youth reported varying senses of belonging while attending education or training programs after age 18. However, caution needs to be exercised in relation to interpreting these educational belonging findings due to the small sample size. Among those who had attended an education/training program since turning 18, around 59 per cent of respondents felt that they could ask for help. Roughly 50 per cent felt that they were positively represented and included, that they could speak up, and that they could be their full, genuine selves. Roughly 50 per cent of Indigenous youth shared the same racial background as their teachers/ professors while participating in an education/training program.



Further, nearly 2/3 of Indigenous youth reported being confident they will achieve their desired level of education. Additionally, 1 in 4 youth had experience leaving an education program without completing it, including because of the pandemic, mental health challenges, or changing programs.

Youth are continuously learning how to navigate predominantly white institutions and structures, interpersonal racism, and the specificities of anti-Indigenous racism. One Indigenous youth interviewee spoke about the racism that she experienced from professors in post-secondary, and how she felt this pressure to prove professors wrong:

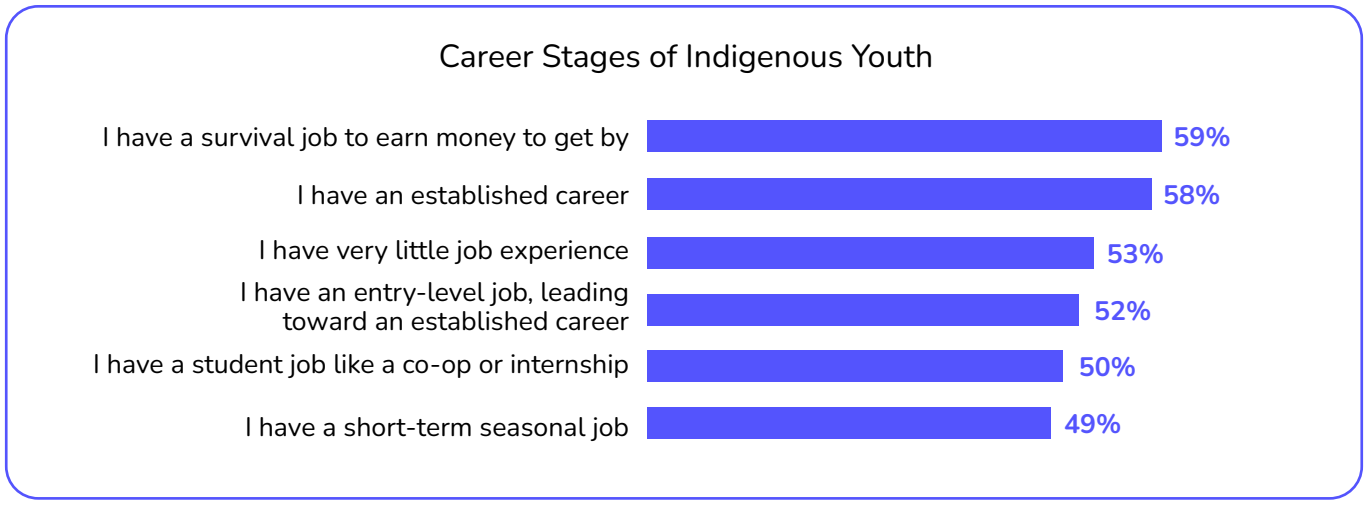
> ***I think that in Canada a lot of people assume that as Indigenous people we're messy, we're unorganized. We don't have follow through. We don't work hard - like these are all like very ingrained ideas that people have about Indigenous people. And that's what I feel like I have to prove all the time that no, I'm organized. I have followed through. I can wake up early. I don't show up late.***

One reaction to encountering racism in educational settings is feeling like you need to prove people wrong. Another related narrative which emerged across youths' interviews was that of wanting to be a role model and 'break through' barriers for those coming up behind them, and to show others it is possible. A narrative of 'proving people wrong' was present in Black and other youth of colour's interviews as well, however, it is important to recognize the specificities of anti-Indigenous racism and how it operates within settler institutions.

In Reddington et al.'s (2021) study looking at Indigenous youth's perspectives on their experiences in the Canadian education system, ***youth emphasized the need to address systemic racism and stereotypes embedded within settler colonial educational structures and institutions.***

Professional Experiences

Indigenous youth survey respondents reported a wide variety of work experiences, with a majority of youth working in survival jobs. The age range of respondents is likely reflected in youth's reported career stages, as a number of respondents are young and still in education and training. To note, the base number for career stage is that of all survey respondents.



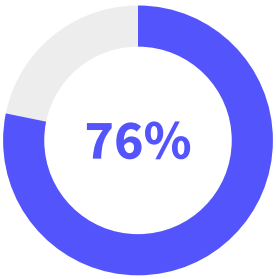
Indigenous youth reported a positive experience overall with their employment. Over 69 per cent of survey respondents shared that they feel satisfied with their current job, and that they find their work meaningful and fulfilling. Respondents also reported having positive experiences in their workplace, with 70 per cent of Indigenous young adults reporting that they feel like they matter at work. Lastly, 73 per cent reported high career decision-making self-efficacy, meaning youth feel confident in their decision-making around their professional path, for example their belief in their ability to complete tasks such as information gathering, planning, and problem-solving.

In their study on factors that help and hinder Indigenous young adults' career decision-making, Mathew et al. (2023), found that ***youth encounter systemic barriers, including financial barriers and a lack of exposure to 'implicit workforce knowledge,' but youth draw strength from their culture, relationships, and creating career networks.***

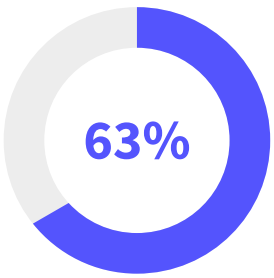
Mentorship Experiences

Access & Barriers

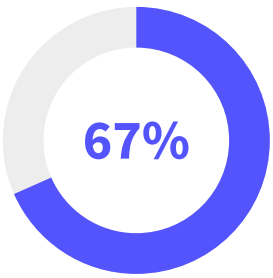
In the survey, youth participants shared their experience with accessing mentorship, defined as both program and natural mentors. The majority of youth reported having a mentoring experience at some point in their lives.



of Indigenous youth **had a mentoring experience in their lifetime**



of Indigenous youth **had a mentoring experience growing up**



of Indigenous youth **had a mentoring experience since turning 18**

This finding is consistent with an earlier survey conducted in 2020 that looked at youth's mentoring experiences. In this previous study, 66 per cent of Indigenous youth had at least one mentor before age 18 (Mentor Canada and SRDC, 2021).

In the current study, youth also identified the barriers to mentorship that they have encountered. The most common barrier to mentorship reported by Indigenous youth was not knowing how to find a natural mentor, followed by thinking that a mentor would not be helpful. Eleven per cent of Indigenous youth respondents reported that they did not face any barriers to mentorship.

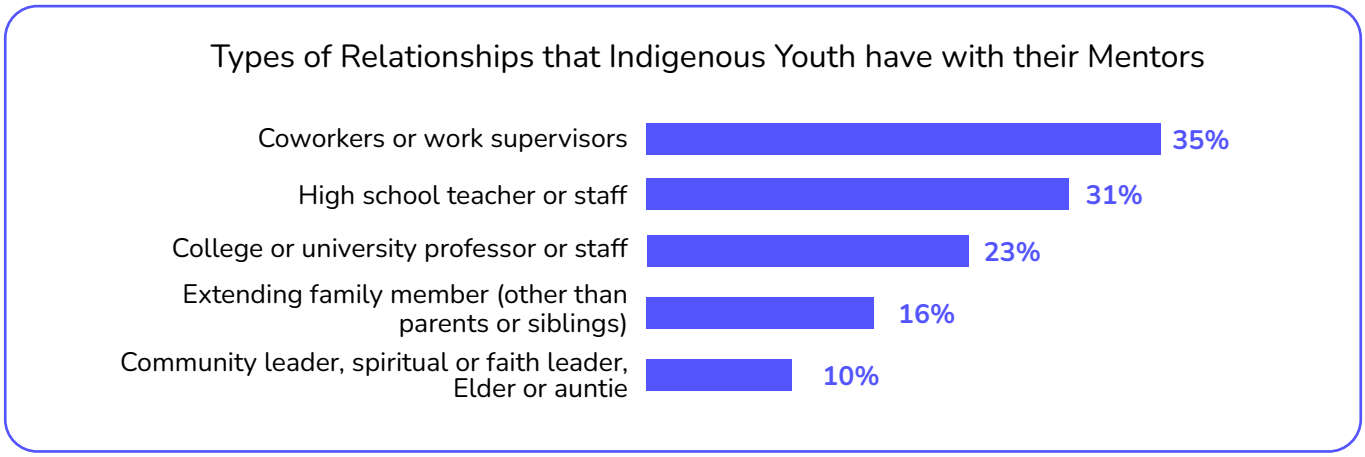
The barriers that Indigenous youth encounter could relate to a lack of awareness and accessibility of mentorship opportunities due to how mentoring programs are marketed and how youth learn about them. Youth may be unaware programs exist or find out too late about programs (i.e., they



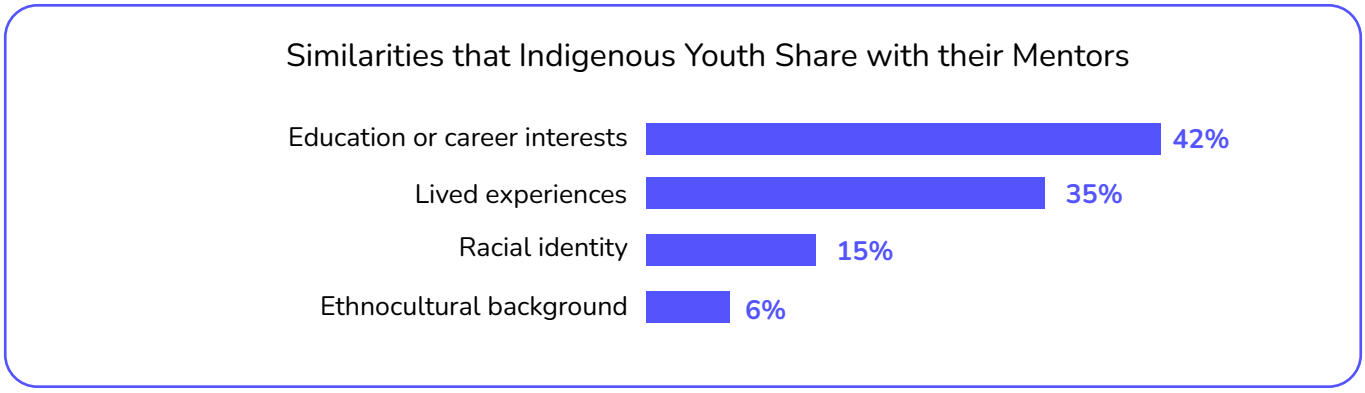
have aged out or are past a transition stage where mentorship could have been useful). However, a lack of trust and a lack of a sense of safety may be another barrier for youth. Indigenous youth have historical and current reasons to mistrust institutions and mentoring structures which have been formed within settler colonial and white supremacist systems and ideologies, demonstrating a need for proactive engagement by mentorship organizations to build reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities. Further, a common narrative that follows Indigenous and other racialized youth as they navigate predominantly white institutions is that they are 'shy' and need to 'step out of their comfort zones.' The shyness narrative is also something that youth internalize, as it was a narrative that research team heard repeatedly when conducting qualitative interviews with youth. However, Indigenous and other racialized youth navigate a world where they are constantly made to be uncomfortable and unsafe, and youth may avoid engagement due to anticipated bias or exclusion and/or have the experience of being continuously rejected when they reach out for help within predominantly white structures and institutions. Yet, there is also the possibility that mentorship can act as a buffer and guide for dealing with anti-Indigenous racism (structural and interpersonal) in predominantly white institutions, further reinforcing the importance of working to proactively engage Indigenous and other racialized youth.

Who are the Mentors

Of survey respondents who reported a mentoring experience, a majority of Indigenous youth respondents reported their mentors as being their coworker or work supervisor. Youth also described what characteristics they share with their mentors, with education and career interests and lived experiences reported most frequent. Six per cent of Indigenous youth shared that they had a mentor of shared ethnocultural background, and 15 per cent shared that they had a mentor of shared racial identity.



Again, it is possible that how the research team, as non-Indigenous people, framed these questions influenced these results from Indigenous respondents. The question posed in the survey in the current study was: '*Which of these identity markers or experiences did one or more of your mentors have in common with you?*' and included the options of ethnocultural background and racial identity, which may or may not have captured Indigenous youths' views of their identities and/or their relationship to an Indigenous mentor. If youth had a mentor who shared their First Nation, Métis, or Inuk identity, perhaps they chose shared 'lived experiences' as opposed to shared racial identity or ethnocultural background.



Interestingly, in the previous 2020 survey, Indigenous youth participants shared that of their most meaningful mentors, 65 per cent shared their 'ethnocultural background.' (Mentor Canada and SRDC, 2021b). However, while mentor-mentee matching along racial or ethnocultural identities or by Indigeneity can be important to youth, young adults also have a strong preference for mentors with similar education or career interests when it comes to mentors for education and work. There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to mentor-mentee matching for career-focused mentoring; match quality depends on individual needs, shared experiences, and mutual respect.

For other types of mentorship, such as cultural mentorship, cultural understanding and representation in matching decisions is key. Nation mentorship match and/or region match may also be important for mentorship focused on cultural practices. Yet across all type of mentorship, the risks posed with mismatch include diminished trust and reduced mentor and/or program impact on youth's lives.

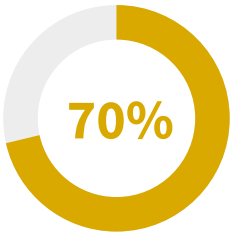
An Indigenous mentoring stakeholder talked about the importance of mentor-mentee matching of Indigenous youth, while also noting that he encourages youth to find value in any relationship they have:

> ***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, if it enhances your life, embrace it.***

In the qualitative interviews, Indigenous youth shared what impact mentoring has had on their lives. One youth interview participant described how a mentor helped her connect more to her Indigenous identity. She emphasized that she would like to receive more of this kind of culturally-based mentorship, as she described that she feels disconnected from some of her Indigenous family members because she lacks certain cultural knowledge that they hold. Overall, she would like more cultural mentorship opportunities for herself and other Métis, First Nation, and Inuit youth.

How Mentoring Can Support Indigenous Youth

Among those Indigenous youth who reported no mentoring experiences since turning 18, 70 per cent shared that they would be interested in having a mentor if they had the opportunity to do so.



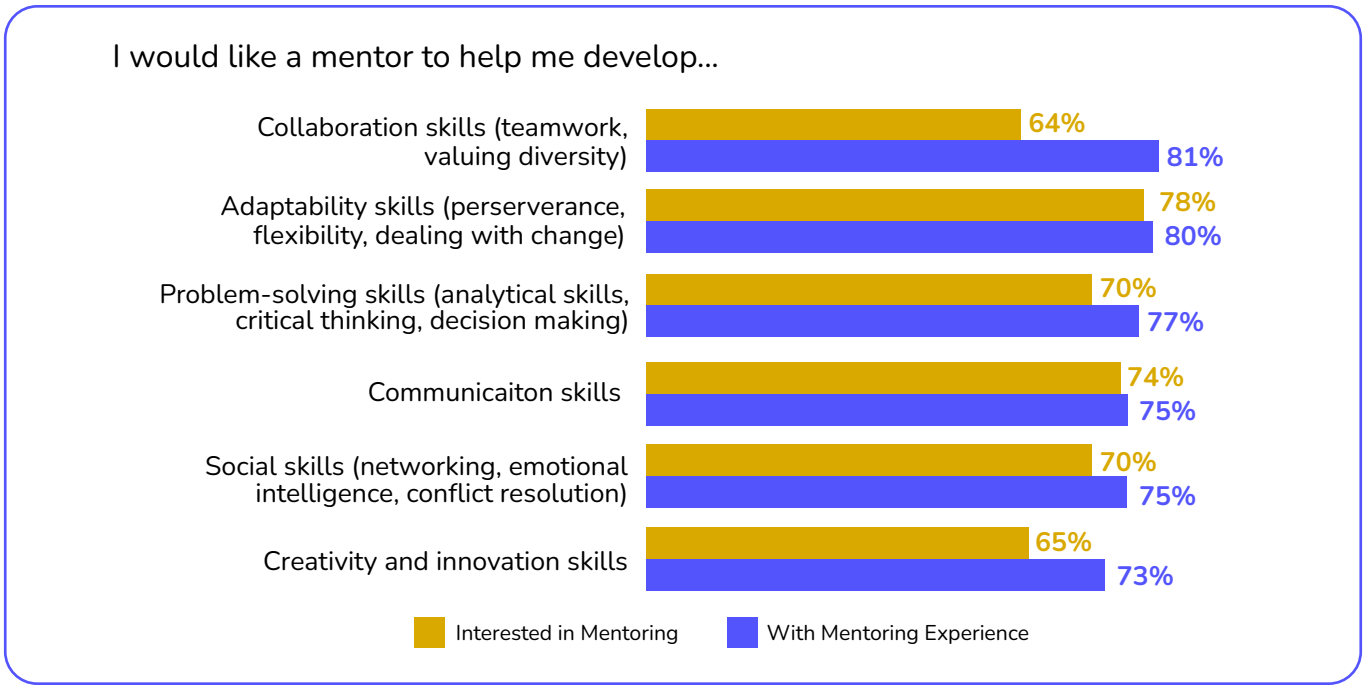
of Indigenous youth who reported no mentor experiences since turning 18 **are interested in having a mentor**

However, 1 in every 3 of the Indigenous youth respondents who reported no previous mentor experiences expressed no interest in having a mentor in the future. To note, these findings stem from a small sample size. However, it is important to consider why some youth may not be interested: perhaps more work is needed to support youth to overcome barriers to access. Systemic factors should also be considered, and it is important not to dismiss why youth are not interested. For example, previous negative experiences with mentoring, including racism, and not feeling safe or belonging in predominantly white spaces could play a role in youth's openness to mentoring.

Regardless of their previous mentorship experience, when asked how a mentor can best support youth, Indigenous survey respondents said they were most interested in mentors providing advice and guidance, listening and being there for them, and helping them build connections to people and services that can offer support. Of those youth with mentoring experience, over 80 per cent also reported that their mentors have shown support by helping them set and reach goals, and by listening and being there for them.

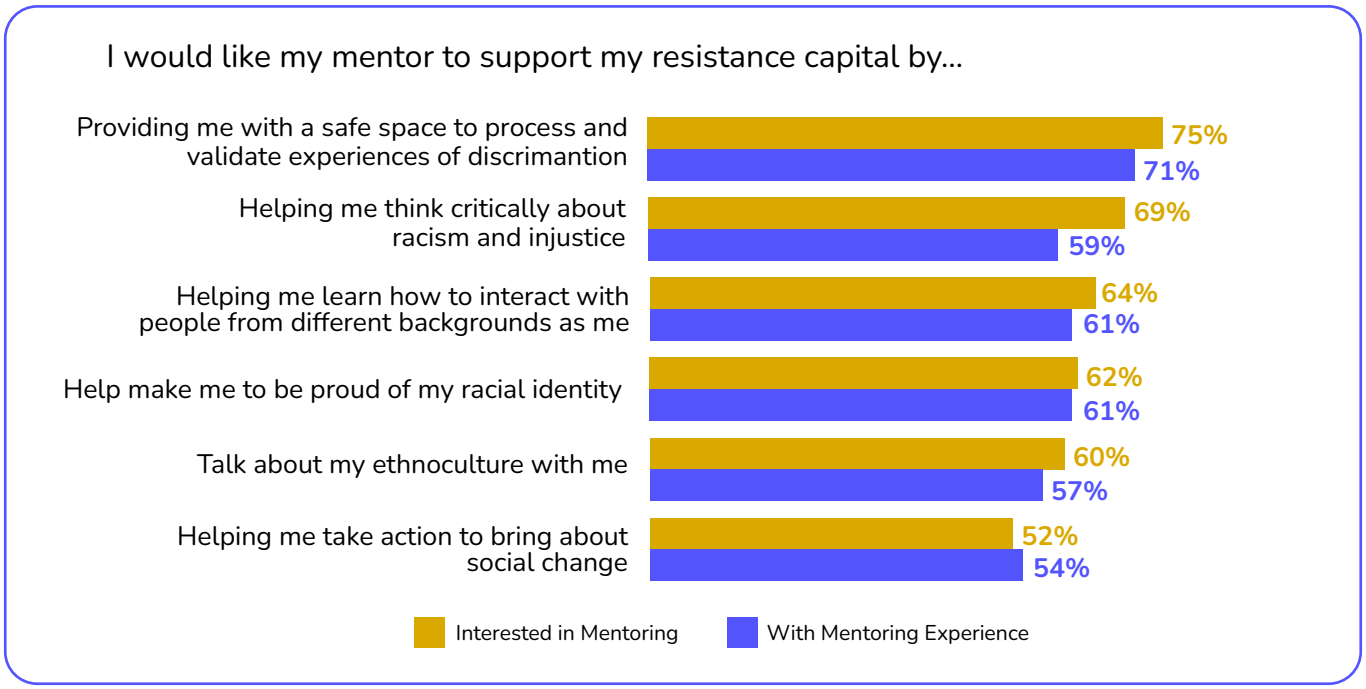
Overall, while career support is highlighted, the key is that youth want someone to listen to them, to provide guidance and goal setting support. To a lesser extent, more practical supports are desired, which may speak to how this group of respondents are within a more autonomous age range.





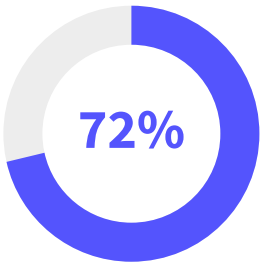
Youth who have mentoring experience or who are interested in mentoring were also surveyed about what skillsets they would like to develop through the help of a mentor. The most reported skillset that Indigenous youth who have mentoring experience would like the help of a mentor to develop was collaboration skills, like teamwork and learning how to value diversity. However, this was the least chosen response from respondents who are interested in mentorship but have not had a mentor since turning 18. An equal number of respondents between those with mentoring experience and those interested in mentoring shared that they would like mentors to help them develop communication skills and social skills. Of those who are interested in mentoring, the most reported skillset that Indigenous youth would like a mentor to help them develop is adaptability, and an equal number of respondents would like a mentor to help develop their problem-solving skills

and their social skills.

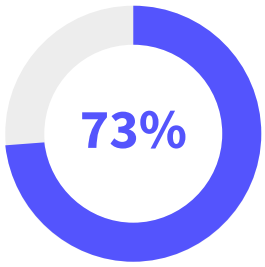


These findings may speak to how Indigenous youth desire to learn through life experiences, and an openness to learning in community-based settings, which may be indicative of opportunities for mentoring programs and mentors to build on. Mentor programs may be most relevant to youth if they focus on adaptability as a priority and skillset that can assist with resilience building.

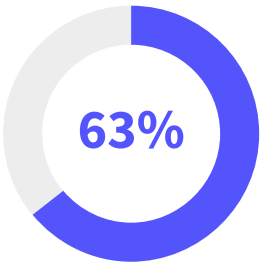
Importantly, having a mentor who can provide a safe space to process and validate experiences of discrimination was the top response from Indigenous youth respondents. 1 in 5 Indigenous youth with mentoring experience reported that their mentors helped them engage in critical thinking about topics in racism and injustices.



of Indigenous youth report that they **speak up when experiencing discrimination, bias, or racism**



of Indigenous youth report that they **take action to create a more fair or equitable society**



of Indigenous youth shared that they **have the skills necessary to respond to discrimination while pursuing their career goals**

However, youth also reported that they already have a high level of resistance capital, signaling their lived experiences and the skills they have needed to develop to navigate racism and a white settler/supremacist society.

Navigating Racism

> *Youth described high levels of resistance and navigational capital, which form Yosso's (2005). Community Cultural Wealth Model, a Critical Race Theory challenge to white settler Euro-centric interpretations of social and cultural capital.*

Indigenous youth encounter the specificities of anti-Indigenous racism, and their different supports that Indigenous youth may need as mentees must be considered. Mentors can help youth develop skills, but also a positive sense of self and ability to understand and act in the face of racism and discrimination.

In qualitative interviews, Indigenous youth talked about how mentoring can support them to navigate racism as well as further their cultural connections. When narrating their lived experiences, it was also evident that due to systemic racism within Canadian settler social structures and institutions, youth are continuously needing to navigate predominantly white institutions and structures, as well as interpersonal racism, including the specificities of anti-Indigenous racism.

Cultural Connection

Some youth expressed the importance of keeping the personal life separate from their career. One youth saw culture as something that is sacred that is not to be bound up in career. However, another youth highlighted that she would like to receive culturally-based mentorship, in response to being asked what type of guidance or mentorship she needs.

Some Indigenous youth shared their experiences of attempted erasure of Indigenous identities and knowledge by the settler state, including the intergenerational impact of residential schools. For example, one youth noted that she was the first person in her family for generations who was not forced to attend residential school, signaling intergenerational resilience as well as the value that cultural mentorship could have for youth.

A mentoring stakeholder further shared that an ideal mentoring program for Indigenous youth would involve an Elder and include cultural ceremony. He reflected on 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, and how this can be supported through cultural ceremony and practices.

Physical Wellbeing

Another area where mentoring can support youth, and related to cultural connection, is that of youth's physical wellbeing. For example, a mentoring stakeholder shared how he works to engage youth's physical wellbeing through his mentorship practice:

> ***"The emotional and mental are almost like they're on overload because of what we see on social media. Everybody wants to be famous. Everybody wants to be a creator. And so it's one of the things we need to get back to: how do we engage [youth] physically? I'm like let's go. Let's go pick medicine. Let's go build a sweat. Let's go make a fire... That could benefit their life immensely.***

Overall, mentors can help youth develop skills, but also a positive sense of self and ability to continue to support their already developed ability to understand and act in the face of racism and discrimination. The different types of supports that Indigenous youth may need as mentees must be considered, and there is no one-size-fits all approach.

Mentor Development and Responsibility

Mentoring 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 as one mentoring stakeholder interviewee shared,

> ***"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.

Anti-racist training and education is needed to help understand the impact of white supremacy on mentorship programs and challenge a white saviour mentality that some mentors may be bringing to the mentoring relationship. This would help provide mentors with a framework to examine, identify and challenge racism and engage in their own personal development, which will in turn help mentors focus on the needs of their mentees, as opposed to stereotypical notions of youths' communities. Overall, it is important for mentors and mentorship programs to support practices that challenge anti-Indigenous racism in multiple spaces.

Sánchez et al. (2021) argue for the importance of anti-racism training and education for mentors.

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Note that the quantitative youth survey dataset from this study is available to researchers in Canada 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 ***info@mentorcanada.ca*** ***or visit*** ***mentorcanada.ca*** for more information.