

From at-Risk to Resilient: Mentoring Networks that Fuel Wellbeing and Leadership

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This study investigates how early mentorship experiences contribute to the long-term wellbeing, professional development, and leadership capacity of adults who were considered “at-risk” during their high school years. Grounded in resilience theory and the framework of developmental relationships, the research explores how various forms of mentoring—formal and informal—supported students facing academic, behavioral, and social challenges. Utilizing a one-time, anonymous survey, the study collects retrospective data on participants’ high school experiences, the nature of their mentor-mentee relationships, and the perceived influence of those relationships on educational attainment, career paths, and personal growth. The study also draws on leadership development theory to examine how mentorship may foster long-term adaptive functioning, identity formation, and inclusive leadership development. Findings are analyzed thematically and used to inform the design of equity-centered mentoring programs aimed at enhancing resilience, leadership, and upward mobility among at-risk youth. Implications support practitioners, educators, and policymakers working to strengthen supportive ecosystems in schools and communities.

Keywords: Developmental mentoring networks, at-risk youth resilience, mentorship and leadership development, long-term wellbeing outcomes

Introduction

Youth who face significant life challenges or come from disadvantaged backgrounds are often categorized as “at-risk” (Keating et al., 2002, p. 717). These youth may experience academic struggles, behavioral problems, and emotional challenges, placing them at greater risk for negative outcomes such as early school dropout, juvenile delinquency, and mental health issues (Moore, 2013; Tolan et al., 2014). In response to these challenges, mentoring has emerged as a promising intervention aimed at promoting resilience and fostering positive developmental trajectories in at-risk youth (Lakind et al., 2014).

Mentoring involves a supportive relationship where a more experienced adult provides guidance and encouragement to a younger individual (DuBois et al., 2011). The primary objective of mentoring programs is to cultivate essential skills and abilities in youth, enhancing their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2008; Earnshaw & Harrison, 2024). Effective mentoring can positively influence at-risk youth by improving their attitudes toward school, reducing problematic behaviors, and strengthening their resilience (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021; Southwick et al., 2007).

Research indicates that mentoring relationships can lead to meaningful, long-term benefits for youth facing adversity. For example, consistent mentoring has shown to reduce delinquent behaviors, improve emotional wellbeing, and

increase self-esteem and academic performance (Tolan et al., 2014; Keating et al., 2002). Moreover, mentoring can enhance youth’s self-regulation skills, helping them to manage emotions and achieve personal goals more effectively (Martins et al., 2024). Specifically, the establishment of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound) goals through mentoring can significantly contribute to positive developmental outcomes for students at risk of school dropout (Martins et al., 2024).

Despite these promising findings, mentoring programs vary widely in their approach, structure, and impact. Several factors influence the effectiveness of mentoring, including mentor characteristics, the frequency and quality of mentor-mentee interactions, and organizational support (Daniels et al., 2019; DuBois et al., 2011). Professional mentors, for instance, bring specialized skills and greater stability to mentoring relationships, which may yield more consistent outcomes (Lakind et al., 2014).

While existing research confirms the short-term benefits of mentoring, there is less understanding of how these early relationships influence adults many years later. A gap exists in the literature regarding the specific long-term contributions of high school mentoring to adult resilience, wellbeing, and leadership capacity. This study addresses that gap by examining the lasting perceived impact of developmental mentoring networks on adults who were at-risk during youth. To capture these lifelong perspectives, the study

utilizes a retrospective survey design. This method is fitting for the objective because it allows adults to reflect on their entire life trajectory and provide rich, firsthand accounts of how they believe mentoring influenced their personal growth and professional development over time.

Literature Review

While mentoring can occur across the lifespan, this paper focuses specifically on youth mentoring programs. These programs typically pair a supportive adult volunteer with a young person to foster a trusting relationship (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009). The primary goal of this relationship is for the mentor to provide ongoing guidance and encouragement that promotes the youth's positive development, character, and overall wellbeing (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021; DuBois et al., 2011). Youth mentoring programs can take various forms, including one-on-one or group formats, and often operate within specific settings such as schools or community organizations (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021). Within this supportive structure, mentors assist students with academic or behavioral challenges and create opportunities for them to build resilience and self-esteem (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Tyler, 2021).

Mentoring has received substantial attention in educational research as a key intervention strategy for supporting at-risk youth. The theoretical foundation for mentoring emphasizes the importance of relationships in fostering resilience and positive development (Southwick et al., 2007).

According to Southwick et al. (2007), mentoring can significantly promote resilience among vulnerable youth by providing reliable support, teaching important life skills, inspiring motivation, and enhancing interpersonal relationships. Such positive relationships with mentors may offer critical emotional and social support that many at-risk youth otherwise lack (DuBois et al., 2011).

Research consistently highlights the value of mentoring in addressing several core areas of youth development. For instance, Claro and Perelmiter (2021) conducted a meta-analysis indicating that mentoring programs improve emotional wellbeing in youth. Their findings suggest that mentoring effectively reduces negative affects and internalizing behaviors and boosts self-esteem, contributing significantly to overall emotional health (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021). Similarly, DuBois et al. (2011) found that mentoring programs positively impact behavioral, social, and academic outcomes, highlighting their broad applicability and effectiveness in promoting youth development.

The effectiveness of mentoring programs can vary depending on several implementation factors. DuBois et al. (2011) emphasized that program features such as frequency of mentor-mentee interactions, structured activities, and program duration significantly influence mentoring outcomes. Additionally, research by Converse and Lignugaris/Kraft (2008) showed that consistent

and regular mentoring interactions significantly improved attitudes in school and behaviors among middle school students at risk of academic failure. These findings underscore the importance of regular and sustained contact between mentors and mentees in maximizing mentoring program effectiveness.

Mentoring also fosters important goal-setting skills and self-regulation strategies. According to Martins et al. (2024), goal-setting frameworks like SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound) significantly enhance the effectiveness of mentoring programs by providing youth with clear, structured guidance for personal and academic development. Their study showed that structured goal-setting through mentoring can effectively address risk factors associated with early school leaving, improving youth's academic resilience and motivation (Martins et al., 2024).

The literature also identifies several critical mentor characteristics that contribute to the success of mentoring programs. Earnshaw and Harrison (2024) argue that mentors who establish trusting, supportive relationships based on empathy and respect are most successful in promoting meaningful outcomes for youth. Moreover, professional mentors often demonstrate greater skill and reliability in their mentoring roles, potentially leading to better outcomes compared to volunteer mentors (Lakind et al., 2014). These findings highlight the need for careful selection and training of mentors to ensure effective implementation of mentoring programs.

Additionally, resilience is frequently cited as a core outcome of mentoring interventions. Moore (2013) defined resilience as the capacity to "bounce back" from stress and adversity, a trait that mentoring can significantly foster through supportive and stable relationships (p. 3). The development of resilience in youth through mentoring not only contributes to immediate improvements in emotional and academic functioning but also promotes long-term positive trajectories in overall life outcomes (Southwick et al., 2007).

In sum, the reviewed literature establishes mentoring as a powerful intervention for fostering resilience, improving emotional and behavioral health, and supporting academic success among at-risk youth. Despite these promising findings, there remains variability in the effectiveness of mentoring programs, driven by differences in program implementation and mentor characteristics. Because programs are often tailored to specific populations and goals, further research is important to identify the best practices that help optimize interventions to consistently achieve their intended outcomes for vulnerable youth.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were adults who graduated from high school and are currently

employed in a range of professions. Inclusion criteria required that participants experienced “at-risk” conditions during their high school years, such as academic difficulties, economic hardship, family instability, behavioral challenges, substance abuse, or mental health issues. Participants also needed to be at least 18 years old and to have participated in a mentorship relationship during high school. Although the target sample size for this study is 50 participants, preliminary results are based on responses from 10 individuals who completed the survey to date.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit individuals with direct experience of the research focus, ensuring the collection of relevant and rich data about mentoring and resilience. Snowball or referral sampling was also employed, with initial participants invited to refer others who met the criteria. These methods are appropriate for studies seeking to access populations with shared, specific experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Recruitment was conducted through email invitations distributed to potential participants by the research team. No compensation or incentives were offered for participation.

Instruments

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey developed by the research team and reviewed by experts in educational leadership to ensure clarity, content validity, and relevance to the research aims. The survey included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions organized into four sections:

- **Demographics and Background:** Items assessed age, gender, occupation, type of high school attended, educational attainment, and specific challenges faced during high school.
- **Mentoring Experience:** Questions addressed the nature of participants’ mentoring relationships, mentor identity, type and duration of mentorship, frequency of contact, and perceived support in various domains, including academic motivation, emotional support, and career planning.
- **Life Outcomes and Reflections:** This section explored how mentoring influenced educational achievements, career pathways, and current wellbeing.
- **Open-Ended Questions:** Participants described specific examples of mentor support, qualities of effective mentorship, and broader reflections on the influence of mentoring on their growth and leadership.

Procedures

Upon LSU IRB approval, participants reviewed an electronic consent form outlining the study’s purpose, risks, and confidentiality measures. After providing informed consent, they completed a

secure, anonymous survey and avoided including identifying information.

Data Analysis

Given the limited sample size at this stage, quantitative data from multiple-choice and scaled-response questions were not subjected to statistical analysis. Instead, initial analysis focused on organizing and summarizing participant demographics and response trends. For open-ended survey responses, the study employed an iterative approach to thematic analysis. This process involved a systematic review of the text to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns related to mentoring experiences, perceived benefits, and personal development.

To conduct the analysis, all open-ended responses were compiled into a single word-processing document. The primary researcher first manually reviewed the data to generate initial codes and identify potential themes. These preliminary findings were then discussed with the research team. This collaborative step, often referred to as peer review or debriefing, is a crucial strategy for enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative interpretations (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). Following the team discussion, the primary researcher returned to the data for a second round of analysis to refine the themes based on the collective feedback. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the mixed-methods approach, with its emphasis on these qualitative insights, offers preliminary understanding of the lifelong influence of mentoring on resilience and leadership in at-risk populations.

Results

Participant Demographics and Background

Ten adults (six female, four male) participated in the study, with ages ranging from under 25 to over 55. The participants represented a variety of professional fields. Seven of the ten respondents graduated from public high schools, while two attended private schools and one attended a charter school. Educational attainment varied, with one participant holding a high school diploma, one an associate’s degree, five a bachelor’s degree, and three an advanced degree.

All participants confirmed they experienced one or more “at-risk” conditions during high school. The most frequently reported challenges were academic difficulties (seven participants) and economic hardship (six participants). Other common issues included family instability, behavioral problems, and mental health challenges. Eight of the ten participants reported experiencing more than one of these risk factors simultaneously.

Mentoring Experiences

Most participants reported having a mentor during high school. Mentoring relationships included both formal and informal arrangements, with mentors

serving as teachers, school counselors, coaches, community volunteers, family members, or older peers. The majority of mentoring relationships lasted between one and two years, although some were less than six months or ongoing into adulthood. The frequency of interaction with mentors varied, with weekly and monthly meetings most common.

Participants rated the support received from their mentors on a five-point scale. Mean ratings indicated a generally positive perception of support, with most respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they could openly communicate with their mentor.

When asked about the helpfulness of their mentoring experiences, participants gave the highest ratings to support in academic motivation, emotional or mental health, and developing confidence and self-worth. Support for college or career planning and for staying out of trouble or avoiding risk were also frequently endorsed as helpful. Most participants indicated that their mentoring relationships contributed to a sense of belonging or connection during high school.

Life Outcomes and Reflections

Participants reported a range of positive life outcomes associated with their mentoring experiences. Most indicated that mentorship played a role in helping them complete high school and, for several, in pursuing college, vocational training, or advanced degrees. Some participants reported that mentoring influenced their choice of career or professional development. A majority of respondents indicated that they had served as a mentor to others following their own high school experiences.

Self-reported wellbeing among participants was generally positive, with most rating their current sense of wellbeing as “good” or “excellent.” Contact with high school mentors varied; while some participants remained in regular contact, others had only occasional or no ongoing relationship with their mentors.

Qualitative Findings

Open-ended responses highlighted several central themes in participants’ mentoring experiences. Many described the importance of emotional support and encouragement during challenging times in high school. One participant shared, “My mentor always listened to me without judgment and reminded me that my struggles did not define who I was becoming.” Another emphasized, “There were times I felt lost, but my mentor helped me see my strengths and kept me motivated to finish school.”

Guidance through personal challenges was a recurring theme. As one respondent wrote, “When I had problems at home, my mentor was the only adult I could trust. She gave me advice on how to cope and encouraged me to keep focused on my goals.” Another reflected, “I never thought I could go to college, but my mentor walked me through

the application process and helped me believe it was possible.” Participants also described qualities that made their mentors effective, including empathy, consistency, and genuine care. For example, one participant noted, “What made my mentor special was that he checked in on me regularly, even when I did not ask for help. It showed he really cared about my future.” Another stated, “She was always honest with me, but also kind. That balance made me trust her advice and see her as a role model.”

Finally, several participants linked their mentoring experiences to the development of resilience and leadership. As one participant put it, “Having someone believe in me during my worst times gave me confidence to take on new challenges and later become a mentor myself.” These qualitative insights illustrate the ways in which supportive mentoring relationships provided participants with emotional safety, practical guidance, and lasting motivation to pursue educational and personal growth.

Discussion

The present study examined how mentoring relationships shaped the resilience, educational outcomes, and leadership development of adults who experienced at-risk conditions during high school. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the findings illustrate that mentoring can serve as a significant protective factor for at-risk youth, fostering emotional support, academic motivation, and personal growth.

The quantitative data showed that most participants had experienced multiple risk factors, including academic difficulties, economic hardship, and family instability. Despite these challenges, nearly all respondents who received mentoring support attributed positive educational and career outcomes, such as high school completion, pursuit of higher education, and engagement in stable careers, to the influence of their mentors. These results are consistent with prior research indicating that mentoring programs benefit at-risk youth by supporting academic achievement and reducing negative behaviors (DuBois et al., 2011; Keating et al., 2002; Martins et al., 2024).

Qualitative analysis further underscored the fundamental role of mentors in providing emotional and instrumental support. Participants frequently described their mentors as sources of encouragement, guidance, and trust during periods of personal difficulty. As noted by Southwick et al. (2007), “mentors can play an important role in promoting resilience among at-risk children and adolescents” (p. 577). In the present study, several participants recounted how mentors offered not only academic guidance but also genuine care and advocacy, echoing findings from Earnshaw and Harrison (2024), who emphasized the importance of trust and emotional connection in successful mentoring relationships. For example, participants in this study described mentors who “listened

without judgment” and “helped me see my strengths and kept me motivated to finish school,” reinforcing the idea that mentors help build self-worth and confidence, which are key components of resilience (Moore, 2013).

These findings also align with meta-analytic evidence showing small to moderate positive effects of mentoring on emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, and school engagement (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021). The results support the developmental model of youth mentoring proposed by Rhodes (2002), which posits that caring relationships with nonparental adults can catalyze social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development. The open-ended responses in this study illustrate how mentors function as “corrective experiences” (Rhodes, 2002), enabling mentees to develop positive attitudes toward themselves and their futures.

However, the present findings must be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the current sample size is small ($N = 10$), and the recruitment process is ongoing. As a result, quantitative analyses are preliminary and may not capture the full diversity of at-risk youth experiences or outcomes. The study relied on self-reported data, which are subject to recall bias and may overrepresent positive mentoring experiences. The absence of a control or comparison group limits the ability to infer causality between mentoring and subsequent outcomes. Finally, participants were drawn from a convenience sample recruited by email and referral, which may limit generalizability to broader populations of at-risk youth.

Future research should address these limitations by increasing sample size, incorporating longitudinal designs, and including comparison groups to better isolate the impact of mentoring from other supportive factors. More detailed quantitative analyses, once a larger dataset is available, could further clarify which aspects of mentoring relationships (e.g., duration, frequency, mentor background) most strongly predict positive outcomes. Additional studies should also explore the intersection of mentoring with other interventions, such as counseling or academic support programs, to better understand their combined effects.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides practical implications for educators and policymakers. The findings suggest that the presence of a consistent, caring adult can have lasting effects on the resilience and success of at-risk youth. Effective mentors demonstrated empathy, consistency, and advocacy—qualities that future mentoring programs should prioritize in mentor recruitment and training (Earnshaw & Harrison, 2024; Martins et al., 2024). Schools and community organizations seeking to support at-risk youth should consider integrating formal mentoring programs that emphasize both academic and emotional support, as such interventions have the potential to “buffer against developing depression and anxiety” and enhance

educational attainment (Southwick et al., 2007, p. 580).

In conclusion, the study highlights the transformative potential of mentoring relationships for individuals who experienced adversity during adolescence. The findings contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting mentoring as an effective intervention for promoting resilience, academic achievement, and leadership development among at-risk populations. As the literature suggests, “positive relationships with caring adults” remain a cornerstone of resilience (Moore, 2013, p. 6), and efforts to expand access to high-quality mentoring may help more young people transition from risk to resilience.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that developmental mentoring is an effective practice for supporting resilience, educational achievement, and leadership development in individuals who experienced at-risk conditions during their high school years. The most impactful elements of mentoring included consistent emotional support, encouragement, and practical guidance from caring adults who fostered trust, motivation, and self-confidence. These practices were especially beneficial for youth facing academic, economic, or family challenges during adolescence.

Overall, the study underscores that the presence of a dedicated mentor, whether through a formal program or an informal relationship, is a vital strategy for supporting at-risk populations. A genuine investment in a youth’s success, grounded in empathy and consistency, provides the resources and relationships young people need to thrive despite adversity. By fostering these powerful connections, educators and community leaders can help ensure more youth transition from at-risk to resilient.

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