

Structured Mentoring, Leadership Practices, and Contextual Dynamics: Evidence from a Bhutanese Middle Secondary School

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Abstract

Structured mentoring has emerged as a key strategy for promoting holistic student development; however, empirical evidence on its effectiveness within Bhutanese school contexts remains limited. This study examines the impact of a structured mentoring programme on students' emotional well-being and analyses how leadership practices and contextual factors shape its implementation within Wangchhu Middle Secondary School (WMSS), a Bhutan Baccalaureate (BB) school. A mixed-methods case study design was employed, integrating pre–post quantitative survey data from 153 students with qualitative evidence from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate a statistically significant improvement in students' self-esteem, while resilience and perceived stress remained statistically unchanged. Qualitative evidence, however, reveals enhanced emotional regulation, increased confidence, and reduced feelings of isolation among students. Leadership practices—particularly instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership—played a critical role in ensuring programme structure, fostering trust, and promoting shared ownership, while contextual factors such as scheduling conflicts, workload intensity, and infrastructure limitations moderated programme implementation and outcomes. The study concludes that structured mentoring is most effective when supported by coherent leadership systems and enabling institutional conditions, and it contributes context-specific insights for strengthening mentoring practices in Bhutan Baccalaureate schools.

Keywords: structured mentoring, emotional well-being, leadership practices, contextual factors, Bhutan Baccalaureate, mixed-methods study

1. Introduction

Structured mentoring has gained increasing recognition as a strategic intervention for promoting holistic student development in contemporary education systems. Unlike informal mentoring relationships, structured mentoring is intentionally designed, systematically implemented, and aligned with institutional goals to support emotional, academic, and personal growth. Within Bhutan's education system, guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and reinforced through Bhutan Baccalaureate (BB) reforms, mentoring is positioned as a key mechanism for nurturing balanced intellectual, emotional, and ethical development.

In this context, Wangchhu Middle Secondary School (WMSS), a BB school, has implemented a structured mentoring programme as part of its institutional approach to strengthening student well-being and holistic learning. The programme is embedded within the school's routine practices, where mentors are systematically assigned to students and mentoring sessions are conducted regularly to provide academic guidance, emotional

support, and personal development. The initiative reflects a deliberate effort to operationalise BB principles by fostering supportive relationships, enhancing student agency, and promoting a positive school climate.

Despite this strong alignment between policy and practice, there remains limited empirical evidence on how structured mentoring functions within Bhutanese school contexts, particularly in relation to student emotional outcomes and the institutional factors that shape programme effectiveness. Much of the existing literature focuses on general outcomes of mentoring without sufficiently examining how leadership practices influence implementation or how contextual constraints affect its impact in real school settings.

Addressing this gap is particularly important given the complexity of mentoring as both a relational and institutional process. While mentoring is expected to enhance students' emotional well-being, its effectiveness may vary depending on leadership support, programme structure, and contextual conditions such as workload, scheduling, and resource availability. Without a nuanced understanding of these interacting factors, the effectiveness of mentoring programmes cannot be fully assessed or strengthened.

This study responds to this need by examining the impact of structured mentoring on students' emotional well-being within WMSS using a mixed-methods approach involving 153 students. It further analyses how leadership practices and contextual conditions shape the implementation and effectiveness of mentoring. In addition to the quantitative survey, qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions with 72 student mentees and 24 teacher mentors, as well as semi-structured interviews with five school leaders, including members of the School Management Team. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enables a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of mentoring within a Bhutanese BB school, thereby contributing to both policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept and Evolution of Structured Mentoring

Structured mentoring is understood as a formalised developmental relationship aligned with institutional goals and supported by systematic processes such as planning, monitoring, and regular interaction (DuBois et al., 2011; Garringer et al., 2015). Unlike informal mentoring, it operates within clearly defined structures that ensure consistency, accountability, and alignment with broader educational objectives. In recent years, mentoring has evolved into a comprehensive intervention influencing emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes simultaneously. Contemporary studies highlight its role in promoting social-emotional learning, behavioural adjustment, and student engagement, particularly during adolescence (Andersen, 2025; Gowdy, 2024). This evolution reflects a broader shift in education systems toward holistic development, where mentoring is increasingly integrated into institutional practices rather than treated as a supplementary activity.

2.2 Mentoring and Students' Emotional Well-Being

Mentoring has been widely associated with improvements in self-esteem, emotional regulation, and sense of belonging (Rhodes, 2020). Through consistent interaction and supportive relationships, mentoring provides students with validation, guidance, and a sense of security, which are critical during formative developmental stages. Recent empirical studies confirm that structured mentoring enhances psychological well-being and self-confidence among adolescents (Alarcón et al., 2021). However, evidence regarding resilience and stress remains mixed. While mentoring improves coping awareness and emotional regulation, measurable changes often depend on programme design, duration, and intensity (Cai et al., 2025; Silke, 2025). These findings suggest that mentoring functions primarily as a relational support mechanism and may require complementary structured interventions to produce sustained behavioural and psychological change.

2.3 Leadership Practices in Mentoring Programmes

Leadership is a critical determinant of mentoring effectiveness, influencing both programme design and implementation. Instructional leadership ensures alignment between mentoring activities and institutional goals through structured planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes (Hallinger, 2005). Transformational leadership fosters trust, motivation, and a shared vision, which are essential for building strong mentor–mentee relationships and a positive school climate (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Distributed leadership further enhances programme sustainability by promoting collaboration and shared responsibility among teachers and institutional stakeholders (Spillane, 2006). Recent research highlights that mentoring programmes are most effective when embedded within whole-school leadership systems that integrate organisational structure with relational practices (Silke, 2025). This underscores the importance of leadership in shaping both the technical and cultural dimensions of mentoring.

2.4 Contextual Factors Influencing Mentoring Effectiveness

Mentoring outcomes are shaped by contextual conditions such as institutional support, workload, and resource availability. Ecological systems theory highlights that student development is influenced by multiple interacting environmental factors, including school structures and social relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Contemporary studies indicate that constraints such as scheduling conflicts, competing academic demands, and infrastructure limitations can significantly affect programme effectiveness (Manoni-Millar, 2026). At the same time, enabling conditions such as supportive school culture, structured implementation, and psychological safety enhance mentoring outcomes by facilitating meaningful engagement. These findings highlight that mentoring effectiveness is not solely dependent on programme design but is also shaped by the broader institutional environment in which it operates.

2.5 Research Gap

Existing studies often examine emotional outcomes, leadership practices, or contextual factors in isolation, with limited integration of these dimensions within a single analytical framework. There is also a lack of context-specific research in Bhutanese school settings, where educational practices are shaped by unique cultural and philosophical foundations such as GNH. Furthermore, much of the existing literature relies predominantly on quantitative approaches, which may not fully capture the relational and experiential aspects of mentoring. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a holistic, mixed-methods approach that integrates emotional outcomes, leadership practices, and contextual dynamics within a single framework, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of structured mentoring in a Bhutanese BB school context.

4. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions, which aim to examine the impact of structured mentoring alongside the leadership and contextual factors influencing its effectiveness:

1. How does structured mentoring influence students' emotional well-being?
2. What leadership practices shape the implementation and effectiveness of mentoring?
3. What contextual factors facilitate or constrain mentoring outcomes?

5. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design to examine the impact of structured mentoring at WMSS, a BB school. The design integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both measurable outcomes and contextual insights.

The quantitative component involved a pre–post survey of 153 students from Classes VII to X, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across grade and gender. The sample comprised 87 females (56.9%) and 66 males (43.1%), with most aged 14–16 years. Standardised instruments measured self-esteem, resilience, and perceived stress, and data were analysed using paired-samples t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.

The qualitative component included multiple participant groups. Focus group discussions were conducted with 72 student mentees (36 males and 36 females) and 24 teacher mentors (14 males and 10 females). Semi-structured interviews were held with five school leaders, including members of the School Management Team and mentoring domain heads. Participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives across students, mentors, and leadership.

Qualitative data explored mentoring experiences, leadership practices, and contextual factors. Data were transcribed and analysed thematically. Findings from both strands were triangulated to enhance validity and provide a comprehensive, contextually grounded understanding of structured mentoring within the Bhutanese BB school setting.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Influence of Structured Mentoring on Emotional Well-Being

The quantitative findings indicate a statistically significant improvement in self-esteem (see Table 1), suggesting that structured mentoring positively influenced students' confidence and self-perception. This finding is strongly reinforced by qualitative evidence, where students consistently reported increased self-belief and confidence in expressing themselves. One student reflected, *"Before mentoring I used to feel shy... now I feel more confident."* Mentors similarly observed increased classroom participation and openness among mentees, indicating that mentoring contributed to creating a psychologically safe and supportive environment.

These findings align with existing literature, which identifies mentoring as a critical mechanism for enhancing self-esteem through relational support, validation, and consistent encouragement (Rhodes, 2020; DuBois et al., 2011). Self-Determination Theory further explains that fulfilment of competence and relatedness needs strengthens self-worth and intrinsic confidence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Within the WMSS context, the structured and consistent mentor–mentee interactions appear to have reinforced these psychological needs, thereby contributing to measurable improvements in self-esteem.

In contrast, resilience and perceived stress did not show statistically significant changes (see Table 1). However, qualitative findings reveal meaningful improvements in students' coping awareness and emotional regulation. Students reported better ability to manage examination pressure and emotional challenges, while mentors emphasised the role of positive reframing and encouragement. Mentoring also reduced feelings of isolation, with students highlighting the importance of having a trusted adult to confide in.

Table 1: Summary of Pre–Post Quantitative Results

Variable	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Result
Self-esteem	17.49	22.92	Significant increase
Resilience	24.93	24.70	No change
Perceived Stress	13.18	13.12	No change

This divergence between quantitative and qualitative findings is consistent with prior research, which suggests that resilience and stress outcomes often require longer-term, skill-based interventions to demonstrate measurable change (Masten, 2018; Llistosella et al., 2023). While mentoring enhances emotional support and coping awareness, structural stressors such as academic workload and examination pressure remain unchanged (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Pascoe et al., 2020). Therefore, mentoring at WMSS appears to function primarily as a relational buffer that mitigates emotional strain rather than directly reducing systemic stress levels.

6.2 Leadership Practices Shaping Mentoring Effectiveness

Leadership emerged as a central determinant of mentoring effectiveness, shaping both programme implementation and outcomes. Evidence from mentors indicates that the mentoring programme was systematically planned, with clear structures for goal setting, monitoring, and feedback. One mentor noted, *“The mentoring program follows a structured plan that includes orientation, goal setting, and regular feedback sessions.”* Such practices reflect instructional leadership, which emphasises alignment, supervision, and coherence in programme implementation (Hallinger, 2005). The presence of structured schedules, documentation, and monitoring mechanisms ensured consistency and accountability across mentoring activities. Another mentor further highlighted this systematic approach, stating, *“We monitor their academic progress, assist them in setting achievable goals, and track development regularly.”*

Transformational leadership was evident in the emphasis on relational trust, emotional support, and shared vision. Students consistently described mentoring as supportive, informal, and non-judgmental. One student expressed, *“It felt more like talking to a friend than a formal school activity, and I never felt judged.”* Similarly, mentors emphasised approachability and openness as key relational strategies. One mentor reflected, *“I make myself approachable so students can share freely; when we are open, they also open up.”* These narratives suggest that leadership fostered a positive school culture conducive to open communication and psychological safety. This aligns with research indicating that transformational leadership strengthens teacher commitment and student engagement by promoting shared values and trust (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Furthermore, distributed leadership practices were evident through shared responsibility among teachers, mentors, and school leadership teams. The collaborative nature of mentoring implementation enhanced ownership and sustainability across the school. A mentor highlighted this shared responsibility, stating, *“Mentorship is a challenging task, but we learn a lot through interaction and understanding each other’s story.”* The involvement of multiple stakeholders including teachers, leadership teams, and wellbeing structures reflects a distributed leadership model that leverages collective expertise and promotes collaborative problem-solving (Spillane, 2006).

Despite these strengths, mentors highlighted the need for additional professional development and institutional support. One mentor suggested, *“Institutional support such as regular workshops and mentor networking*

sessions would greatly benefit us.” Another pointed to infrastructural needs, stating, “*A quiet space for mentoring discussions and recognition for active mentors would also help improve the programme.*” These concerns indicate that mentoring effectiveness depends not only on structural design but also on mentor capacity and enabling conditions. This finding is consistent with literature emphasising the importance of continuous mentor training and resource support for effective programme delivery (Garringer et al., 2015).

Overall, the findings suggest that leadership practices at WMSS provide a strong foundation for structured mentoring through alignment, relational culture, and shared responsibility. However, strengthening professional capacity and institutional support systems would further enhance the depth, consistency, and long-term impact of the programme.

6.3 Contextual Factors Influencing Mentoring Outcomes

The findings indicate that mentoring effectiveness is shaped by a combination of enabling and constraining contextual factors. Students consistently reported positive mentoring experiences characterised by emotional support, trust, and psychological safety. Many described mentoring sessions as meaningful and engaging. One student shared, “*It wasn’t just about meetings; it was about connecting, learning, and growing together.*” Another reflected, “*I felt comfortable because there was no judgment, it was just support and understanding.*” These narratives highlight the strength of relational quality within the mentoring process, which is widely recognised as a key predictor of positive outcomes (Rhodes, 2020).

However, several contextual constraints limited the full realisation of mentoring outcomes. Scheduling conflicts emerged as a significant barrier, particularly the overlap of mentoring sessions with other school programmes. One student noted, “*Sometimes we cannot complete our mentoring activities because other programmes are held on the same day.*” Such disruptions affected continuity and reduced the effectiveness of planned interventions.

Academic workload and time constraints further influenced engagement. Mentors acknowledged the challenge of balancing mentoring responsibilities with teaching demands. One mentor explained, “*After a long school day, both mentors and students feel tired, and it becomes difficult to have deep discussions.*” This indicates that while mentoring is institutionally prioritised, competing academic pressures constrain the depth of interaction.

Infrastructure limitations also affected the quality of mentoring. The absence of dedicated and private spaces restricted confidential and focused conversations. A mentor suggested, “*Having a quiet room for mentoring discussions would improve the quality of our sessions.*” Additionally, mentors highlighted the need for professional development to strengthen mentoring practices. One mentor stated, “*Regular workshops and training would help us guide students more effectively.*” These concerns point to the importance of capacity-building and institutional support in sustaining programme effectiveness.

These findings are consistent with ecological systems theory, which emphasises that individual development is shaped by interactions between institutional, environmental, and personal factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Contemporary research similarly highlights that mentoring outcomes depend on enabling conditions such as protected time, adequate resources, and organisational support (Eby et al., 2013).

In the WMSS context, strong leadership commitment and relational trust act as key enabling factors, while operational constraints moderate programme effectiveness. As one student expressed, “*Even though there are challenges, mentoring makes me feel supported and not alone.*” This suggests that structured mentoring is most effective when supported by aligned institutional systems, adequate resources, and coordinated

implementation mechanisms, allowing relational strengths to translate into sustained developmental outcomes.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of structured mentoring within Wangchhu Middle Secondary School, a Bhutan Baccalaureate (BB) school, by examining its impact on students' emotional well-being alongside the leadership practices and contextual conditions that shape its effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that structured mentoring significantly enhances students' self-esteem and provides meaningful emotional support, contributing to increased confidence, improved self-expression, and a stronger sense of belonging.

However, the absence of statistically significant changes in resilience and perceived stress highlights important limitations in the scope of mentoring outcomes. While qualitative findings indicate improvements in emotional regulation and coping awareness, these changes remain largely perceptual and may require more structured, skill-based interventions and sustained engagement to translate into measurable outcomes.

The study further underscores the central role of leadership in shaping mentoring effectiveness. Instructional leadership ensured programme structure and accountability, transformational leadership fostered trust and relational engagement, and distributed leadership promoted shared ownership and sustainability. These leadership dimensions collectively enabled mentoring to function as a whole-school developmental strategy rather than an isolated activity.

At the same time, contextual constraints including scheduling conflicts, workload pressures, and infrastructure limitations moderated programme implementation and reduced the depth of mentoring interactions. These findings highlight that mentoring effectiveness is not solely determined by programme design but is also shaped by broader institutional conditions.

Overall, the study demonstrates that structured mentoring is most effective when embedded within coherent leadership systems and supported by enabling institutional environments. It contributes to the limited body of research on mentoring in Bhutan by providing a holistic, mixed-methods analysis within a real school context. The findings offer important implications for policy and practice, particularly in strengthening mentoring design, enhancing leadership support, and addressing contextual constraints to maximise impact in Bhutan Baccalaureate schools and similar educational settings.

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