

Leadership as the Engine of Effectiveness: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of Structured Mentoring and Student Development at a Bhutanese Middle Secondary School

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of structured mentoring on students' emotional well-being, academic achievement, and personal growth at a Bhutanese middle secondary school, and analyses how school leadership practices and contextual conditions shape mentoring implementation and outcomes. Using a mixed-methods case study design, the researcher collected quantitative data from 153 students through validated pre- and post-intervention instruments and gathered qualitative data through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with students, mentors, and school leaders. Structured mentoring was associated with a statistically significant increase in self-esteem and a modest but significant improvement in academic performance, while resilience, perceived stress, study habits, and leadership skills showed no significant change, and motivation, personal growth initiative, career aspiration, and interpersonal relationship scores declined statistically despite positive qualitative narratives. Findings indicate that instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership practices jointly produced the program coherence, relational trust, and accountability that shaped these outcomes, and that apparent declines in several domains are better explained as developmental recalibration than disengagement. Scheduling conflicts, workload pressure, and limited space moderated, without negating, this leadership-driven coherence. The study concludes that structured mentoring functions as a leadership-driven institutional practice rather than a stand-alone intervention, and proposes a formal monitoring and evaluation framework, autonomy-supportive mentoring practices, and broader student leadership distribution to sustain impact.

Keywords: structured mentoring, school leadership, student development, self-esteem, academic achievement, personal growth, Bhutan

Introduction

Structured mentoring is increasingly used as a whole-school strategy for promoting holistic student development, and has become a common feature of secondary education reform efforts internationally as schools seek to complement academic instruction with sustained relational support (DuBois et al., 2011; Garringer et al., 2015). Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory and Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory, mentoring provides scaffolding, modeling, and relational support that build self-efficacy and identity during adolescence, a developmental period in which peer relationships, academic pressure, and emerging autonomy converge to make consistent adult guidance particularly consequential (Erikson, 1968). Empirical evidence links structured mentoring to improved self-esteem, motivation, and leadership skills (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; DuBois et al., 2011), and these benefits tend to be strongest when mentoring is formally structured rather than left to an informal, ad hoc arrangement. Mentoring effectiveness, however, is not automatic; rather, it is strongly conditioned by the leadership practices within which it is embedded, including how consistently a program is planned, monitored, and resourced (Garringer et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2005). Within Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH)-informed education philosophy and the Bhutan Baccalaureate (BB) reforms, mentoring has been institutionalized as a mechanism for balanced intellectual, emotional, and ethical development, reflecting a national policy commitment to educating the whole child rather than academic performance alone. However, empirical research examining both mentoring's contribution to student development and how leadership shapes that contribution within Bhutanese schools remains scarce, leaving practitioners with limited contextually grounded evidence to guide implementation.

Statement of the Problem

Wangchhu Middle Secondary School (WMSS), a BB school in Chhukha Dzongkhag, has institutionalized structured whole-school mentoring in which every teacher mentors 10 to 14 students across a phased, month-wise cycle spanning emotional, academic, and personal-growth domains. This institutional commitment, however, rests on two largely untested assumptions. First, although international literature links structured mentoring to gains in self-esteem, motivation, and leadership development (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2020), it remains unclear whether comparable outcomes are realized within Bhutanese middle secondary contexts, where cultural norms around hierarchy, disclosure, and collective responsibility differ markedly from the predominantly Western settings in which most mentoring evidence has been generated. Second, it is unclear how school leadership, through instructional, transformational, and distributed practices, shapes the design, delivery, and sustainability of such a program, since Bhutanese school-effectiveness research has rarely examined leadership and mentoring together. Left untested, these two assumptions carry a concrete institutional risk: without systematic, theory-grounded evaluation, mentoring risks becoming a procedural compliance exercise rather than a leadership-driven developmental strategy, consuming instructional time and mentor effort without a clear evidentiary basis for its continuation or refinement, particularly within Bhutan's hierarchical and collectivist institutional culture. This study addresses both gaps by empirically examining structured mentoring's contribution to student development at WMSS and the leadership practices that shape it.

Purpose of the Study and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine how structured mentoring contributes to student development at WMSS and how school leadership practices influence the effectiveness and sustainability of mentoring. The specific objectives were to:

1. analyze the influence of structured mentoring on students' emotional well-being, including self-esteem, resilience, and stress management;
2. examine the relationship between structured mentoring and students' academic achievement, particularly motivation, study habits, and examination performance;
3. explore how mentoring contributes to students' personal growth, including leadership skills, interpersonal relationships, and career aspirations;
4. investigate the role of school leadership in planning, implementing, and monitoring the mentoring program; and
5. identify challenges and contextual factors that facilitate or constrain mentoring effectiveness.

Research Questions

The study was guided by one main research question: How does structured mentoring, shaped by school leadership practices, contribute to student development at Wangchhu Middle Secondary School? This main question was addressed through the following five sub-questions:

1. How does structured mentoring influence students' emotional well-being?
2. In what ways does mentoring contribute to students' academic achievement and learning engagement?
3. How does structured mentoring support personal growth and leadership development among students?
4. What leadership practices shape the implementation and effectiveness of mentoring within the school?
5. What contextual factors facilitate or constrain mentoring outcomes?

Significance of the Study

For school leaders, this study may provide evidence of how instructional and transformational practices can be deliberately aligned to strengthen mentoring coherence across emotional, academic, and personal-growth domains and offer a practical reference point for principals seeking to move mentoring from a scheduled activity toward a leadership-driven, structured mentoring practice. For teachers and mentors, it clarifies which

relational and structural supports most directly enable effective mentoring, and identifies specific areas – such as protected time and confidential space – where additional institutional investment would yield the greatest return. At the policy level, once WMSS demonstrates a workable structured mentoring model with measurable, sustainable impact, it may offer policymakers a practical, field-tested reference point for developing standardized mentoring guidelines that Dzongkhag and national authorities could share with other schools, thereby contributing contextually grounded evidence to Bhutan's holistic education discourse and informing Dzongkhag- and national-level efforts to institutionalize mentoring within GNH- and BB-aligned frameworks, particularly as other schools consider adopting or adapting similar whole-school mentoring models. For students, strengthened mentoring practices may enhance emotional resilience, academic confidence, and leadership identity formation. Academically, the study extends mentoring and leadership scholarship beyond predominantly Western literature by situating it within a Himalayan, Buddhist-influenced, and collectivist school culture, contributing a rare empirical case to the broader South Asian literature on school leadership and adolescent development.

Literature Review

Mentoring relationships can be broadly distinguished as unstructured (informal) or structured (formal). Unstructured mentoring arises spontaneously from personal affinity between an adult and a young person and offers flexibility and organic relational trust, but it is typically inconsistent, unmonitored, and dependent on the availability and goodwill of individual adults, making it vulnerable to relationship breakdown and highly variable outcomes across mentor-mentee pairs (DuBois et al., 2011; Garringer et al., 2015). Structured mentoring, by contrast, is intentionally designed, formally organized, and monitored against defined objectives, and this formal architecture is associated with more consistent and durable benefits for youth, although it requires greater institutional investment in training, matching, and oversight (Garringer et al., 2015; Karcher et al., 2010). Because WMSS has adopted a structured, leadership-coordinated model, the remainder of this review focuses on structured mentoring and, in particular, on the leadership conditions that sustain it.

Structured Mentoring: Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Structured mentoring differs from informal support in being intentionally designed, formally organized, monitored, and aligned with institutional goals, rather than arising spontaneously from personal affinity between an adult and a young person (DuBois et al., 2011; Garringer et al., 2015). Structured mentoring is theoretically grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory, which frames mentors as scaffolds operating within a learner's zone of proximal development, and Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory, which explains how students internalize coping and leadership behaviors through modeling and reinforcement. Rhodes's (2006) model of youth mentoring further specifies that developmental change occurs through interlocking pathways of social-emotional support, cognitive development, and identity development, each of which depends on relationship quality and duration. Program effectiveness depends heavily on design quality – mentor preparation, systematic matching, and evaluation mechanisms (Eby et al., 2008) – and on relational trust and consistency, with weaker or inconsistent mentoring relationships associated with negligible or even counterproductive effects (Karcher et al., 2010). Design quality, matching, and evaluation are not, however, self-sustaining; instead, they are properties of a program that school leadership must actively create and maintain, which is why the literature reviewed below turns next to leadership as the primary organizing construct for this study.

School Leadership as the Primary Driver of Program Effectiveness

Leadership is widely recognized as one of the strongest school-level levers of program effectiveness, second only to classroom teaching in its influence on student outcomes, and its effects operate largely indirectly, through the conditions, culture, and processes that leaders create rather than through direct contact with students (Robinson et al., 2008). This indirect pathway is especially relevant to whole-school interventions such as mentoring, which depend on consistent scheduling, resourcing, and supervision across many individual mentor-mentee relationships. Three leadership models are particularly relevant to structured mentoring: instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, each of which captures a distinct mechanism through which leaders shape program quality. Because this study's central argument is that leadership functions as the primary engine of mentoring effectiveness, these three models are examined first, before the literature review turns to the specific emotional, academic, and personal-growth outcomes they are theorized to shape.

Instructional, Transformational, and Distributed Leadership: Complementary Mechanisms of Influence

Instructional leadership centers on goal-setting, coordination, and monitoring of teaching and learning processes (Hallinger, 2005, 2011). Applied to mentoring, it ensures that activities are formally scheduled, systematically documented, and monitored against defined objectives, producing program coherence rather than ad hoc activity, and providing the accountability structures needed to sustain a whole-school intervention across numerous mentor-mentee pairs.

Transformational leadership emphasizes shared vision-building, individualized consideration, and the cultivation of relational trust and collective commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005); in mentoring contexts, it shapes the emotional climate of the school, translating leadership vision into classroom-level relational safety and care, and helping mentors internalize a shared purpose rather than treating mentoring as an added administrative task.

Distributed leadership conceives of leadership as stretched across multiple actors – formal leaders, teachers, and even students – rather than concentrated in a single role (Spillane, 2006); in whole-school mentoring, it enables shared ownership of implementation across school management teams, well-being committees, mentors, and peer structures, supporting sustainability beyond any individual leader's tenure.

These three leadership modes are not mutually exclusive. In fact, effective whole-school interventions typically depend on their simultaneous operation. For instance, instructional leadership providing structure, transformational leadership providing culture, and distributed leadership providing reach (Fullan, 2014).

Leadership and Students' Emotional Well-Being

Leadership shapes the institutional conditions under which mentoring relationships form and are sustained, and its influence on students' emotional well-being therefore operates primarily through the quality and consistency of the relationships it enables. Research consistently links supportive mentoring relationships with improved self-esteem, resilience, reduced stress, and stronger belonging (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2020). Mentoring functions as a protective factor when relationships are stable, consistent, and emotionally supportive, buffering adolescents against the developmental risks associated with low self-worth and social isolation (Garringer et al., 2015; Masten, 2018). Cultural norms characterized by respect for authority may influence disclosure and relational trust, suggesting that emotional outcomes depend on culturally responsive mentoring practices attentive to how young people in hierarchical settings experience adult guidance (Rhodes, 2020). Broader research on school stress indicates that academic pressure is strongly tied to systemic workload and assessment structures rather than to relational support alone (Pascoe et al., 2020), which implies that mentoring may buffer emotional experience without altering the structural sources of stress (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This distinction between emotional buffering and structural stress reduction is particularly relevant in examination-driven education systems, where periodic high-stakes assessment can sustain stress levels regardless of the relational support available to students, underscoring that leadership can shape the emotional climate mentors create even where it cannot alter external stressors originating outside the school.

Leadership and Students' Academic Achievement

Leadership's influence on academic achievement operates substantially through the instructional structures – goal-setting protocols, monitoring routines, and feedback expectations – those leaders establish for mentors to follow. Mentoring is frequently associated with improved academic motivation, study habits, and persistence, particularly when it extends beyond emotional encouragement to include concrete academic strategies (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; DuBois et al., 2011). Academic gains occur through direct instructional guidance and indirect strengthening of confidence and goal orientation (Rhodes, 2020), with stronger effects when mentoring incorporates structured goal setting and learning strategies rather than general encouragement alone (Garringer et al., 2015). Feedback, monitoring, and goal clarity are among the most influential school-based factors affecting achievement, with effect sizes for structured feedback among the largest identified across educational interventions (Hattie, 2009), and self-regulated learning theory similarly emphasizes goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflective evaluation as drivers of sustained academic improvement (Zimmerman, 2002). Motivational quality, however, is not simply additive with these structural supports: how a mentor frames goals and feedback – itself a function of the leadership culture in which the mentor operates – can shape whether students internalize academic effort as self-directed or externally imposed (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Leadership and Students' Personal Growth

Personal growth outcomes are similarly contingent on the opportunity structures that leadership creates, particularly regarding whether students are granted authentic responsibility rather than symbolic recognition. Personal growth during adolescence encompasses identity formation, leadership capacity, interpersonal competence, and future orientation, and represents a period in which young people actively negotiate questions of competence, belonging, and purpose (Erikson, 1968). Mentoring contributes to these processes through validation, role modeling, and structured reflection (Karcher et al., 2010; Rhodes, 2020), with research indicating improvements in leadership confidence, communication skills, and goal clarity among mentored students (DuBois et al., 2011). Career-related mentoring in particular helps adolescents move from broad or idealized aspirations toward more informed and realistic goals as self-concept differentiates with age and as students gain more accurate information about their strengths, interests, and the requirements of specific pathways (Gati & Levin, 2015). Leadership development within personal-growth-oriented mentoring appears to depend heavily on whether students are given authentic responsibility rather than symbolic recognition, suggesting that opportunity structure – a leadership decision – matters as much as relational quality (Spillane, 2006).

School Leadership within the Bhutanese Educational Context

Within Bhutan's GNH-informed and BB-aligned education system, school leadership operates within a hierarchical yet collectivist institutional culture that shapes how authority, accountability, and relational trust are enacted, and in which the principal is typically viewed as both administrative head and moral exemplar for the school community (Ministry of Education and Skills Development [MoESD], 2022). National reports document the expansion of school-based well-being and mentoring structures, alongside growing policy attention to adolescent mental health and safeguarding (MoESD, 2021, 2023), yet few empirical studies have examined how Bhutanese school leadership practices specifically shape mentoring implementation and outcomes, and fewer still have done so using triangulated quantitative and qualitative evidence from the same cohort of students.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The preceding sections indicate that leadership and mentoring are theoretically inseparable: instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership each provide a distinct mechanism through which program structure becomes lived practice, and the emotional, academic, and personal-growth literatures reviewed above each point back to leadership as a shaping condition rather than a peripheral variable. Yet, although international literature robustly connects mentoring to positive youth outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2020) and connects school leadership to program effectiveness (Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Spillane, 2006), few studies integrate these two literatures empirically, treating mentoring outcomes and leadership practice as separate rather than interdependent phenomena. Fewer still do so within Bhutanese middle secondary schools while simultaneously examining multidimensional student outcomes across emotional, academic, and personal growth domains within a single design. This absence is notable given that Bhutan's whole-school mentoring model is explicitly leadership-coordinated by design, making it a particularly well-suited context in which to examine the leadership-mentoring relationship empirically. This study addresses that integration gap.

Conceptual Framework

School leadership – operating through instructional, transformational, and distributed practices – is positioned as the primary driver shaping structured mentoring implementation, which in turn influences three domains of student outcomes: emotional well-being, academic achievement, and personal growth. This directional logic reflects the study's central premise that mentoring outcomes cannot be understood independently of the leadership structures that plan, resource, and sustain them. Contextual factors (scheduling, workload, physical space, and student self-regulation) are modeled as moderators that constrain or enable this leadership–mentoring–outcome pathway, consistent with ecological and organizational leadership perspectives that situate individual development within nested layers of family, school, and institutional influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). The framework thereby positions leadership not as a background variable but as the primary mechanism through which program design becomes lived practice. The Figure 2 is included to present the conceptual framework guiding the study.

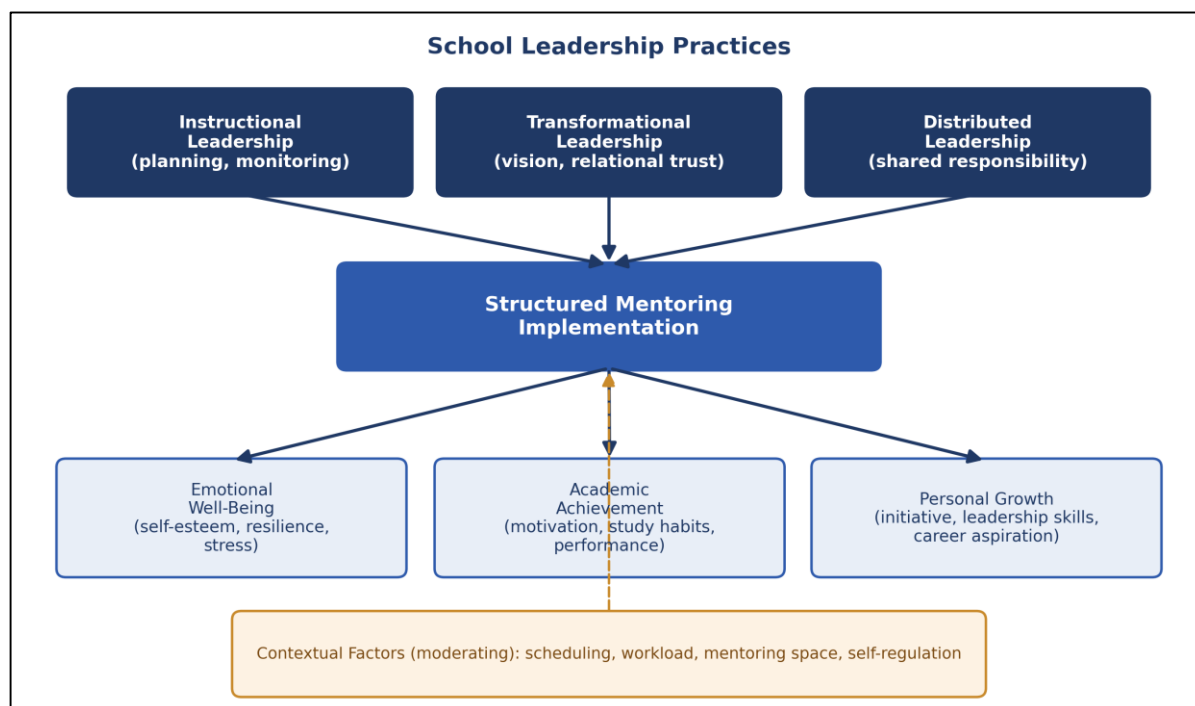


Figure 2 Conceptual Framework: Leadership, Mentoring, and Student Outcomes

Method

Research Design and Approach

The study used a mixed-methods, single-site case study design combining a quantitative pre-post design with qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted within the same institutional setting and the same participant cohort. A mixed-methods design was selected because the quantitative pre-post scores alone could not explain why particular domains changed as they did, while the qualitative accounts alone could not establish whether observed differences were statistically reliable; combining both strands allowed convergence and divergence between the numerical and narrative evidence to be interpreted jointly, which proved essential for making sense of domains in which scores declined even as participants described positive experiences. The case study framework enabled in-depth examination of leadership structures and mentoring processes within their real institutional context, an approach considered appropriate when a contemporary phenomenon cannot readily be separated from the context in which it occurs (Yin, 2014). Integrating quantitative and qualitative strands supported methodological triangulation, allowing convergence between data sources to strengthen confidence in findings and divergence to be treated as analytically informative rather than as error.

Study Site, Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted at WMSS, a BB school in Bjabcho Gewog, Chhukha Dzongkhag, enrolling 539 students (266 male, 273 female), 38 teachers, and 13 support staff, governed by a School Management Team and Board (WMSS, 2025). Participants comprised Classes VII–X students in the structured mentoring program, along with teacher mentors and school administrators involved in implementation. Student participants for the quantitative survey were selected via stratified random sampling by grade level and gender to ensure representativeness and reduce sampling error (Cochran, 1977).

A total of 153 student mentees completed both the pre- and post-intervention surveys as the same cohort, comprising 87 females (56.9%) and 66 males (43.1%). Most were aged 14–16 years (69.9%) or 11–13 years (17.6%); 17 (11.1%) were aged 17–19, and two (1.3%) were 20 or above.

Gender distribution varied moderately by grade: Class VII was 54.5% female (18) and 45.5% male (15); Class VIII was 53.7% male (22) and 46.3% female (19); Class IX was 60.5% female (26) and 39.5% male (17); and Class X was 66.7% female (24) and 33.3% male (12).

Qualitative data were gathered via FGDs and semi-structured interviews across three groups: student mentees (9 FGD; 72 participants, 36 male, 36 female) from Classes VII–X; teacher mentors (3 FGD; 24 participants, 14 male, 10 female); and teacher leaders (5 semi-structured interviews), including School Management Team members and mentoring domain heads, to capture strategic and implementation-level perspectives.

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected using validated instruments: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-10), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), the Academic Motivation Scale, the Study Habits Inventory, the adapted Personal Growth Initiative Scale, the Leadership Skills Assessment, the Career Aspiration Scale, the Interpersonal Relationship Scale, and school academic performance records, chosen to correspond directly to the study's five objectives. All instruments were piloted prior to administration to check contextual clarity and cultural appropriateness for a Bhutanese middle secondary population. Baseline data were collected in May 2025, at the start of the mentoring cycle, and post-intervention data were collected in October 2025, after its completion, from the same cohort of students to enable within-group paired comparison over time. Qualitative data were collected after the post-test through audio-recorded, transcribed interviews and focus group discussions examining mentoring processes, relational dynamics, and leadership practices, allowing qualitative accounts to contextualize and help explain the quantitative pattern of change.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS (Version 27). Preliminary screening examined data accuracy, missing values, and statistical assumptions before substantive analysis proceeded. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test together with inspection of skewness, kurtosis, and histograms; paired-samples t-tests were applied where assumptions of normality were satisfied, and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used where they were violated. Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, moving from familiarization through coding, theme development, and review to final naming and reporting, alongside qualitative content analysis that examined the frequency and distribution of recurring categories across transcripts. This combination enabled systematic comparison across student mentee, teacher mentor, and teacher leader perspectives for each outcome domain.

Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Construct validity was strengthened through the use of established, standardized instruments rather than researcher-generated measures, and internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each scale. The pre-post design supported internal validity by enabling within-group comparison over time, while stratified sampling by grade level enhanced representativeness across the student population. Qualitative credibility was supported through triangulation across three participant groups, member checking of emerging interpretations, and systematic documentation of analytic decisions to maintain an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Integration of the quantitative and qualitative strands at the interpretation stage further reinforced overall methodological rigor, consistent with mixed-methods integration principles that treat convergence and divergence between strands as substantively meaningful rather than as a threat to validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection, in accordance with national standards and ethical requirements for research involving minors. All participants received information sheets detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and rights in accessible language appropriate to their age. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental consent additionally secured for students under 18 years before any data collection began. Confidentiality was protected through anonymized coding of all survey and interview data, password-protected and access-restricted data storage, and deletion of audio recordings once transcription was complete and verified. Participation was voluntary throughout, with an explicit right to withdraw at any stage without penalty or effect on the student's standing in the mentoring program, and access to school counseling services was made available should participation raise emotional concerns for any student. No experimental manipulation was introduced; the study evaluated an existing institutional program rather than testing a novel intervention on

students, ensuring risk remained within the limits of normal school life. Findings are reported transparently, and data integrity was maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Findings

Findings are organized below by research objective, drawing on triangulated evidence from institutional documentation, mentor and leader accounts, focus group discussions, and the quantitative pre–post survey. Table 1 and Figure 3 provide an overview of results across all nine measured variables; narrative findings for each objective follow. Interpretation across objectives is brought together in the Discussion. To protect participant confidentiality while allowing readers to distinguish participant groups, quotations below are identified by pseudonyms drawn from three groups: Student Mentee (numbered 1–9, reflecting the nine student FGDs), Teacher Mentor (numbered 1–3, reflecting the three-teacher mentor FGDs), and Teacher Leader (numbered 1–5, reflecting the five leader interviews). Each pseudonym is followed by its data-collection method, FGD or Interview, so readers can identify how that account was gathered.

Table 1

Pre–Post Comparison of Mentoring Outcomes

Variable	Pre M	Pre SD	Post M	Post SD	Test Statistic	<i>p</i>
Self-Esteem	17.49	2.67	22.92	4.03	W = 597.50	< .001
Resilience	24.93	5.70	24.70	5.90	t(152) = 0.35	.727
Perceived Stress	13.18	3.34	13.12	3.66	t(152) = 0.16	.869
Academic Motivation	21.95	5.09	20.14	5.17	t(152) = 3.48	.001
Study Habits	18.50	5.51	17.75	5.09	t(152) = 1.17	.243
Personal Growth Initiative	41.12	8.21	38.27	8.83	W = 3908.00	.004
Leadership Skills	25.65	4.50	24.79	4.65	W = 4884.00	.283
Career Aspiration	22.96	4.48	21.52	4.66	W = 3742.50	.001
Interpersonal Relationship	22.34	4.58	21.24	4.48	t(152) = 2.23	.027
Academic Performance (%)	71.17	8.82	73.33	9.68	W = 4627.50	.029

Note: Paired-samples *t*-tests were used when normality was met; Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used otherwise. *W* = Wilcoxon test statistic.

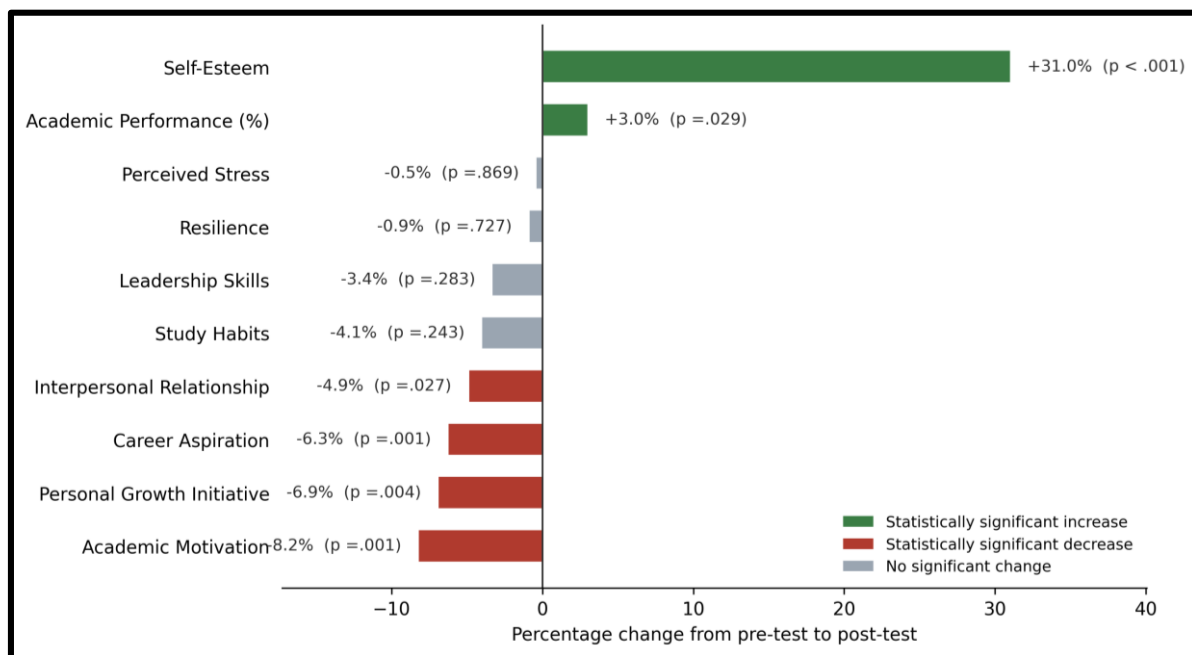


Figure 3. Pre–Post Percentage Change in Mentoring Outcomes (*N* = 153)

Structured Mentoring and Students' Emotional Well-Being

Self-esteem increased significantly from pre-test to post-test (*M* = 17.49 to *M* = 22.92, *W* = 597.50, *p* < .001). Institutional messaging emphasized care and psychological safety from the start of the year. Mentors described

visible growth in student confidence and classroom participation, and students reported feeling more able to voice opinions and trust their own abilities. Teacher Mentor 1 (FGD) explained, “I have noticed a remarkable improvement in my mentees' confidence. They are now more willing to speak openly, share their ideas without hesitation, and participate actively in class discussions.” Student Mentee 1 (FGD) similarly reflected, “Before mentoring, I used to feel shy and unsure of myself... Now I feel more confident than before and I believe that my opinions matter.” All three perspectives converged, indicating that relational encouragement and a stable, monitored mentoring structure jointly strengthened students' sense of self-worth.

Resilience showed no statistically significant change ($M = 24.93$ to $M = 24.70$, $t(152) = 0.35$, $p = .727$). Institutional well-being initiatives, including the Students' Resilience Development Program, framed resilience-building around awareness and encouragement. Teacher Mentor 2 (FGD) described this relational approach: “I help them build self-confidence and resilience by celebrating small achievements and encouraging them to view failures as opportunities to improve.” Students reported feeling calmer under pressure, but this qualitative sense of improved coping did not translate into a measurable score change, suggesting that awareness-based encouragement alone may be insufficient to shift resilience without more structured, skill-based coping practice.

Perceived stress likewise showed no significant change ($M = 13.18$ to $M = 13.12$, $t(152) = 0.16$, $p = .869$). Safeguarding and well-being structures provided channels for emotional support, but academic workload and examination schedules remained constant. Student Mentee 2 (FGD) shared, “Just having someone to talk to when I felt overwhelmed made a big difference because I felt understood and supported.” This kind of account, echoed across several mentee interviews, indicates that mentoring functioned as a relational buffer against the emotional impact of stress rather than as a mechanism that reduced the structural academic pressures generating it.

Structured Mentoring and Students' Academic Outcomes

Academic motivation declined statistically across both intrinsic ($M = 21.95$ to $M = 20.14$, $t(152) = 3.48$, $p = .001$) and extrinsic ($W = 3586.00$, $p = .005$) subscales, while amotivation remained unchanged ($W = 2588.50$, $p = .522$). Teacher Mentor 3 (FGD) described a performance-oriented framing of motivational support: “When students feel disappointed about their performance, I encourage them to channel that disappointment into motivation and effort to improve.” Students described learning as more interesting when mentors connected ideas across subjects, but generally framed engagement in terms of improvement and grades rather than enjoyment. A subset of students remained irregular in attendance and participation despite encouragement, indicating that motivational barriers persisted for some students even as overall program structures promoted engagement.

Study habits showed no statistically significant change ($t(152) = 1.17$, $p = .243$). Mentors actively guided students in building study timetables and revision plans, and Student Mentee 3 (FGD) reflected, “My mentor encouraged me to create a study schedule and follow it regularly to improve my performance.” Several students, however, also acknowledged inconsistent follow-through, suggesting that mentoring introduced organizational strategies and raised awareness of effective study methods without yet producing widespread, sustained behavioral change.

Academic performance improved modestly but significantly ($M = 71.17\%$ to $M = 73.33\%$, $W = 4627.50$, $p = .029$). Teacher Mentor 1 (FGD) described the structured process underlying this gain: “We monitor their academic progress, assist them in setting achievable goals, and track development against goals.” Student Mentee 4 (FGD) linked this guidance to concrete change: “The mentoring program has helped me develop better study habits... I became more motivated to study and take my academic work seriously.” The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that structured monitoring and feedback—core instructional-leadership mechanisms—translated into measurable, if modest, academic gains.

Structured Mentoring and Students' Personal Growth

Personal growth initiative declined significantly ($W = 3908.00$, $p = .004$). Institutional platforms for participation existed but were bounded by academic schedules, and mentors noted that limited interaction time constrained how much initiative students could develop. Student Mentee 5 (FGD) nonetheless described a concrete instance of stepping up: “I started volunteering to help new students adjust to school life because my

mentor encouraged me to take responsibility.” Such accounts suggest that initiative was stimulated in specific contexts rather than broadly or consistently across the cohort.

Leadership skills remained statistically stable ($W = 4884.00$, $p = .283$). Leadership opportunities such as class captain and health captain roles were available but concentrated among a small number of appointed students. Student Mentee 6 (FGD), who held such a role, reflected, “I took the responsibility as health captain in my school, and this experience helped me become more confident.” Most mentees did not report comparable leadership experiences, indicating that mentoring can support leadership growth when paired with a concrete role, but broader, more inclusive leadership opportunities are needed to produce measurable gains across the wider student body.

Career aspiration declined significantly ($W = 3742.50$, $p = .001$), as did interpersonal relationship scores ($M = 22.34$ to $M = 21.24$, $t(152) = 2.23$, $p = .027$). Student Mentee 7 (FGD) described the reflective process mentors encouraged: “My mentor helped me explore different career options and think about what I want to become in the future.” Read alongside this kind of qualitative evidence of deeper reflection, the decline in self-reported career aspiration and interpersonal relationship scores plausibly reflects more critical, realistic self-appraisal as students engaged more deeply with these questions, rather than an actual narrowing of ambition or a decline in relational competence.

The Role of School Leadership in Shaping Mentoring Effectiveness

Analysis of leader and mentor accounts, triangulated with institutional documentation, showed mentoring operating through the interplay of three leadership modes.

Instructional leadership was evident in the formal structuring of mentoring – predefined orientation, goal setting, weekly sessions, and structured documentation – reinforced by the school's Child Safeguarding and Protection Framework, which assigns the Principal explicit responsibility for monitoring implementation and reviewing policy. Teacher Mentor 2 (FGD) described this structure directly: “The mentoring program was designed to support learners for their professional growth. It follows its structural plan that includes orientation, goal setting, classroom observation and regular feedback sessions,” reflecting the goal clarity and supervision that define instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011). Teacher Leader 1 (Interview) added a strategic-level perspective: “I review each domain head’s monthly report personally, and if a section falls behind on the checklist, I follow up directly, because without that oversight the program would drift into inconsistency across classes.”

Transformational leadership was visible in the alignment between the Principal's articulated vision and mentors' own relational practice. School management documentation recorded that “the session opened with a heartfelt welcome note from our Principal, who addressed both learners and new teachers, emphasizing the school's commitment to fostering a supportive and thriving environment.” This vision–practice congruence is consistent with transformational leadership's emphasis on shared values shaping teacher beliefs and practice (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005) and was reinforced through visible leadership compassion during a fire incident in March 2025, when senior leaders personally supported affected families to sustain continuity of care. Teacher Leader 2 (Interview) reflected on the intent behind this culture: “We never wanted mentoring to feel like paperwork; from the first orientation, we spoke about care and belonging so that teachers carried that spirit into their own sessions.”

Distributed leadership was reflected in the Wellbeing Team organogram, which extends responsibility from the Principal and Wellbeing Focal through counselors, mentors, Peer Helpers, and student safeguarding representatives. Teacher Mentor 3 (FGD) captured the shared, effortful nature of this distributed model: “Mentorship is not always easy. It is a challenging task, but we learn a lot through interaction and understanding each other's stories,” consistent with Spillane's (2006) conception of leadership as stretched across formal and informal actors. Teacher Leader 3 (Interview) described how responsibility is shared across the team: “The Wellbeing Team meets every month so that counselors, mentors, and I are working from the same picture; mentoring cannot rest on one office alone.”

Contextual Factors Enabling or Constraining Effectiveness

Across all participant groups, mentoring was described as enabled by strong institutional commitment, structured planning, and relational trust. Students frequently characterized mentoring as psychologically safe and relationally meaningful. However, mentors and school leaders also identified recurring constraints.

Student Mentee 8 (FGD) explained a common scheduling problem: “One of the main challenges is that we are sometimes unable to complete the activities in our roadmap on time... other school programs are also often held on Wednesdays, the same day as our mentor-mentee meetings.” Teacher Mentor 1 (FGD), in turn, pointed to gaps in institutional support: “Institutional support such as regular workshops, mentor networking sessions, and access to counseling resources would greatly benefit mentors.” Students also proposed concrete improvements; Student Mentee 9 (FGD) suggested, “It would have also been great if our mentors could do one-on-one conversations with mentees where they can talk more personally if they have something private to share.”

Discussion

The findings across all five objectives support the study's central proposition that mentoring effectiveness at WMSS functions as a leadership-driven institutional practice rather than a stand-alone intervention, and that leadership operates as the mechanism linking program structure to the specific pattern of gains, stability, and apparent decline observed across emotional, academic, and personal-growth domains. This pattern is not adequately explained by any single outcome in isolation; rather, it is the configuration of results across nine variables, read against the qualitative accounts of three participant groups, that reveals leadership's coordinating role. This reading also resonates with Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) governance philosophy, which treats institutions as interconnected wholes rather than as collections of discrete programs, implying that a mentoring initiative's success is inseparable from the leadership ecosystem in which it is embedded (MoESD, 2022).

The strong, convergent improvement in self-esteem is consistent with meta-analytic evidence that mentoring reliably enhances adolescents' self-esteem (Claro & Perelmiter, 2022; Raposa et al., 2019) and with Self-Determination Theory's foundational proposition that fulfillment of competence and relatedness needs reinforces self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This finding also aligns with Rhodes's (2006) model of youth mentoring, in which social-emotional support is typically the first and most reliably achieved pathway of change, often preceding more complex cognitive and identity-level shifts. The stability of resilience and perceived-stress scores, despite qualitative reports of improved coping and reduced isolation, is best explained by the distinction between relational buffering and structural stress reduction: supportive relationships can mitigate emotional burden without altering the workload and assessment pressures that generate it (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Pascoe et al., 2020) and durable resilience gains typically require sustained, skill-based coping practice beyond what a once-weekly mentoring session can provide (Jagiello et al., 2024; Llistosella et al., 2023; Masten, 2018). In the Bhutanese context, this null result may also partly reflect cultural norms of emotional restraint and modesty consistent with Buddhist-influenced upbringing, in which students may under-report both distress and coping strength on self-report instruments regardless of actual change, a possibility consistent with the more expressive and detailed accounts of coping that emerged in the FGDs.

The academic domain shows a similarly nuanced pattern. Academic performance improved through mechanisms consistent with visible learning and self-regulated learning research – structured feedback, monitoring, and goal clarity (Hattie, 2009; Zimmerman, 2002) – which map directly onto instructional leadership's emphasis on planning and supervision. The statistically significant decline in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, read alongside qualitative evidence of sustained effort, is plausibly explained by Self-Determination Theory's account of motivational internalization: as externally driven motivation becomes integrated into more self-regulated forms, students may score lower on instruments capturing extrinsic drivers even while remaining engaged through relational trust (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). An additional, complementary explanation is that the mentoring program's strong emphasis on measurable progress and examination readiness may have inadvertently foregrounded performance goals over curiosity-driven exploration, a trade-off long noted in achievement-goal research even where overall effort is maintained. This dynamic is likely amplified within Bhutan's examination-driven secondary system, in which high-stakes national assessments at key class levels exert persistent structural pressure on both students and mentors, a pressure that the BB reform's shift toward holistic, competency-based assessment is explicitly intended to ease over time (MoESD, 2022). The stability of study habits alongside reported inconsistency in following study routines is consistent with habit-formation research showing that durable behavioral change requires repeated practice and environmental reinforcement well beyond a single mentoring cycle (Wood & R  nger, 2016).

Within personal growth, the statistically significant declines in personal growth initiative and career aspiration, alongside qualitative accounts of deeper reflection and more realistic future planning, are consistent with

developmental research showing that adolescent self-appraisal becomes more critical and differentiated with age (Scherrer & Preckel, 2019) and that career expectations commonly narrow toward realism as students gain clearer information about pathways and requirements (Gati & Levin, 2015). This pattern is also consistent with Erikson's (1968) account of adolescence as a period of active identity negotiation, in which more sophisticated self-evaluation, even when it lowers self-reported scores, can represent developmental progress rather than regression. In Bhutan, this tendency toward conservative self-rating may be reinforced by culturally valued modesty and self-effacement, in which openly claiming strong initiative or leadership capacity can be experienced as socially immodest, so that a genuine increase in capability may still be reported cautiously. The decline in interpersonal relationship scores is plausibly part of the same recalibration pattern rather than an actual loss of relational competence. The stability of leadership skills scores, combined with qualitative evidence of pronounced growth concentrated among a small number of formally appointed student leaders, illustrates a structural limitation in distributed leadership at the student level: leadership opportunities were restricted to appointed roles rather than systematically rotated across the mentee cohort, consistent with Spillane's (2006) caution that distributed leadership requires deliberate structuring of roles, not merely the presence of multiple actors.

Across all five objectives, leadership functions as the coordinating mechanism: instructional leadership provides the structural backbone that translates policy into coherent weekly practice; transformational leadership supplies the relational and cultural conditions under which students feel safe engaging with mentors; and distributed leadership extends responsibility beyond the Principal's office into a networked system of counsellors, mentors, and peer structures. This triad closely mirrors Robinson et al.'s (2008) finding that leadership's effect on student outcomes operates largely through its influence on the conditions and processes of teaching and support, rather than through direct intervention. Contextual constraints – scheduling conflicts, workload, and limited space – did not undermine this leadership–mentoring relationship but did constrain its depth, echoing Leithwood and Jantzi's (2005) observation that transformational leadership's effects depend on enabling organizational conditions as well as vision. In Bhutan's civil-service-structured education system, this instructional backbone is further reinforced by the Dzongkhag Education Office's supervisory relationship with individual schools and by driglam namzha, the traditional Bhutanese code of conduct that formalizes respectful, hierarchical interaction between students, teachers, and school leaders, lending institutional and cultural weight to the Principal's monitoring role. Viewed through an ecological systems lens, mentoring outcomes at WMSS emerge from the interaction of nested layers of influence – individual student characteristics, mentor practice, school leadership, and wider institutional and cultural context – rather than from any single layer in isolation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In a hierarchical, collectivist institutional culture such as Bhutan's, students' consistent reports of feeling safe to open up to mentors suggest that transformational leadership's emphasis on relational trust may carry particular weight in overcoming cultural reticence around disclosure, consistent with the broader literature on culturally responsive mentoring (Rhodes, 2020). This dynamic can usefully be understood through the Bhutanese concept of *tha-damtshig* – a sense of sacred, reciprocal bond and loyalty between individuals in a relationship of trust – which offers a culturally resonant frame for the kind of relational commitment mentors described cultivating with their mentees, beyond what secular models of transformational leadership alone capture. This suggests that in settings where driglam namzha might otherwise formalize distance between adults and young people, transformational leadership's explicit modeling of care and approachability may function as a cultural bridge, enabling a depth of relational engagement that structural planning alone could not produce.

A further insight emerging from the triangulated evidence is that the domains showing clear, convergent improvement – self-esteem and academic performance – were precisely those most directly targeted by instructional leadership mechanisms of goal-setting and monitoring, whereas domains showing statistical decline alongside positive qualitative narratives – motivation, personal growth initiative, and career aspiration – were those most dependent on students' internal, developmental processes rather than external structuring. This distinction suggests a boundary condition for leadership-driven mentoring: instructional and transformational leadership appear highly effective at shaping externally observable, structurally supported outcomes, but their influence on internally mediated developmental processes may be more indirect, operating by creating safe conditions for change rather than by directly producing it. For Bhutan's wider holistic education agenda, this boundary condition carries a specific policy implication: GNH- and BB-aligned mentoring frameworks may need to distinguish explicitly between outcomes that leadership can drive directly

through structure and monitoring, and outcomes that leadership can only indirectly enable by creating the psychological safety within which adolescent development unfolds on its own timeline. Overall, the evidence indicates that mentoring outcomes at WMSS cannot be fully explained by program design alone; they are substantially mediated by the specific configuration of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership practices operating within the school, by Bhutan's distinctive cultural and institutional context, and by the developmental nature of adolescence itself, moderated by resource and scheduling conditions.

Limitations and Future Research

As this is a single-site case study, findings are not statistically generalizable beyond WMSS, though analytic transferability to similarly structured BB schools is plausible. The absence of a comparison school limits causal inference regarding leadership's specific contribution relative to other factors, and the seven-month intervention window may be too short to capture resilience or habit-based change that typically requires longer reinforcement. Future research should employ multi-site or comparative designs examining variation in leadership practice across schools, and longitudinal designs to determine whether the motivational and personal-growth patterns observed here represent temporary recalibration or longer-term shifts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the impact of structured mentoring on students' emotional well-being, academic achievement, and personal growth at WMSS, and the role of school leadership in shaping that impact. Structured mentoring was associated with significant gains in self-esteem and modest academic improvement, while resilience, stress, study habits, and leadership skills remained statistically stable, and motivation, personal growth initiative, career aspiration, and interpersonal relationship scores declined in ways more plausibly explained by developmental recalibration than by disengagement. These patterns are best understood through the leadership configuration underlying the program: instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership jointly shaped program coherence, relational trust, and accountability, moderated by scheduling, workload, and space constraints.

Building on these findings, the study offers the following recommendations for strengthening mentoring at WMSS and comparable BB schools:

1. Emotional well-being: resilience and stress-management components should move from awareness-raising toward structured, skill-based coping instruction, delivered consistently across the mentoring cycle rather than concentrated in a single term;
2. Academic outcomes: autonomy-supportive practices – such as mentee-led goal setting and reflective dialogue on relevance – should be strengthened to protect intrinsic motivation alongside continued structured goal-setting and monitoring;
3. Personal growth: career guidance should be formalized through structured pathway mapping, and leadership opportunities should be rotated more broadly across the mentee cohort rather than concentrated in a small number of appointed roles;
4. Leadership practice: instructional leadership should be extended through a formal monitoring and evaluation framework, including baseline–endline assessment and mid-cycle review, to sustain accountability beyond individual leadership tenure;
5. Contextual and operational support: dedicated mentoring space, protected scheduling, and expanded mentor professional development should be prioritized to address the operational constraints that mentors and leaders identified; and
6. Policy scaling: at the Dzongkhag and national levels, standardized mentoring guidelines and leadership-preparation programs that explicitly incorporate mentoring supervision would support the scalability of this leadership-driven model across other BB schools (MoESD, 2022).

These recommendations point toward a single conclusion: sustaining and scaling structured mentoring at WMSS and within Bhutan's wider education system will depend less on the curriculum itself than on the leadership infrastructure that surrounds it – structured resilience and coping instruction, more autonomy-supportive practices, broader distribution of student leadership opportunities, and formalized monitoring and

evaluation, all embedded within a policy environment that explicitly and coherently links mentoring to Bhutan's GNH- and BB-aligned education goals.

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