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Keijzer, R.; Rijst, R.M. van der; Schooten, E. van; Admiraal, W.F.

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Towards emotional responsive mentoring of at-risk students in last-resort programs

Rineke Keijzer^{1,2*} , Roeland van der Rijst¹, Erik van Schooten² and Wilfried Admiraal¹

*Correspondence:

r.keijzer@hr.nl

² Rotterdam University

of Applied Sciences,

Museumpark 40,

P.O. Box 25035, 3001

HA Rotterdam, The

Netherlands

Full list of author information

is available at the end of the
article

Abstract

Background: Mentors guide students in their challenges at school and in life. At-risk students in last-resort programs who are at a high risk of leaving school unqualified are especially in need of highly competent and adaptive mentors. This study therefore aimed to identify mentor qualities as perceived by at-risk students and their mentors that meet students' needs and mentors' capabilities.

Methods: Face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and mentors of two specialized programs in the Netherlands. Sensitizing concepts, derived from literature, were used to identify themes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analyses and was validated by performing an audit.

Results: The mentor qualities that at-risk students and their mentors reported were classified in three different themes. Mentor tasks consisted of guiding and motivating students and providing them with tangible methods of support. Relationships between mentor and student were based on levels of respect, equality, and bonding. Characteristics of mentors related to empathy, care, and trust.

Research implications: Emotional responsiveness deserves further exploration as it appears to be an underlying concept of being a good mentor. Future research might explore mentor qualities in the context of other last-resort programs for at-risk students.

Practical implications: Findings implicate that mentors have to walk a tightrope between keeping professional distance and being sensitive, suggesting constant attention to their professional development is needed.

Originality: In the context of last-resort programs, an alternative perspective on mentoring at-risk students is outlined, based on perceptions of both students and mentors.

Keywords: Mentoring, At-risk students, Emotional responsiveness, Rebound program, Vocational education, Audit

Introduction

In many educational settings, teachers are assigned an additional task as mentor, which is particularly meaningful in supporting and guiding students. Mentoring at-risk students who attend a specialized or last-resort program can be assumed to impose other or more requirements on mentors compared to mentors in regular educational programs. Last-resort programs are a combination of specialized educational curricula and

personalized support in which at-risk students are offered a chance to graduate with additional assistance compared to regular curricula. The students who are admitted to these programs consist of a heterogeneous group of students (Keijzer et al. 2020) of whom many may struggle with one or more obstacles of a personal or social nature. Sulimani-Aidan (2017a) found several barriers that deterred vulnerable young adults from attending school, including a lack of environmental support for learning and schooling and a low self-efficacy. As a result, they are at risk to drop-out of school.

For this study two specialized last-resort programs were included. The first was a rebound program (RP), a special, non-mainstream educational trajectory with intensive support for former dropouts. The second was a school-based curriculum at schools for senior secondary vocational education (SSVE) at entry-training level, which is the lowest level of SSVE. Students may or may not have a diploma from a previous education and may or may not be former dropouts. SSVE is obliged to accept all students under 23 years. This results in heterogeneity of the student population.

The challenges at school and in the lives of at-risk students are strongly entangled. Supporting at-risk students at school and in life is vital to improve their chances of graduating, to find appropriate apprenticeships and to achieve success in their future jobs (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2017). Without formal qualifications, the ungraduated face a serious risk of lasting unemployment and social exclusion (Bäckman and Nilsson 2016; CBS [Statistics Netherlands] 2020). The key, therefore, for at-risk students in particular, is to attend school and stay motivated for learning. For mentors it is essential to know how to guide their students to graduation.

Despite the fact that mentoring may be assumed to be a decisive factor for the success of last-resort programs, this angle of approach has received little scholarly attention. Studies so far mostly address either school-based mentoring (Kanchewa et al. 2021; Meltzer et al. 2020; Spiekermann et al. 2020) or out-of-school or community-based mentoring (Buehler et al. 2018; Yu and Deutsch 2019). Also, studies mainly include middle schoolers and pay less attention to older at-risk students (Herrera et al. 2013). Research on specialized programs that offer an educational curriculum in combination with intensive personalized support, attended by late adolescents and young adults, is still lacking. This study aims to fill that gap by providing insights into the qualities mentors in last-resort programs need to have, according to these mentors and their students, to guide and support at-risk students in order to increase their chances of graduation.

Mentors and mentoring

In the context of last-resort programs, mentors are challenged to support at-risk students' well-being as well as their learning. McNeven et al. (2020) and Karcher (2008) found that mentoring can contribute to students' well-being in terms of positive self-perception and school connectedness. In addition, Jablon and Lyons (2021) and Herrera et al. (2011) found positive relationships between mentoring and academic achievement. Good personal relationships between mentor and student seem to be a crucial element of mentoring, according to mentors (McNeven et al. 2020) and at-risk students (Weiss et al. 2019).

Various authors differentiate between the terms mentoring, coaching and training. For example, Diller et al. (2021) distinguish between coaching and training as personal

development tools; they found that non-directive, empowering coaching best suits students with a need for autonomy, whereas training is more suitable for students who need to develop competences and skills. Taylor and Black (2018) interpret mentoring as a personal reciprocal relationship, that is, one of a non-directive character, and coaching as a learning relationship aimed at enhancing competence and performance, that is, skills training. The distinction between non-directive and specific efforts is also made by Christensen et al. (2020) who found that non-specific efforts directed to personal bonding are conditional but not sufficient for successful mentoring; these should be accompanied by task-oriented or targeted activities. This conclusion corresponds with the finding of Jablon and Lyons (2021) that mentors' perceptions of relationship quality are significantly associated with academic outcomes for students. For our study, the non-directive as well as the task-specific orientation is relevant, which is best expressed in the term mentoring, especially for curricula covering an extended period of time. According to our definition, mentoring contains building personal reciprocal relationships—as conditional but not sufficient—and performing targeted activities in order to support and guide students.

Qualities of mentors are bound to personal characteristics. They can only be valued or interpreted in the light of the tasks to be performed and how the relationship between mentor and student should look like. The search for mentor qualities should thus start by investigating what tasks mentors should undertake, according to perceptions of at-risk students. In performing these tasks, at-risk students may wish mentors to meet aspects of relationship quality. Perceived tasks and relational aspects relate to the characteristics or competences mentors should have. Mentoring is a reciprocal process by definition (Pekel et al. 2018) and both mentor and student contribute to its result. Yet, mentors and students may evaluate mentors' qualities differently. Hence, also mentors' perceptions should be included in investigating how the mentoring process can be optimized in the context of last-resort programs for at-risk students. Mentors' perceptions concern the same three themes of mentor qualities, that is, the tasks they value and must perform, elements of relationships between them and their students, and the characteristics they need to have.

We reviewed literature on mentors and mentoring in broad contexts of education, community, and business (Jablon and Lyons 2021; Liang et al. 2008; Rhodes 2002; Vaclavik et al. 2017). We maintained the division into three themes of mentor qualities: mentor tasks, that is, actions and behaviors of a mentor; relationships between mentor and student, that is, how mentor and student interact; and mentor characteristics, that is, traits that mentors possess.

Mentor tasks

A main task of mentors is to provide guidance and to enhance motivation for learning, which involves encouraging school attendance and achievement, constructive feedback on assignments, setting high expectations of what their students can achieve, and helping their students to believe in their dreams and develop career ambitions (Weiss et al. 2019). Vaclavik et al. (2017) conducted a study on the quality of youth-adult mentoring relationships in the setting of an out-of-school-time (OST) program that links young people's academic learning and personal passions. In five focus groups, 26 adolescents

reflected on mentor tasks. They specifically valued guidance from adults who attempt to gradually convince them to have confidence in their own abilities. Sulimani-Aidan (2017b) showed that students perceive their mentors to be supportive when they follow a non-judgmental guiding approach. Encouragement and constructive criticism have also been found to be of value for mentees in professional contexts, as reported in a review of over 300 studies in contexts of education, medicine, and business by Ehrich et al. (2004).

Another identified task is emotional support, conceptualized by Vaclavik et al. (2017) as a specific way to support youth in the event of personal problems. The authors found that emotional support of mentors as perceived by youth contributes to positive outcomes, such as a sense of empowerment. Though *task* may suggest some tangible form, Vaclavik et al. (2017) operationalize the concept in terms of care and comfort. Other studies have interpreted emotional support as a mentor characteristic (e.g., Spencer 2006; Suldo et al. 2009; see "[Mentor characteristics](#)" section). Two more tasks have been identified. Vaclavik et al. (2017) found that adolescents appreciate mentors who provide information or advice concerning education or work, and who connect them to persons who can support them in exploring possibilities for internships or work, resulting in the expansion of young people's formal or informal networks. This informational support is found to be an important supportive task of mentors (Suldo et al. 2009). A final task of mentors is instrumental or skill-based support with, for example, academic tasks. Suldo et al. (2009) showed that academic support, such as being responsive to students' understanding of academic material and encouraging them to ask questions in classroom environments, relates strongly to students' subjective well-being. Instrumental support also applies to professional settings. Ehrich et al. (2004) showed that help with selecting strategies to improve mentees' performance and to broaden subject knowledge are among the mentor tasks that mentees most appreciate.

Relationships between mentor and student

Spencer (2006) examined mentoring relationships in a community-based mentoring program, which matched disadvantaged youth with adult volunteers. In 24 duo interviews, mentors and students reported that a successful mentoring relationship can be characterized as mutual, authentic, collaborative, and one of companionship. Students evaluated the relationship positively when the mentor's efforts shifted from helping needy persons to supporting students to reach their full potential (a mentor's task; see "[Mentor tasks](#)" section) and when mentors engaged in a genuine way with their students recognizing their individuality (a mentor's characteristic; see "[Mentor characteristics](#)" section). This finding exemplifies the interconnectedness of mentors' tasks and characteristics. Spencer (2006) concludes that a successful lasting mentoring relationship can be established when adolescents feel that their mentor treats them as equals. Several of these aspects of a good mentor–student relationship are similar to those found in the OST program examined by Vaclavik et al. (2017), in which mutual respect created a fruitful context for interacting on an equal footing. Students highly appreciated mentors who expressed respect, acted as a role model, and cultivated youth voice. The latter means encouraging students to think autonomously and speak out, resulting in students' feelings of empowerment and control over their future.

According to Rhodes (2002), good mentoring starts with a strong interpersonal connection between mentor and mentee. Without an emotional bond a mentor cannot serve as a role model for possible futures, and positive changes in social skills and well-being of mentees are not likely to occur. Liang et al. (2008) found that older students attach more value to an equal relationship with their mentors compared to younger peers. The older students think it is important that they keep a balance between being connected to their mentor and autonomous decision-making. They also reported that they wish to be taken seriously. In his review of best mentoring practices, Miller (2010) concludes that mentors should not act like a parent or show authoritarian behavior and that they should focus instead on creating a bond and a sense of equality with their mentee.

Based on a meta-analysis of 73 evaluative studies of mentoring programs DuBois et al. (2002) infer that frequent interaction, longevity of the relationship as well as emotional closeness between mentor and student are strongly linked to beneficial outcomes. This vitality of intense relationships between mentors and disconnected youth is also reported by Heinrich and Holzer (2011). Finally, connecting and conveying friendship are also found to be important aspects of mentoring relationships (Ehrich et al. 2004; Liang et al. 2008; Vaclavik et al. 2017).

Mentor characteristics

Adolescents in the OST program (Vaclavik et al. 2017) were found to appreciate genuine interest on the part of mentors engaging with them, which facilitates good mentor–mentee relationships. This is another finding exemplifying how the themes are interconnected: Genuine interest as a characteristic easing a sound relationship. The adolescents of the OST-program also showed to appreciate far-reaching involvement of mentors that exceeds their expectations, indicated as “going above and beyond”, including, for example, writing a letter of recommendation or attending an out-of-school event such as a music rehearsal. This shows a mentor’s interest in more areas of life than just a student’s academic performance, which was also valued by students studied by Suldo et al. (2009).

In a mixed-method study on forms of social support, Suldo et al. (2009) discerned three aspects of emotional support: expressions of empathy, care, and trust, as necessary characteristics that enable mentors to adequately perform their tasks and to build sound relationships with their students. Like instrumental support, emotional support was found to be independently and highly related to students’ well-being. Focus group discussions with students revealed that they most appreciate those teachers who are interested in them personally and create a positive and honest atmosphere (Suldo et al. 2009). The effects of communicating empathy and care were also reflected in the empathic relationship between mentor and student as examined by Spencer (2006). Students appreciated being shown empathy as the understanding of another person’s frame of reference.

According to Rhodes (2002), if mentors show empathy and if both mentor and mentee experience mutual trust, this can improve mentees’ feelings of well-being and increase their sources of support and encouragement in and around their community. Similar conclusions were formulated by Liang et al. (2008) who found that in informal mentoring contexts participants value mentors who show trust and fidelity, interpreting trust as being serious and honest with each other and relying on mentors to keep participants’ secrets confidential. Yu et al. (2019) found that youth who hesitate to attach to significant

non-parental adults specifically benefit from mentors they trust and who adapt to their needs by listening and caring.

Current study

In the literature on mentors and mentoring, various categories within three themes of mentoring qualities were distinguished. The first theme, mentor tasks, refers to acting, performing, conducting, or what a mentor *does*. This theme involves ways of providing support. The second theme, relationships between mentor and student, refers to the “inherently interpersonal endeavor” (DuBois et al. 2002, p. 189), and expresses the way of *interacting*. The third theme, mentor characteristics, relates to perceived characteristics that mentors preferably possess to perform and interact. This theme is about what a mentor *is* or *has*. These three themes of mentoring qualities represent acting, interacting and having, respectively. Despite this clear distinction, the themes are interconnected, and assigning categories to one of them could be challenging at times. For example, guiding of mentors may be interpreted as a task and as an aspect of relationship. Since guidance mainly expresses behavior, how a mentor acts, and not how mentor and student interact, categorizing it as a task seems most appropriate.

No studies include all three themes of mentor qualities. Some studies focus on mentor tasks (Vaclavik et al. 2017), some on relationship quality (Liang et al. 2008), and others on mentor characteristics (Rhodes 2002). Also, few studies address both mentors’ and students’ views (Jablon and Lyons 2021). In addition, most scholarly attention goes to middle or high schoolers. Yet at-risk students face increasing vulnerability as they grow older, due to, for example, young parenthood and a criminal neighborhood (Herrera et al. 2013). No studies address specialized programs that combine an educational curriculum with personalized support directed to students with a high risk of dropping out from school.

Dropout from last-resort programs forms a real threat to students’ future life chances and a good mentoring relationship might help to keep them on track. Considering their vulnerability and the obstacles they encounter, at-risk students may well place different demands on mentoring from students in mainstream education. For this group of students, in particular, it is important to get a better understanding of how they perceive and value mentoring in order to align their values and needs with the views and capabilities of mentors. Furthermore, perspectives of mentors themselves have received limited scholarly attention. Mentors’ views and capabilities need to be taken into account to avoid a one-sided emphasis on how mentoring is evaluated. A mismatch of perceptions between students and mentors can be counterproductive and may frustrate mentoring practices.

In the current study, we investigated which mentors’ qualities were considered important by at-risk students and their mentors of two specialized last-resort programs in the Netherlands. The considerations may be expressed in descriptive and appreciative ways. Three research questions guided this study: (a) How do students and mentors describe and value tasks offered by mentors? (b) How do students and mentors describe and value aspects of their relationship? (c) How do students and mentors describe and value characteristics of mentors?

Research design

Context

The two specialized last-resort programs included in this study, were situated in the urban area of Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The first is the rebound program (RP), a special, non-mainstream educational trajectory to which former dropouts can be referred to by a municipal youth help-desk. It intends to prepare students to rejoin regular education, such as the other last-resort program, that is, the school-based curriculum. Support is provided in order to enable school attendance, such as assistance with housing and coping with addiction or debts. The program starts with the basics of attending school: coming in on time, bringing their materials, and getting used to the normal routines at school. Then the focus shifts to curriculum content and assignments.

The second program is a school-based curriculum at entry-training level, which is the lowest level of schools for senior secondary vocational education (SSVE). The two largest schools for SSVE in the area participated. SSVE is part of the regular Dutch education system. Entry-training education consists to a large extent of practical lessons and part-time internships. SSVE is obliged to accept all students under 23 years, with or without a diploma. As a consequence, the student population is heterogeneous with respect to abilities and background. Students lack elementary language or math skills, are former dropouts, or are recently arrived immigrants who need to acquire a basic level of Dutch language proficiency. The curriculum and student population of the SSVE largely correspond to those of the RP.

Many of the students faced personal obstacles and were from deprived urban neighborhoods characterized by poverty, unemployment, lack of social cohesion and insecurity. These difficulties might have contributed to a permanent threat of student dropout. Mentors' efforts therefore combined general guidance and support relating to psychosocial problems and to academic issues. If the at-risk students of the programs needed specialist help, mentors might refer students to appropriate professionals, such as a behavioral expert or psychologist.

The RP and SSVE programs combine elements of (a) school-based programs emphasizing dropout prevention and strategies to promote access to higher educational levels, and out-of-school-time or community-based programs focusing on taking up or rejoining education, training, or employment; and (b) formal mentoring with a teacher who is assigned the additional task of mentor and informal mentoring between an adolescent and a supportive adult, e.g., a neighbor or sports instructor. Despite recognition of these elements, both programs in our study were school-based programs with formal mentors. The duration of both RP and SSVE programs is about 1 year, but can be adjusted to individual students. Students need to finish this specialized program before choosing between continuing education at the next level or starting work.

Participants

Purposive sampling at the two specialized programs resulted in 31 students and 24 mentors who participated voluntarily in this study (see Table 1). The interviews were planned at agreed days and times, taking into account program activities, days of internships and exams. We decided to include all the students who were present at those days and

Table 1 Student and mentor participants' program, gender, and age

	SSVE ^a		RP ^b		Total
	Males	Females	Males	Females	
Students					
16–17 years	4	5	2	2	13
18–20 years	4	2	2	1	9
21–28 years	4	3	1	1	9
Total	12	10	5	4	31
Mentors					
28–39 years	1	3	3	2	9
40–49 years	2	1	3	1	7
50–64 years	2	4	1	1	8
Total	5	8	7	4	24
Overall	17	18	12	8	55

^a School for Senior Secondary Vocational Education^b Rebound program (all former dropouts)

willing to participate. This decision had two consequences. First, we could not choose which student to interview. We requested the department heads, managers and mentors to invite as large a variety among the students present as possible, that is, males and females of different ages. The second consequence was that we could only interview the mentors who were present after class room hours at the days we conducted the interviews. Those with other working days or who visited their students at an internship company could not be included. Participation of both students and mentors was voluntary. No non-responses were reported. Parental consent for students under 18 years was secured prior to data collection. Informed consent for the interviews was also obtained from all students and mentors at the time of the interview.

Data collection

The first author and research assistants performed semi-structured individual interviews. The research assistants were informed about the background and content of the curricula. Interviews with students lasted on average 20 min and took place in a quiet room, during or after class. Mentors were interviewed after working hours and the conversations took about 40 min each. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. A topic list acted as a guide, to enable the interviewees to elaborate on issues that were important to them. Topics for the interviews concerned evaluation of the school atmosphere, goals and implementation of the program and students' evaluation of their mentor. In preparation of conducting the interviews, the first author and other researchers went through the interview guide to clarify its intention and to avoid any ambiguities. Open questions were used to stimulate participants to talk freely, to spontaneously mention any subjects or perspectives relevant to them and to avoid directing participants to predetermined subjects, so that information and themes emerged from the participants themselves (Creswell 2009). The research assistants were instructed similarly to keep asking questions about all the answers and to attune their formulations to both sample groups.

Data analyses

We derived several sensitizing concepts from the literature on mentors and mentoring within the three themes of mentor tasks, relationships between mentor and student, and mentor characteristics. This can be understood as a preliminary theory-driven, deductive analytical approach (Krippendorff 2019) in which the sensitizing concepts from the literature were used to select the relevant fragments for further inductive analysis. The result of this theory-driven analysis is presented in Table 2.

The thematic analysis was a data-driven, inductive process in which all the data were fully analyzed and explored in-depth to clarify subthemes emerging from the data. These analyses were meant to elaborate on the three themes from the data to produce insights into the meanings of these themes within the context of last-resort programs. The coding process consisted of several iterations. All initial coding was performed by the first author, iterative coding was performed by the first and second author.

During the inductive analytical process, thematic analyses were performed in three main steps. In the first step, we selected and labeled fragments that fitted the sensitizing concepts. The units of analysis expressed a single thought or feeling and ranged from a few words to an entire paragraph. The second step consisted of axial coding and, by means of close reading, and within a sensitizing concept, fragments with similar meanings were assigned to categories. When a fragment related to more than one category, it was assigned to the best fitting one. All fragments were interpreted and coded in an iterative process and definitions of categories were adapted along the way. Dialogical reliability was established by discussing minor issues with the first and second author, and major issues with all authors. In the third step, all transcriptions were coded again according to the revised descriptions and definitions of the categories, and all fragments were re-labeled based on the final coding system. The final description included five categories of mentor tasks, five of relationships between mentor and student, and three of mentor characteristics.

After the data analyses, an audit was conducted to assess their quality. A procedure described by Akkerman et al. (2008) was followed to determine the visibility, comprehensibility, and acceptability of our coding. The audit was conducted by an external auditor who had not been involved in any part of the study based on a draft of the paper.

Table 2 Sensitizing concepts relating to mentors' qualities resulting from literature review

Sensitizing concept	Categories			
Respect	Mutuality	Empathy	Encouragement	
Emotional support	Genuine interest	Going above and beyond	Trust and fidelity	
Instrumental support	Help with (teaching/learning) strategies	Skill-based support	Academic functioning	
Guidance and motivation	Informational support	Feedback, constructive criticism	Encouragement	Esteem/appraisal support
Autonomy	Balancing connection and autonomy	Authenticity	Cultivating youth voice	
Connection	Ongoing communication and friendship	Connecting		

Grouped according to overlapping definitions

The audit report (available on request) showed satisfactory results and the auditor did not formulate any recommendations to adjust the data analyses.

Results

Mentor qualities as described and valued by at-risk students and their mentors were examined in two specialized programs: a non-mainstream educational trajectory for former dropouts, called a rebound program (RP) and a school-based curriculum at entry-training level, the lowest level of senior secondary vocational education (SSVE).

The sample groups did not pay equal attention to all categories and in some cases, only one fragment (within one of a sample group) could be assigned a category. In those cases, the category will not be discussed below. No differences in descriptions and the valuing of mentors' qualities were observed between males and females, and between mentors and students from different age groups. There were, however, differences between mentors' and students' views and between the participants of the RP and SSVE.

In Tables 3, 4, and 5 (see “[Descriptions and valuing of mentor tasks](#)”, “[Descriptions and valuing of relationships between mentor and student](#)” and “[Descriptions and valuing of mentor characteristics](#)” sections respectively) the categories are formulated in general terms; for example, ‘Academic support’. Their corresponding summary and explanatory sentences reflect the actual or preferred ways of acting, interacting or having of mentors;

Table 3 Descriptions and valuing of mentor tasks

Acting	What mentor does or should do
Guidance tasks	Mentor guides student in activities, performance, and development
Approach in guidance	Pedagogical approach during mentors' guidance and ways of performing
Motivation	Mentor stimulates student, shows a positive attitude, continues to believe in student
Academic support	Mentor helps student with learning and with academic tasks
Informational support	Mentor supports student with information or advice concerning choices in education or work

The table indicates discussed categories. Findings are presented below in text and quotations

Table 4 Descriptions and valuing of relationships between mentor and student

Interacting	How relationship between mentor and student is or should be
Respect and equality	Student feels he/she is being taken seriously; interaction is on an equal footing
Authority	Authentic mentor role legitimates appealing to and exercising authority
Autonomy	Mentor encourages student's independent decision-making and taking responsibility
Contact	Student feels mentor is (frequently) accessible and available
Personal bonding	Mentor and student express the quality of interpersonal connection

The table indicates discussed categories. Findings are presented below in text and quotations

Table 5 Descriptions and valuing of mentor characteristics

Having	What a mentor is or should be, or has or should have
Empathy and affinity	Mentor 'gets' student, empathizes and sympathizes with student and target group
Genuine interest and care	Mentor is committed, cares about student, and wants to be meaningful
Trust	Student can trust the (confidentiality of the) mentor

The table indicates discussed categories. Findings are presented below in text and quotations

in the above example, ‘Mentor helps student with learning and with academic tasks.’ The tables do not present findings. Results of whether and how descriptions and valuing of either mentors, students or both relate to categories, are presented in “[Descriptions and valuing of mentor tasks](#)”, “[Descriptions and valuing of relationships between mentor and student](#)” and “[Descriptions and valuing of mentor characteristics](#)” sections. Both similarities and discrepancies between mentors and students will be covered in the text and quotations following each table.

Descriptions and valuing of mentor tasks

Categories of mentor tasks were recognized: guidance tasks, approach to guidance, motivation, and different forms of support of students. *Emotional support* in the sense of tangible help with personal problems was hardly mentioned by mentors and students. This may relate to the tension between emotional support as a task and its operationalization in terms of comfort and care (Vaclavik et al. 2017), which corresponds to emotional support as one of the forms of social support described by Suldo et al. (2009) and is reminiscent to a mentor’s characteristic. Therefore, we have omitted the category of emotional support as a task and will discuss it in “[Mentor tasks, relationships and characteristics](#)” section. Table 3 contains the five categories and their definitions.

Guidance tasks were almost exclusively mentioned by mentors. Important tasks they described were to help students to engage or re-engage with the education system and to keep attending school. Mentors also mentioned that they have to enable students to grow and help them to develop a realistic future perspective. Some mentors valued the combination of guiding students on both academic and non-academic issues. The students stressed a task-oriented element of guiding: The mentor mediates in conflicts that a student may have with a teacher or another student, and makes sure that students are prepared for school. Two quotations below illustrate mentor tasks in guidance. The first example illustrates the role of a mentor in engaging students to attend school and the second example is about helping students to set realistic goals.

They have been home for a while. Most of the time and energy goes into ensuring that someone can rejoin the system of going back to school, keeping to agreements. (mentor 4)

So, creating that realistic perspective. The pace at which they get things done, they have an unrealistic view of the timeline. Earning money fast, getting your diploma fast, now, now, now. They do not know how to invest in themselves. And bear in mind, they have to start at the bottom, in fact, they have to start far below. To open doors to themselves. (mentor 17)

Aspects of the *approach* in *guidance* were reported by almost all the RP-mentors and only one SSVE-mentor and one student. The RP-mentors considered it necessary to align their approach to individual needs and to have an understanding of the student’s life issues. According to their perceptions, this approach includes working step-by-step, allowing students to make mistakes, and staying positive. This step-by-step approach is illustrated by the following quotation.

You cannot get them out of the lifestyle of years in a few weeks. Especially not by taking too big steps, that is a pitfall. I wanted to do that in the beginning, but it doesn’t

work. (mentor 21)

However, according to mentors, they have to restrict their efforts, especially in cases where students do not seem to make an effort themselves. The following quotation expresses seeking a balance between mentors' efforts and subsequent activity of students.

I say this is my offer and the student takes it or doesn't. If someone doesn't want to, then I also let go. Some people have to hit that bottom to (make a mental) switch. (mentor 22)

Mentors described several ways in which they tried to *motivate* students for school: expressing their confidence that the students can perform well, emphasizing all kinds of successes, such as completing an assignment and showing up on time for an internship, and showing genuine interest in students' preferences when, for example, they were more motivated for work than for school. The mentors considered it important that students were motivated for either work or school and their efforts to support students' motivation were also strongly appreciated by their students. This appreciation was formulated by a student:

I especially think the way teachers can deal with the students. Even if you opted out of it completely, you can still get back into the school system. I think it is great that teachers can motivate the students. (student 28)

Mentors of the SSVE valued to provide *academic support* in responding to the students' academic abilities; RP-mentors mentioned this aspect of their work less often as important. These considerations differ from the valuing aspect of academic support mentioned by students. They varied in their evaluation of this academic help. Some were very satisfied because of, for example, clear instructions, and others were very dissatisfied, when, for example, they felt that they were left to their own devices. A student expressed a negative opinion about academic support in the following quotation.

The school doesn't really help. You have to do everything yourself. You have the pen, the pencil and the eraser and the teacher only gives you the paper. (student 2)

Students generally appreciated the *informational support*. For example, in conversations about continuing education or work, students reported that mentors noticed their personal preferences. The following quotation illustrates how a student valued the informational support from the mentor.

A mentor also gave me a tip to do the Logistics track]. [...] Then I started thinking and googling, visited open days and I found Logistics to be more fun, so I think that's good of the teachers. They are really involved with the student. (student 16)

Descriptions and valuing of relationships between mentor and student

Five categories were distinguished with respect to the relationships between mentor and student (see Table 4).

The first three categories (respect, authority and autonomy) imply that the mentor takes the student seriously and interacts on an equal footing, while at the same time

maintaining the authoritative role as a mentor. The other categories were labeled contact and personal bonding.

Some mentors described showing their *respect* for students as interacting with students on an equal footing. Students reported experiencing respect when their mentor treated them as an adult. In contrast, they experienced a lack of respect when they felt that their mentor did not care about their opinion. The following quotation illustrates a lack of respect according to a student, expressing an obvious negative connotation.

As a student you are only told that you will do the Trade track next year and nothing else. Nothing is discussed with you. (student 1)

According to mentors, keeping a professional distance from students is necessary to maintain their *authority*. They want to be by their students' side but not to become their friend. This valuing of proximity and distance in their profession is expressed by a mentor in the following quotation.

I am seen as a nice and funny coach, but they know what to expect from me. Laugh and cry, but there is also work to be done. Students know the limit. (mentor 19)

When students reported about authority, they were especially negative about the overfamiliar behavior of some mentors. This was mainly expressed by RP-students. Both overfamiliar and authoritarian behavior of mentors thwarted students' *respect* for them. Furthermore, students felt *respected* when they were encouraged to make decisions *autonomously* and to take responsibility; they perceived and valued *autonomy* as an indicator of *respect* and equality. Some mentors felt the need to encourage a student's independence. A student expressed the link between respect and authority in the following quotation.

The tip I want to give is that the teacher must stick to his own principles and not try to run with young people so that young people will like them. The student is not a teacher's friend. The teacher must maintain some form of authority or they [the students] will walk all over you. (student 29)

Most mentors, especially those of the RP, highly valued *contact* as aspect of a good mentoring relationship and mentioned that they were permanently available in order to avoid losing their students. Mentors described they usually had daily intermediate conversations in addition to scheduled mentoring meetings. The students appreciated extensive mentor availability and frequency of contact.

If there is no contact, then there is no opening to achieve anything. I think we are very good at that. Having time, having your own coach, being allowed to make mistakes, sitting down one-on-one, easily accessible. With contact you can make steps together. (mentor 23)

RP-mentors valued *personal bonding* since individual attention is crucial to enable students' development. They thought students should feel welcome and noticed. SSVE-mentors expressed their appreciation for personal bonding much less strongly. Students evaluated the bond with their mentor positively. For some of them, the bond

acquired a personal touch. Yet mentors reported that they intended to remain professional. A student expressed the meaning of personal bonding as follows:

As a teacher you are a teacher and of course you should help someone if someone has problems, but my mentor discusses it in-depth. She is not only a mentor, but also a supervisor, sister, mother to me. (student 18)

Descriptions and valuing of mentor characteristics

Three characteristics of mentors distinguished were empathy, genuine interest, and trust (see Table 5).

In the interviews, the mentors reported a need to feel involved with their students. These statements were labeled as *empathy*. They thought that, as a mentor, it is important to have *affinity* and to sympathize with at-risk students; according to themselves, mentors should choose to work with this target group. Some mentors added that this can be challenging—though energizing as well—because of the diversity of the target group.

If you behave like a mentor who tries to understand their mindset, you can be the connection between learning and growing up. (mentor 16)

Some students appreciated that mentors had an eye for them as a person, their needs and circumstances, though others did not feel this involvement. These expressions, labeled as *empathy*, were mainly done by students of the SSVE. They reported both positive and negative experiences, as illustrated in the quotations below.

It is a school that aims to help you, they take you into account, if anything they try to help you. It is a school that is really focused on your living environment, your living conditions and who you really are. That is good thing. (student 15)

They may need to put younger teachers in front of the class. They understand us better. They were brought up in a different world. They were all brought up in 1960. [...] They don't understand young people. (student 2)

Mentors expressed to value *interest and care* for their students, by being committed and willing to be meaningful and take action. A mentor expressed a need for this interest as follows:

The people who work here are very committed to the students, don't just give classes from 9 to 5 [...], otherwise you are not going to make it with these students. (mentor 2)

Students mentioned that some mentors go beyond what they expected by, for example, making a house call. This was valued by most students who addressed this point. The following quotation illustrates the extensive commitment of a mentor.

If you miss something, she will text or call you immediately. She does not let the grass grow under your feet. If you have to catch up on something or if you have missed something, she will call you. (student 17)

Mentors mentioned showing *trust* as an important mentor characteristic. In their opinion, trust requires a non-judgmental attitude in which the mentor accepts the student. The mentor quoted below much appreciated a student's trust.

The best thing is if you feel as a teacher and as a person that students like you, accept you. Pour their heart out and trust you. (mentor 10)

Students also valued openness and trust as important mentor characteristics. Some students discussed all kinds of personal issues with their mentor and appreciated the mentor as an outlet, trusting that their mentor would keep the information confidential. Other students expressed some hesitation about discussing personal or home problems with their mentor, as they wished to keep some privacy. The balance between trust and privacy is illustrated in the following quotation.

My mentor is just fine. He has been in the business for years and knows what he is doing. [...] I talked to him this morning, because I had a few things. [...] I discuss almost everything with my mentor. Also private things, but I prefer not to talk to my mentor about some things because they are very personal. (student 5)

Discussion

This study aimed to identify which mentor qualities are considered important by at-risk students and their mentors and that meet students' needs and mentors' capabilities. Three main aspects of mentoring were reviewed from literature: mentor tasks, relationships between mentor and student, and mentor characteristics (e.g., Jablon and Lyons 2021; Liang et al. 2008; Rhodes 2002; Vaclavik et al. 2017). Descriptions and valuing of students and mentors were related to these three main aspects. How at-risk students valued mentoring might reveal specific needs that differed from students in mainstream education. To avoid a one-sided view of mentoring, mentors' perspectives were also included. Descriptions and valuing of mentors and students could then be taken into account. Similarities and discrepancies between students' and mentors' perspectives will first be discussed, followed by conclusions about the proximity and repertoire of mentors.

Mentor tasks, relationships and characteristics

Mentoring tasks and approach to student guidance were mentioned less often by students than mentors. This may mean students take guidance for granted, not reflecting on it explicitly, or they may attach less value to it. According to mentors, important mentor tasks in guidance were to re-engage their students into the system. This task was not recognized in previous studies and might be especially relevant for students who are at risk of dropout. Mentors helped to develop realistic future perspectives, which was appreciated by some students, corresponding to findings of Vaclavik et al. (2017). Especially RP-mentors concentrated on aligning their guidance to individual needs and students' life issues. They did so requiring that their students exerted themselves too. This wish for reciprocity had not been found before and added to our knowledge.

In line with previous studies (e.g., Suldo et al. 2009; Weiss et al. 2019), both at-risk students and mentors underlined the important mentors' task to motivate students for

school. Students experienced and highly valued motivating mentor approaches. Students appreciated mentors who supported them with information or advice. Some students felt that support with studying was lacking as it was not always addressed adequately. The diversity of the group of at-risk students, especially with respect to their academic development, may explain their different needs for academic support. The student population varied from participants who formerly attended schools for special educational needs to students who were actually capable of meeting academic standards but who still had to graduate at entry-training level due to a history of non-attendance.

Both groups expressed experiencing respect in their relationships where students were taken seriously by their mentors and they interacted on an equal footing (Spencer 2006), but in contrast to the study of Liang et al. (2008) no differences were found between younger and older students in this respect. Furthermore, both students and mentors concluded that mentors must have authority without becoming authoritarian (e.g., Miller 2010; Vaclavik et al. 2017). Mentors should meanwhile have respect for students' autonomy in decision-making. Some RP-students warned against overfamiliar behavior on the part of mentors as it could undermine students' respect. No former studies mentioned this subtlety in a mentor's role keeping. Frequent and close interaction was appreciated by students and mentors, although mentors also emphasized the need for professional distance. This finding added a new perspective in this field and may be related to a mentors' emotional involvement which is constantly being called upon.

Mentors expressed the view that a good mentor characteristic was to have deliberately chosen to work with last chance students. According to many mentors, it is hard to persevere in this context without such affinity. Students generally indicated and valued that mentors showed empathy and a genuine care, characteristics known to contribute to feelings of well-being (Rhodes 2002; Suldo et al. 2009). Both mentors and students considered trust an important characteristic and valued openness.

The balance of mentoring

Based on this comparison between students' and mentors' perspectives on mentor qualities, we conclude that mentoring at-risk students is like tightrope walking, balancing between keeping a professional distance and being sensitive. This balance requires close relationships between mentors and students. At-risk students want to be noticed and respected. The mentor should genuinely care about the student, be available, and respect a student's autonomy and privacy. At the same time, students want mentors to maintain their authority without becoming authoritarian, referring to professional role-taking. That mentor role also includes individual academic support. Mentors need to be willing to customize their mentoring approach to specific needs of their students and to help students develop realistic future perspectives. Mentors should notice students' individual needs and capabilities and be prepared to search for ways to do justice to them. In so doing, and in contrast to students, their focus generally retains a professional character.

The question that arises then is how close should mentors get? Or how distant should they be? How do they balance personal and professional attention, the mentor's authority versus interaction on an equal footing? It is in this space of tension that mentors have to seek the most appropriate mentoring strategies and find out which elements of their mentoring repertoire best suit the individual at-risk student. This requires, first and

foremost, empathic mentors who continually seek to attune pedagogically to the individual student. Meanwhile mentors should bear in mind that it may be counterproductive to cultivate personal bonding as a primary goal and that the focus of their relationship should be directed at goal-oriented tasks (DuBois et al. 2011). Based on the results and the discussion, we can now state that mentoring at-risk students implies a permanent delicate balancing act, a sensitive and demanding venture.

Emotional responsiveness

Although the at-risk students in our population were permanently confronted with a variety of personal problems, our findings revealed that they had little need for tangible emotional support. The term ‘emotional support’ was defined in our study to mean help with personal problems, interpreted as a task (Vaclavik et al. 2017). Emotional support has also been defined in more general terms, including “[...] perceptions of trust and love, as well as communications of empathy and care” (Suldo et al. 2009, p. 68). Our results did not find need for emotional support in the form of tangible help, like informational or academic support, but, instead, they pointed to a prerequisite underlying characteristic needed to establish a sound relationship with students and to perform mentoring tasks.

To make a clear distinction between emotional support as an underlying characteristic and emotional support in the sense of tangible help, we propose to replace ‘emotional support’ as defined in general terms with the concept of *emotional responsiveness*. Emotional responsiveness comprises empathy, genuine care and trust, indicating the concept’s overarching nature. In the context of mentoring at-risk students, a mentor’s emotional responsiveness implies deliberately choosing for working with at-risk students indicating to empathize and sympathize with them, being sincerely committed, wishing to be meaningful and being open and trustful. As a consequence, mentors should be willing to attune to their students’ needs and to reflect on their own behavior. Being emotionally responsive to at-risk students then forms the core of a mentor’s necessary repertoire. It is the comprehensive concept that defines being a good mentor. Emotional responsiveness does not mean that mentors uncritically fulfill their student’s wishes. It may ask for in-depth conversations with the student, consulting colleagues, thinking and rethinking, resulting in a well-considered tailor-made mentoring approach.

Further research

Insights from this study could be extended by investigating to what extent the observed mentor qualities prove relevant in other specialized programs for at-risk students. Though each program will have its own emphases in targeting at-risk groups and its own curriculum, it would be interesting to identify generic qualities of mentors that should be applied in last-resort programs directed at at-risk students. These investigations could be of a qualitative nature or they could follow a quantitative or mixed methods approach. Such studies could contribute to the generation of hypotheses about outcomes of mentoring at-risk students in terms of their academic achievement and well-being. Subsequently, results could be used to test such hypotheses in quantitative studies.

Additional insights into the significance of mentoring in last-resort programs could be gained from follow-up interviews with graduates of last-resort programs. Graduates

could be invited to reflect on the mentoring they received and provide valuable insights based on their experiences within the programs and their experiences with continuing education, job, or other activities. Their reflections could provide clues to further improve the mentoring practices in last-resort programs.

Further research in last-resort programs is recommended on the proposed core quality for mentors of being emotionally responsive. Insights are needed into the value of the construct to understand and interpret mentoring in these contexts, and into how to break down emotional responsiveness into its components: empathy, care and trust. Subsequent application of these insights into practice may prove useful in determining to what extent mentors meet requirements and need further training.

Strengths and limitations

The heterogeneity of the at-risk student group has been taken into account in this qualitative study. They were given a voice to communicate their opinions and feelings on mentor qualities and the voices of mentors themselves were also interpreted. In so doing, insights were gained into students' and mentors' perceptions of mentor qualities and into the extent to which preferences and nuances were aligned. These insights have added to knowledge about mentoring qualities in the context of last-resort programs directed to at-risk students who need additional support to graduation.

Bias may have occurred, as invitation of participants by mentors and staff was restricted to students who attended school at the moment the interviews were scheduled. Whether absent students represented more critical voices is unknown; their absence might be due to, for example, illness, care for children, urgent family problems, or discontent with school. The measures taken to include a wide variety of students and possible reasons for non-participation minimized the threat of social desirability.

Different researchers conducted the interviews. As a form of triangulation, a team of different researchers may contribute to the reliability of a study (Creswell 2009). A team of researchers may be disadvantageous when their way of conducting the interviews affects the results. The interviewers were encouraged to keep asking questions about all the answers; the verbatim transcriptions showed modest differences with regard to their length and quality of the data provided and it could be deduced that some researchers did more so than others. Prior to the interviewing, we intended to avoid this threat by providing clear instructions. It remains a challenge, however, to interview these students; consent does not always result in that they mention a lot of information.

Length of experience of mentors was not always reported. This may be due to a reluctance on the part of the younger researchers in particular to ask for it, although data on mentors' ages had been collected. Mentors' ages provide some indication of their length of experience.

Implications for mentoring practice

Core conclusions of our study are the need for mentors to (a) be emotionally responsive; (b) align their approach to the individual at-risk student; and (c) meanwhile keep a professional distance. Alignment presupposes that mentors know their individual students. Time should therefore be scheduled from the beginning of the program to enable

mentors to really get to know their students and their needs, wishes, personal preferences and problems.

Mentors themselves reported that they need to sympathize with their students. Empathy for the target group could be assessed during application procedures to ascertain a mentor's fitness instead of assigning the mentor's role by default. Assigning the role of mentor to teachers who lack empathy in the context of last-resort programs might be ineffective and might have negative consequences for both mentors' job satisfaction and students' well-being and achievement.

Mentors may be quite capable of both mentoring and educating. Initial teacher education, however, is mostly focused on subject matter. Though mentoring is a frequently and naturally occurring intervention in education, not all teachers have the required mentor qualities. Given the importance and intricacy of mentoring at-risk students, mentors should be trained during their teacher education, guided during induction programs, and supported during their careers. It is essential to develop a sense of emotional responsiveness. This relates to the gentle mentor balance between keeping distance and being sensitive. Students want personal and emotional closeness while valuing the more distant authority role of mentors. Mentors wish to show empathy and concern, and to provide support while maintaining a professional distance. This delicate balance should be one of the core themes to be discussed during initial pedagogical training and continuous teacher professional development.

Concluding remarks

Mentoring implies acting in the pedagogical space in which mentors make their informed decisions. In the context of last-resort programs, mentoring at-risk students undeniably means walking a tightrope: show empathy but do not be overfamiliar; be trustful but keep your distance; build a personal bond but do not become friends; provide support but do not become authoritarian; and sit by your student's side but keep your mentor's role. Understandably, mentors regard mentoring at-risk students as energizing though challenging.

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Authors' contributions

The first author did the data collection, analysis and most of the writing. Minor issues in analyses were discussed with first and second author and major issues with all authors. Corrections in the paper were made by all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author details

¹Leiden University, ICLON, Kolffpad 1, P.O. Box 905, 2300 AX Leiden, The Netherlands. ²Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Museumpark 40, P.O. Box 25035, 3001 HA Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

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