

**“Why single me out”? Peer Mentoring, Autism and Inclusion in
mainstream schools**

By

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ABSTRACT

The past decade has seen a significant increase in the number of autistic students attending mainstream educational provision. Improving outcomes for this group is a complex issue given the deficit of evidence based practice within schools. A mixed methods multiple case study design was used to evaluate the impact and outcomes of a new peer mentoring programme targeting the inclusion of autistic students. Twelve autistic students and thirty-six non-autistic students participated as mentors across five mainstream secondary schools in the South East of England.

Semi-structured interviews were used to record the views and experiences of the mentors and staff participating in the programme. Autistic mentors completed questionnaires on levels of social satisfaction, bullying and social competence. All showed improvements over the course of the programme. These findings highlight the importance of the full inclusion of autistic students in peer mentoring programmes and the use of approaches promoting social competence. The study has wider implications on the way educational approaches for autistic students are developed and implemented in mainstream secondary schools.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“Research that increases diversity in research samples, addresses the daily challenges children face in school, and assists school staff in implementing effective and personalized interventions should lead to better outcomes for children with autism.” (Kasari and Smith, 2013, p.265).

1.1 BACKGROUND

International educational policy sets out that every child has unique characteristics and a fundamental right to education (UNESCO, 1994). Within the UK, educational settings have been directed to take account of the wide diversity of children to ensure those identified with special educational needs (SEN), including autism, are included in mainstream schools (DfE, 2014). In this context, it is important to address whether schools are meeting the needs of this population given the increase in the number of autistic children being diagnosed and attending mainstream schools in the UK. Recent figures estimate that approximately one percent of the population in the UK has an autism spectrum condition, including 600,000 children and young people (Baird et al., 2006; Brugha et al., 2011). This represents a more than twenty-fold increase from the results of the first epidemiological studies in the 1960s, with similar figures seen internationally (Elsabbagh et al., 2012). The picture emerging from statistics in England show a pattern of growth in the numbers of children and young people diagnosed with autism in the school population (DfE, 2014). The figures for students with autism as a primary need has seen an annual increase between 2010 and 2014. The total numbers in English school standing at 76,015 (DfE, 2014). Furthermore, figures from the Department of Education (DfE, 2010) indicate that approximately seventy percent of autistic students attend mainstream schools rather than specialist or special educational settings.

Improving outcomes for these students is a challenging issue given the nature of autism as a spectrum condition and the evidence that no single approach or programme will meet the needs of all learners with autism (Parsons et al., 2009; Bond et al., 2015).

Autism has traditionally been categorised through medical terminology resulting from a diagnostic model and culture that predominates the identification and support of autistic people. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) for Mental Disorders is commonly used to determine whether a person has an Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD, the latest version of which was revised in 2013 (DSM-5; APA, 2013). The term ASD was first introduced by Lorna Wing (Wing, 1996) to encompass different subgroups within the autistic spectrum, including autism and Asperger syndrome. It was referred to as 'spectrum condition' because while there are similar core areas affected, each child or person diagnosed will experience them differently and may have varying degrees of associated learning disability. Whilst there remains an emphasis on the continuity between neurotypical and autistic development, this does not necessarily mean that there are only quantitative differences between people but qualitative ones as well (Frith, 2015).

Developments in the field of molecular genetics (Happé and Plomin, 2006) lent support to the notion that autism was probably two genetically distinct traits, namely impaired social communication abilities and repetitive, restrictive and ritualistic behaviour, but which tend to have a high frequency of co-occurrence. This two-fold model of autism underpins the current DSM-5 definition whilst acknowledging the possibility of the separate occurrence of each set of traits, both of which are readily measurable in themselves. More recently a consensus has emerged that autism has *“multiple etiologies and various genetic and*

biological characteristics” (Amaral et al., 2017, p.1). This recognises the heterogeneous nature of the condition with both genetic and environmental factors playing a significant role.

The heterogeneity of autism, including social, communication, sensory and cognitive differences across a broad spectrum of need, means identifying effective educational approaches to meet those needs is a complex issue. Several systematic reviews have been undertaken with the aim of identifying which approaches are most effective in meeting the needs of autistic children and young people. Many of these have focused on approaches designed to address specific aspects of autism, for example to increase adaptive behaviour (Palmer et al., 2012) or increase social interaction (Hughes et al., 2012); whilst other reviews have focused on broader themes such as how technology may be used to address organisational skills or social understanding. In addition to these, several reviews have evaluated the quality of the evidence base for autism interventions (National Autism Centre, 2009; Odom et al., 2010). These have tended to prioritise a narrow range of methodologies for generating evidence of best practices with experimental intervention studies dominating the field (Fletcher-Watson, 2014; Guldberg, 2016). Other studies have noted further limitations with research in this field: a lack of research in schools and settings; small sample sizes; a lack of research on autistic adolescents; and an insufficient understanding of why some children respond well to approaches while others do not (Kasari and Smith, 2013). Thus, the choice of educational approaches needs to be based on both research evidence and the individual needs of the students. Practitioners should also consider the views of the individual and their family and the capacity, training, and experience of the staff to implement any given approach.

These were all considerations in the development of a new peer mentoring programme that formed the basis of study for this thesis. Previous research has shown that peer mentoring can improve social and communication skills, such as learning to negotiate with others, learning to ask for help and increased confidence in social interactions (Cowie et al., 2002). Peer mentoring programmes were also seen as being effective in raising staff and students' awareness of issues that affect emotional health, such as bullying, disability and peer relationships (Phillip and Spratt, 2007; Cowie and Wallace, 2000; Smith et al., 2003). The findings from the literature review in Chapter two provided evidence for the need to develop a new peer mentoring programme as no existing programmes specifically for autistic students were found. The new approach was designed to target peer relationships, particularly the areas of friendships and bullying, and to be inclusive and participatory for both autistic students and their non-autistic peers.

This thesis explored, for the first time, the impact and outcomes of being a peer mentor for autistic students. It also examined the use of principles and practice from Agency Theory for the development of the new programme. Discussion and collaborative problem-solving were embedded in real-life contexts rather than artificially created scenarios from adult directed resources. This enabled the content or 'what' of the programme to be established by the students themselves in collaboration with peers and staff. This meant the focus of the programme was on developing social competence for students, rather than just social skills. The 'how' or structure of the new peer mentoring programme was established through identifying good practice from previous research in this area (Wittemeyer et al., 2011; DCSF, 2008) and adapting this to the needs of autistic students. This recognises the importance in

research of obtaining the perspective of autistic students to both better understand their experiences and inform future practice (Billington, 2006).

1.2 TERMINOLOGY

It is important to clarify the language and terminology used within this thesis. Several national projects funded and endorsed by the Department for Education (DfE), through the Autism Education Trust (AET), have supported the view that autism should be seen primarily as a difference rather than deficit in the context of education. This views autism as a neurodevelopmental condition that impacts on an individual's language and communication, social interaction and emotional expression, sensory processing, information processing and interests. The AET Schools and Early Years Training Programmes (Guldborg et al., 2012, 2014) and AET National Standards (Jones et al., 2012, Bradley et al., 2014) have promoted this view and have used the terms autism or autism spectrum in their materials. A recent research project surveyed the views of 3,470 people, including 502 autistic adults, 2,207 parents of children and adults on the autism spectrum, 1,109 professionals, and 380 extended family members and friends, on the terminology used to describe autism (Kenny et al., 2015). Analysis of the results showed that amongst autistic adults, the term 'autistic person/people' was the most commonly preferred term. Whilst, 'people on the autism spectrum' was the most preferred term amongst all stakeholders.

While acknowledging the wider debate on the appropriateness of these terms I will be using the terms autistic, autism, or autism spectrum throughout this thesis. This recognises the rights of individuals who view their autism as a different rather than disordered way of being, while ensuring the right resources are given at the right time to meet their individual needs.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR STUDY: A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The rationale for this thesis is closely aligned to my professional role and experience of working within the field of autism education for the past sixteen years. Following the completion of an undergraduate MA thesis, on communication styles between parents and autistic infants, I went onto work in special needs education as a teacher. I joined the Communication and Interaction Service in Oxfordshire in 2006 where I work as a manager of autism advisory services for schools and autism resource bases attached to mainstream schools. This is a local authority service that works with students, schools, parents and other services to promote the education and inclusion of over 2500 autistic children and young people in Oxfordshire.

I work with schools, students, and parents on a weekly basis and as such have developed a good understanding of the issues faced by mainstream secondary schools in meeting the needs of autistic students (Moorewood et al., 2011). The work I have done at a local level has been enhanced through my experience of national and international work in the field of autism education as a member of the Autism Education Trust (AET) Programme Board and as a Research Fellow at the Autism Centre for Educational Research (ACER) at The University of Birmingham. The AET is a Department of Education funded body who aim to improve educational and wider outcomes for all autistic children and young people in England. Their innovative Schools, Early Years and Post-16 programmes have meant that over 150,000 educational practitioners and staff have been trained in autism education over the past five years. As a core writer of the schools and Early Years programmes I have had the opportunity to impact on the way educational practitioners understand autism and the way they support autistic children and young people in their settings (Guldborg et al., 2012, 2014). As a Research

Fellow at ACER I am working on the '*Transforming Educational Practice in Autism*' research project which is funded by the European Commission. The project proposes to promote equity and inclusion in autism education by enhancing the skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers and other school staff who work with children aged between five and ten. Firstly, through researching the current state of autism education in the UK, Greece, and Italy. Secondly, by developing training materials, a set of quality indicators, a competency framework, an open source website and a model of training delivery for Italy and Greece that is relevant to each countries context. The project is modelled on, and complements, the AET training programmes.

The three strands of my work with the local authority, ACER and the AET has helped to shape my understanding of autism, inclusion and the ongoing issue of addressing the needs of autistic students in schools. This work has informed the development of my doctoral work including the motivations, aims and research questions that are outlined in the following sections.

1.4 AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A review of 'best practice' in educational provision for children with autism concluded that *"More quality research is needed across all stages and contexts of provision. In particular, there is a need for research on educational interventions and settings to explicitly address questions of social validity"* (Parsons et al., 2009; p.113). A comprehensive search of the literature has indicated that despite the rhetoric on its importance there are a lack of studies on educational programmes targeting improved outcomes for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. As such the purpose of the study was to evaluate the impact

and outcomes of a new peer mentoring programme in mainstream secondary schools targeting the inclusion of autistic students. This included triangulating data on the views and experiences of autistic students, their non-autistic peers and school staff participating in the programme. Contextual factors influencing the implementation and delivery of individual peer mentoring programmes were explored to better understand factors influencing future sustainability of such approaches in schools.

The research questions for the study are shown in Table 1.1. The questions focus on three separate but interrelated areas. RQ1-RQ3 focus on specific outcomes relating to areas seen as important in peer relationships. These have traditionally been challenges for children and young people on the autistic spectrum. RQ4 evaluates the new peer mentoring programmes effectiveness in enabling autistic students to successfully participate as peer mentors. Finally, RQ5 is concerned with the factors that would support or challenge the future implementation of this approach more widely.

In Chapter five I also report on pre-and post-programme levels of academic competence for the autistic students. This was not an original focus of the research, and did not form part of the literature review, but is included due to the staff and student focus on academic support as part of the peer mentoring programme. It is of interest given the focus on agency and autonomy over the content of the programme and the possible impact of this on outcomes.

Table 1.1: Research Questions

RQ1. Does being a peer mentor improve levels of social competence for autistic students?

- RQ2. Does being a peer mentor improve levels of social satisfaction for autistic students?**
- RQ3. Does being a peer mentor reduce levels of bullying for autistic students?**
- RQ4. Did the new peer mentoring programme promote participation and inclusion for autistic students?**
- RQ5. What factors are key to the sustainability of the peer mentoring programme as an educational approach to support autistic students in mainstream secondary schools?**

1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

Due to differences in the way inclusion is interpreted, and educational approaches are implemented in schools, it is believed that there may be variance in the delivery of the new peer mentoring programme. There has been a little done to compare these differences previously which would lead to more informed knowledge about the factors needed to create a sustainable and embedded model of good practice within schools. It is therefore justifiable to undertake a comparative study, using similar methodologies and concepts, to obtain knowledge about differences in the implementation and impact of the new peer mentoring programme under different contexts and institutional frameworks. A comparative study would thus enable an understanding of how the new peer mentoring programme is supported and perceived by the participants, as well as how these participants have changed because of involvement in the programme. This reflects the need to study both process and outcomes as part of the research. Outcome evaluations measure to what degree programme objectives have been achieved. In this case, whether the new peer mentoring programme had a positive impact for autistic students on selected measures identified in research questions RQ1-3. However, this would not necessarily provide information on the participant experience of the peer mentoring programme and why any changes in outcomes had occurred. It was therefore important to evaluate the process of programme implementation and the involvement and

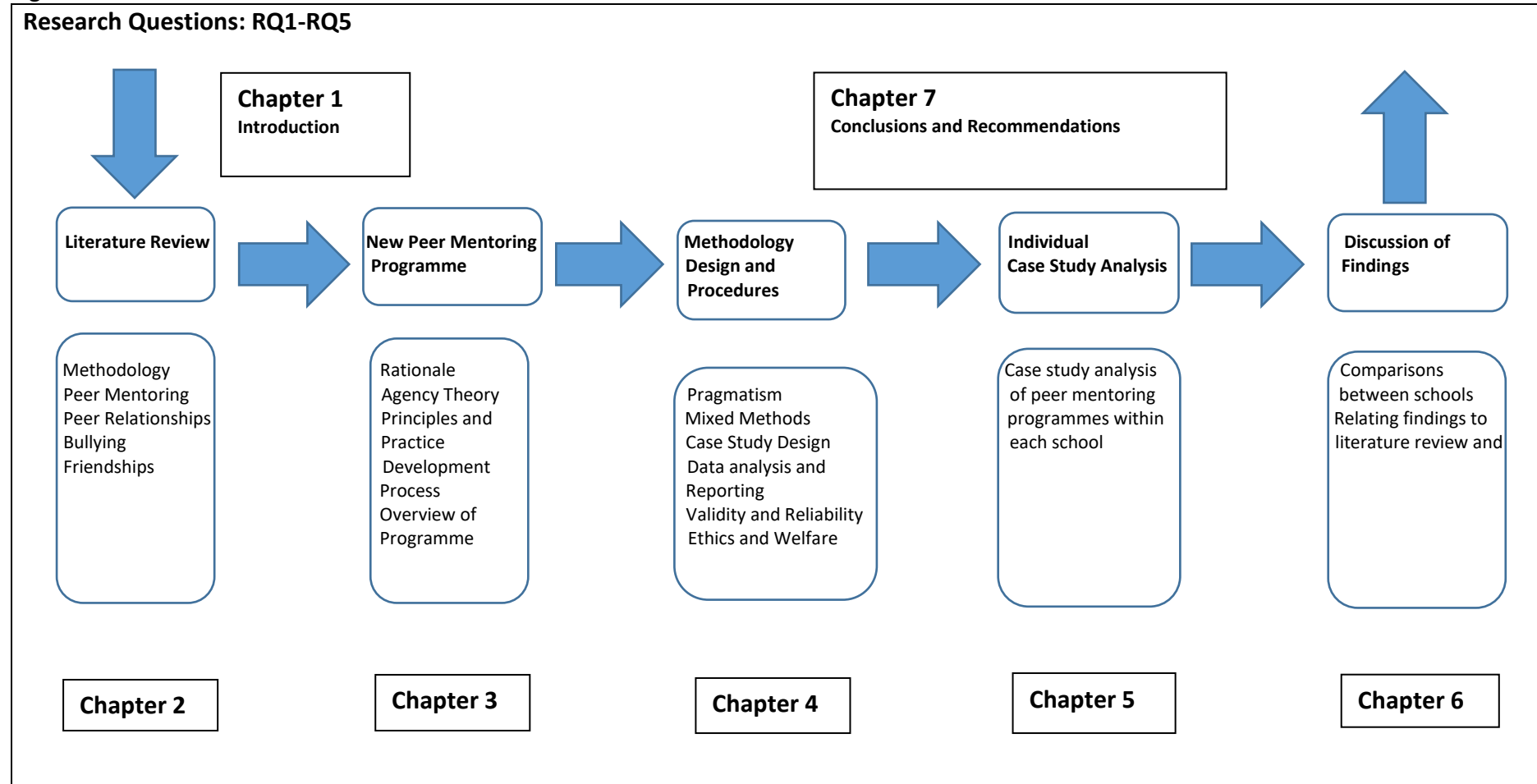
experience of staff and students. This would enable more robust recommendations to be made on sustainability, and the inclusion of autistic students in the peer mentoring programme, as identified in research questions RQ4-5. A view supported by Guldberg (2017, p.13), *“It is difficult to see how a practice can be effective at generating improvement if we do not also gain an understanding of the way that the world is viewed and experienced by the individuals whose outcomes we are aiming to improve.”*

As such, the research design for this thesis was a mixed methods multiple case study in five mainstream secondary schools in the South-East of England. Qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with the peer mentors (twelve autistic and thirty-six non-autistic students) and the five programme co-ordinators in each school. This was used to better understand the experiences of being a peer mentor or co-ordinator across the twelve-peer mentoring programmes, the decision-making and strategies that were used to implement the new programme and the factors that may impact on the sustainability of the programmes within schools. Quantitative data, in the form of mentor and co-ordinator questionnaires from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (DCSF, 2008), gave further information on the pre-and post-programme views of the mentors and co-ordinators. In addition, questionnaires: Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale (Asher and Renshaw, 1984); Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1984); and the Anti-Bullying Alliance (2007); were used to assess the impact of being a peer mentor on levels of social satisfaction, social competence, academic competence and bullying for the autistic mentors. Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed and interpreted at the case level, as well as across cases, to highlight meaningful similarities, differences and site-specific experiences relevant to the research questions.

1.6 THESIS STRUCTURE

The structure of this thesis is shown in Figure 1. This consists of seven Chapters of which the first Chapter is the introduction providing an overview of the objectives and the structure of the thesis. Chapter Two is a review of extant literature in relation to peer mentoring and autism education, with a specific focus on peer relationships and approaches used in schools and settings to support this. The findings from the literature review informed the identification of peer mentoring as a possible approach to support the needs of autistic students in secondary schools. Chapter Three provides an overview of the development of the new programme which was written due to a gap in the research literature on peer mentoring for autistic students. The programme was based on existing models of good practice found in the literature and used Agency Theory as a framework to inform both principles and practice. Chapter Four gives a description of the methodology selected for the study. The relationship between theory, methodology and my epistemological position are outlined in this chapter. The research data from each school is reported on in Chapter Five. Within each case study the experiences, views and impact of the peer mentoring programme on the autistic peer mentors are explored, as are the views and experiences of the non-autistic peer mentors and school staff involved in the programme. The findings from each school are then compared, triangulated and discussed in Chapter Six, in relation to the research literature and research questions. Chapter Seven summarises findings for each research question and presents areas of contribution in relation to new knowledge and methodology. I make recommendations on the further use of peer mentoring for autistic children and young people in mainstream secondary schools, discuss the limitations of the study and outline areas for further research. A list of references and appendices follow this.

Figure 1: Thesis Structure



CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

As documented by multiple researchers (Humphreys and Lewis, 2008; Kasari and Smith, 2013) the inclusion of autistic students in schools is still a complex and poorly understood area of education and there is evidence that they are at an increased risk of experiencing negative outcomes in comparison to other learners. This Chapter will examine empirical and expert literature that seek to explain the current approach to the education of autistic children and young people in England and the drivers and barriers that exist to enabling positive outcomes for this group. I begin by looking at background information on inclusion policy and practice to provide a situational context for the education of students with special educational needs and disabilities, including autism. Next is a review of the literature relating to peer relationships, specifically friendships and bullying, that are of interest due to the challenges for autistic students in these areas. This is followed by a review of the literature relating to educational approaches focussing on peer relationships for autistic students. Finally, I review the findings from the literature relating to peer mentoring in schools. I identified this as an approach that may be used to target peer relationships for autistic children and young people.

I start with an outline of the methodology employed for the review of the literature in this Chapter which was based on good practice from the methodology used in NCSE *'International Review of the Literature of Evidence of Best Practice Provision in the Education of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders'* (Parsons et al., 2009).

2.2 METHODOLOGY FOR LITERATURE REVIEW

Similar to the NCSE study, two main strands of literature review were used for this thesis. This recognises the importance of both empirically informed research and publications based on expert opinion in the field of autism education, policy and practice. A systematic search of electronic databases focusing on empirical studies (empirical strand) was initially undertaken. I then did a separate search focussing on reports, articles, guidance and case studies from professionals, practitioners, autistic children and young people and their families (expert strand). The searches were separated into two areas covered in this Chapter, due to the lack of research literature found on initial searches when the terms were combined. Firstly, peer relationships and approaches for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools, and secondly, peer mentoring in mainstream schools. The empirical and expert strands together generated a total of seventy-nine separate articles which formed the basis of the review. In addition, I used similar systematic search criteria for the background section found in this Chapter.

2.21 PROCEDURE FOR THE EMPIRICAL STRAND

Inclusion criteria (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2) were identified and translated into lists of related search terms (see Appendix 1). These terms were then systematically applied to five main databases that were used in the study: ERIC, British Education Index (BRI), Research Autism Database, Google Scholar, and the ISI Web of Knowledge. These databases all had an extensive breadth and depth of literature related to the research topic and enabled me to combine search terms which increased the efficiency and effectiveness of the search.

Table 2.1: Inclusion criteria - Peer relationships and approaches

Inclusion criteria – Studies included met all the following	
Scope	Focus on autistic children and young people Focus on peer relationships Focus on educational provision, approaches, and interventions for peer relationships Take place in mainstream schools
Study Type	Are empirical, that is include the collection of (quantitative or qualitative data) or systematic reviews of empirical data
Time and Place	Are written in English Are published after 2000

Table 2.2: Inclusion criteria - Peer mentoring

Inclusion criteria – Studies included met all the following	
Scope	Focused on mentoring programmes for children and young people Indicates aims and outcomes for children and young people Indicates aims and outcomes for staff and schools Takes place in mainstream schools
Study Type	Are empirical, that is include the collection of (quantitative or qualitative data) or systematic reviews of empirical data
Time and Place	Are written in English Are published after 1990

The search on peer relationships and approaches for autistic students was limited to publications from 2000 onwards in order remain as relevant as possible to the current study and to make the literature review a manageable task, given the number and range of published work in this field. The date for peer mentoring was extended to 1990 due to the relatively limited literature in this area. As with the NCSE study, each search within each of the five databases was run in the same way with the combination of terms occurring in the same order. The separate sets of results were then combined and the duplicates removed.

2.22 PROCEDURE FOR THE EXPERT STRAND

The criteria for inclusion in this strand were similarly pragmatic to the NCSE methodology given the number of papers found in the empirical strand. This was based on my professional knowledge as both a practitioner and researcher in the field of autism education. Table 2.3 shows the criteria that were used in relation to peer relationships and approaches for autistic students in mainstream schools. Tables 2.4 shows the criteria used for peer mentoring. International material was included due to the lack of information an initial UK only search uncovered.

Table 2.3: Criteria for Expert Strand on peer relationships and approaches

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Published from 2000 onwards.2. Focused on mainstream educational provision for autistic students (broadly defined as taking place in schools or colleges).3. Focused on approaches targeting peer relationships for autistic students4. Available in English.5. Permanent documents i.e. standalone published documents or downloadable pdfs/word documents from websites.6. Focused in the UK. |
|---|

Table 2.4: Criteria for Expert Strand on peer mentoring

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Published from 1990 onwards.2. Discuss educational policies or practice relating to peer mentoring for all children and young people, including those on the autistic spectrum.3. Focused on educational provision (broadly defined as taking place in schools or colleges).4. Available in English. |
|--|

5. Permanent documents i.e. standalone published documents or downloadable pdfs/word documents from websites.
6. Focused on the UK and international work.

2.23 LIMITATIONS OF REVIEW METHODOLOGY

While the research project attempted a systematic and comprehensive review of the literature it is recognised that I cannot include all relevant papers, reports and policies. Throughout the course of a six-year part-time PhD new research or policy guidelines are published which means that the literature search, to a certain extent, is an ongoing process and represents the current state of knowledge over a period rather than a snapshot in time. This inevitably means that the interpretation and impact of new policy and research can influence the direction and focus of PhD study and I have tried to incorporate this into my work. As ever, human error, the efficiency of search engines and lack of time present barriers to the overall effectiveness of any literature search. However, I have attempted to ensure that my search methodology has been as robust and objective as possible based on good practice from the NCSE study.

2.24 RESULTS OF REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The review of the empirical literature resulted in the following number of articles per database:

Research Autism Database = 16

BREI = 14

ISI Web of Knowledge = 18

ERIC = 20

Google Scholar = 21

In total this produced eighty-nine articles for possible inclusion. The results for each database were then cross-referenced and the duplicates removed which meant the remaining total of article summaries (titles and summaries) requiring closer inspection was seventy-three. This included fifty-five documents for peer relationships and approaches and eighteen documents for peer mentoring.

The expert strand produced six articles for inclusion in the literature review. Out of this number, four were for peer relationships and two were for peer mentoring. The results informed the following sections on friendships, bullying and peer mentoring. In each case, the empirical and expert strands were combined when writing up each section of the literature review.

2.3 PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES FOR AUTISTIC STUDENTS

2.31 BACKGROUND

This section provides contextual information within which this thesis is situated. I consider the impact of inclusion legislation on practice in schools and how this has informed the provision, approaches and outcomes for students with special educational needs, including those on the autistic spectrum. This is important as globally there has been a move towards inclusive practice over the past twenty years and wide agreement on the key principles first encompassed in the Salamanca Statement (1994). Principles that have been reinforced by legislation, policy and recommendations at national, European and global levels, including the '*UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*' (2006), which makes explicit reference to the importance of ensuring inclusive systems of education. The UNESCO '*Policy*

Guidelines on Inclusion in Education' (2009) set out the clear justifications for working towards inclusive practices and educating all children together:

Educational justification. Inclusive schools must develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and benefit all children.

Social justification. Inclusive schools can change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society.

Economic justification. It costs less to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different schools 'specialising' in different groups of children.

The UNESCO (2008, p.3) definition states that inclusive education is *"an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination."* This widens the context for inclusion as opposed to earlier definitions that have often focused on the argument between special education and 'integration' into mainstream school. This represents a significant shift from a definition of inclusion as a means of understanding and overcoming a deficit to a broader definition including issues of gender, ethnicity, class, social conditions, health and human rights that encompasses universal involvement, access, participation and achievement (Ouane, 2008). This change in our understanding of inclusion has run parallel to the international community's commitment to human rights and has led to a reduced emphasis on an individual's disability where *"inclusion may be understood not just as adding on to existing structures, but as a process of transforming societies, communities and institutions such as schools to become diversity-sensitive"* (Arnesen et al., 2009, p.46).

The ideology of inclusive education, as outlined above, is implemented in different ways across different contexts and varies with national policies and priorities. These are in turn influenced by a whole range of social, cultural, historical and political issues. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that policy makers and practitioners are not always talking about the same thing when considering policy and practice for inclusive education across different countries (Watkins and D'Alessio, 2009).

Despite the differences in both national contexts and definitions, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (which includes the UK) highlighted key principles of inclusive policies agreed upon by Agency member countries in the report '*Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education*' (2009). These inter-related and mutually supporting principles include widening participation to increase educational opportunity for all learners; policies that promote inclusion; organisational culture and ethos that promotes inclusion; flexible resourcing systems that promote inclusion; education and training in inclusive education for all teachers; support structures organised to promote inclusion and legislation that promotes inclusion. The extent to which these principles have been enacted in the UK and specifically England will be discussed next.

'The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People' (Warnock, 1978), better known as the '*Warnock Report*,' was the biggest ever study of special education in England, Scotland and Wales and put the issue of the integration of disabled children into ordinary schools on to the national agenda for the first time. Key proposals included the integration of children into mainstream schools wherever possible and the need for early diagnosis and pre-school support. The principle of integration was to

underpin special educational needs policy up until the early nineties when the '*Salamanca Statement*' (1994) provided a catalyst for policy in the UK to follow a largely inclusive direction. More recently, The Equality Act (2014) has provided legislation that underpins educational policy across England, Scotland and Wales. The Act places a duty on schools and education authorities not to discriminate against students with disabilities and they must take reasonable steps to avoid putting these students at a substantial disadvantage.

Though the UK education system has several regional differences, with separate legislation for England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, there are some common principles adopted by policy and guidance documents that has contributed to the way inclusion has been conceptualised in schools. Significantly, this has led to the development and continuation of a similar range of provision within each country to meet the needs of autistic children and young people. This includes mainstream schools, units linked within mainstream schools, special schools and specialist schools for those on the autistic spectrum. In England, the popular perception (e.g. Warnock, 2005) is that the policy of inclusion has led to the closure of special schools and the 'forcing' of some children into mainstream schools when it is not in their best interests to be there, resulting in distress for students and families. Whilst there are local variations national policy has been relatively consistent from Warnock (1978) onwards in recognising that a small number of students would require specialist provision. The version of inclusion presented within government documents has always involved a role for special schools, though only part of this role is in providing a placement. The most significant effect on special school numbers seems to have occurred because of the policy of

integration seen in the late seventies and eighties rather than the drive for inclusion following policies such as *'Excellence for All Children'* in 1997.

Though policy has supported the move to mainstream education for more children with special needs it was criticised (Armstrong, 2005) for rejecting the language of individual student needs in favour of the school effectiveness and improvement paradigm. This followed on closely from the White Paper *'Excellence in Schools'* (DfEE, 1997) that aimed to transform institutional failure into success by means of individual student achievement. There was no recognition of wider strategic aims in encompassing the role of education for supporting social cohesion and inclusion or removing the barriers that can create educational disadvantage. It can be argued in the years since that inclusion in England has been transposed onto an increasingly diverse educational system that contains competing and opposing systems such as school performance tables and age-assessed attainment (e.g., *Excellence in Schools*, 1997; *Academies Act*, 2010). As such, there has been a lack of coherence in the way educational policies in relation to SEN, inclusion and raising standards have been developed.

The Green Paper *'Support and Aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability'* (2011) sought to address some of these issues and respond to key findings from Warnock and Cameron (2005) and the Lamb Inquiry (2009). The subsequent statutory guidance found in the *'Children and Families Act'* (2014) contained a new SEND code of practice built on the four key principles of Participation; Outcomes; Collaboration and Clear information about SEN and disability support in all areas. As such, legislation in England has

moved towards greater inclusion, in keeping with international governments shift towards inclusion as a model for education (Lambe and Bones, 2006). The terms inclusion and inclusive promised a positive focus, going beyond disability to cover other forms of 'diversity' with the implication that regular schools will accommodate and restructure for this diversity. These ideas and terms are still influential internationally and in countries like England, but over the last fifteen years, some negatives aspects have started to emerge (Norwich, 2008). As seen earlier, inclusion as a concept and value is now recognised as complex with multiple meanings.

Ravet (2011) argues that the needs-based and rights-based perspectives on inclusion have come to dominate the field of autism education and provide contradictory standpoints on the effective inclusion of children and young people on the autism spectrum in mainstream schools. The 'needs-based' perspective highlights the lack of research evidence for mainstreaming autistic students and the risk of exclusion this may cause. Key to this perspective is the availability of a range of schools and educational provision to meet the distinctive group needs of autistic children who have identified additional support needs (Lindsay, 2007). In contrast, the 'rights-based' perspective argues for no educational segregation and the inclusion of all children and young people in mainstream schools (Allen, 2008). This approach prioritises the right of children to wide academic and social inclusion, and the requirement of schools and practitioners to adapt their practice to meet the needs of autistic students. An argument is made by Ravet (2011) for an integrative model that enables multiple rather than binary possibilities for the inclusion of autistic children and young people within education. Within this model the two dominant perspectives can be

reconciled, whilst acknowledging that neither has a “*monopoly on the values of social justice, social democracy and social equality*” (Ravet, 2011, P.679).

Critiques have developed of inclusive education in terms of its utopian orientation and that the incorporation of inclusion into international and national policy has softened its radical and hard edge. Furthermore, the outcomes seen for children and young people on the autistic spectrum, within the mainstream education system in England, means we need to re-evaluate what inclusion really means for those students. Rix et al., (2006) define a range of outcome measures relevant to aspects of the learning and participation of children and young people. These include their attainment levels, progress, attitude, confidence, self-esteem and independence skills. This broader definition is particularly important when understanding the experiences of autistic students and reflects the wider range of needs of this population. Two reports by the charity Ambitious about Autism (Schools Report, 2012; Schools Report, 2013) did look at a broader range of outcomes and brought key statistics together to provide an overview of what school was like for children and young people on the autistic spectrum in England. The 2013 Report found that seventy-one percent of autistic students were educated in mainstream schools and the remainder in specialist provision; sixty percent of all teachers in England did not feel they have had adequate training to teach autistic students; thirty-five percent of teachers felt it had become harder to access specialist support for autistic students in the past twelve months and over forty percent of autistic students had been bullied at school. In addition, the 2012 Schools Report had found that less than one in four of autistic young people continued their education beyond school.

The Ambitious About Autism reports give a clear picture of the challenges that exist within education to effectively meet the needs of children and young people on the autistic spectrum in England. Shown by the fact that they are more likely to be excluded than students with other or no special educational needs (DfE, 2012). The findings are more significant given the increase in numbers of autistic students being educated in mainstream settings following the national policy focus on inclusion over the past decade. They also question the extent to which inclusion has been successfully managed for autistic students if we accept Ainscow's (2007) definition of inclusive education as participation, presence, achievement and acceptance for all. The following section looks at this in more detail by focussing on two key indicators for inclusion that emerged from the literature review on peer relationships, namely friendships and bullying.

2.32 FRIENDSHIPS

The importance of having a friend to a child's development and adjustment has been well documented in the literature on neurotypical children (Newman et al., 2003). Friendship quality has been proposed to create various psychological benefits and costs for children that, in turn, affect their development and adjustment. Therefore, it is the quality of friendships that makes a difference in terms of the function of that friendship and not simply whether children have friendships or not. For example, friendship quality has been shown to be both a protective factor against bullying (Bollmer et al., 2005) and a precursor to feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

Studies have shown that some autistic children and young people do have a desire for friends and involvement with other children (Bauminger and Kasari, 2000), do seek out their non-

autistic peers and report having friends and best friends (Daniel and Billingsley, 2010). Furthermore, interviews with young autistic people suggest that establishing and maintaining friendships play a significant role in their overall experience of school, just as it does for non-autistic children (Connor, 2000; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Ochs et al., 2001). However, these relationships may be strained and not always reciprocated (Bauminger and Kasari, 2000; Bauminger et al., 2003; Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). Furthermore, autistic children tend to rate their best friendship as lower on several dimensions, including companionship, helpfulness, security and closeness (Bauminger and Kasari, 2000; Kasari et al., 2011; Whitehouse et al., 2009). Findings from a longitudinal study showed that autistic adolescents were more likely never to see friends, be called by them or be invited to activities, relative to adolescents with other special educational needs (Shattuck et al., 2011). This reinforces the finding that children on the autistic spectrum experience more rejection and neglect from their peers than other children (Symes and Humphrey, 2010). Though research has shown that autistic children can establish social connections with other children in their mainstream classroom, despite having more limited social networks (Chamberlain et al., 2008).

The differences that autistic children and young people show in their relationships with peers may be because of several factors, including their level of social competence and the low frequency of interaction with peers. When autistic children are observed in the presence of other children, they make fewer attempts to engage with them and are less responsive to others' bids for social interaction (Chamberlain et al., 2003). These missed opportunities are likely to affect children's social status in a group, particularly in their classroom social structure. Less is known about the social networks of older children and adolescents on the

autistic spectrum. It may be even more difficult for autistic adolescents to fit into peer social groupings because of the increasing complexity of social networks found in this age group. Humphrey and Symes (2011, p.401) highlight the circular nature of this issue when concluding that *“At the level of the student with autism, the negative social outcomes reduce the motivation for further peer interaction, creating a pattern of avoidance and solitary behaviour that does not provide adequate opportunities for the development of social and communicative skills. At the level of the peer group, the reduced social contact with students with autism limits the opportunities for the development of understanding and awareness, further accentuating feelings of difference.”*

Research by Locke et al., (2010) into loneliness in autistic adolescents found that they have the social desire to develop relationships with other adolescents their age. However, they may experience a lack of connection between what they want and what is occurring within their social networks and friendships. This seems to be the result of the autistic adolescents' difficulty with reciprocating what they believe to be necessary in a healthy relationship. Questionnaire responses showed that they tend to view themselves negatively in terms of the qualities that they believe are essential in a friendship. This suggests that autistic students in mainstream schools seem aware of their social situations and desire social engagement with others, but may lack the skill and opportunity to do so.

Recent research has indicated that gender differences may also be significant in the motivation and social networks of autistic children and young people. Head et al., (2014) found that autistic girls aged ten to sixteen years scored significantly higher on a Friendship Questionnaire than autistic boys and, furthermore, scored similarly to boys without autism.

Similarly, when examining children's friendship patterns, Dean et al., (2014) showed that autistic girls were more connected and had higher levels of social motivation, whereas autistic boys were more likely to be actively excluded and rejected by their peers. The authors suggested that the neurotypical friends of autistic girls helped to prevent their active exclusion from social networks, allowing them to maintain their greater connectedness and number of relationships. Much of the research on friendships has focused on the differences found in the social skills of autistic people rather than their relationships, social networks and friendships. It has often been based on targeting within person factors and a deficit model of social functioning. This is perhaps understandable given that social skills have traditionally been viewed as a core deficit of autism and that autistic individuals were seen as lacking the desire and skills needed to foster meaningful relationships with others. However, the picture emerging from research is more complex despite the fact relatively little is still known about the nature and quality of these relationships, particularly in older autistic children (Locke et al., 2010).

The ability of autistic children and young people to actively engage with peers and adults is likely to significantly impact on their academic achievement and attainment without the appropriate understanding, knowledge and support in place. Autistic children and young people may not understand that teachers and peers can be a source of help, emotional support or information (Prizant, 2015). This can result in internalising and externalising behaviors (Gomez and Baird, 2005) that cause unusual coping strategies, isolation from peers and increased risk factor for bullying that are explored more in the following section (Myles and Simpson, 2002).

2.33 BULLYING

Bullying is widely accepted as a form of social aggression (Griffin and Gross, 2004) where a power imbalance is exploited (Olweus, 2013). Many studies continue to use the definition originally proposed by Olweus (1993, p.9) that states *“A student is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.”* Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumours, attacking someone physically or verbally and excluding someone from a group on purpose. At its most extreme, bullying in general school-aged populations has resulted in self-harm (McMahon et al., 2010), suicide (Nansel et al., 2001), suicide ideation and behaviour difficulties (Olweus, 2013). In addition, children and young people who are bullied are at risk of becoming depressed, anxious, having low self-esteem and falling behind in the classroom due to poor concentration or sleep issues (Kloosterman et al., 2013; Reid and Batten 2006; Turner et al., 2006). They are also more likely to miss school, leave school at sixteen and to be not in employment, education or training (DfE, 2010), all of which may remain long after the bullying has stopped. Whilst all schools in England are required to have an anti-bullying policy that reflects national legislation, bullying remains a concern and a significant policy issue for schools and educational services. Several groups at risk of increased exposure to bullying have been identified (Green et al., 2010), with the most vulnerable being children with special educational needs and disabilities (McLaughlin et al., 2010) and autistic children considered particularly at risk (Reid and Batten, 2006).

Victims of bullying often exhibit difficulties in social understanding (Garner and Hinton, 2010), occupy low social status (Card and Hodges, 2007) and are perceived as deviating from peer group norms (Horowitz et al., 2004). These are common characteristics of autistic children

and young people and as such place them at higher risk of being bullied, both within and outside of school. Research by the University of Sheffield in mainstream secondary schools found that ninety percent of autistic students were bullied compared to fifty-six percent of their peers (Wainscot et al., 2008). Humphrey and Symes (2011) found that autistic students are at least three times more likely to be bullied and report receiving less social support from parents, classmates, and friends. The challenges in forming and maintaining friendships can lead to isolation from peers, increasing potential vulnerability among autistic students (Humphrey and Symes, 2011; Lasgaard et al., 2010). Autistic children and young people may also be perceived as 'different' by their peers, due to differences in understanding and conforming to social norms. This may arise from the misinterpretation of non-literal language (including jokes) due to pragmatic language issues or a different understanding of social rules leading to socially incongruent behaviour (Wainscot et al., 2008). Thus, their peers may actively reject or ignore them (Kasari et al., 2011), which means they are more likely to lack protective social support (Humphrey and Symes, 2010). We know that having at least one friend can serve as a protective factor against peer victimisation and overall adjustment for children and adolescents (Malcolm and Jensen-Campbell, 2006). However, as discussed earlier, research suggests that it is not just whether children have friendships that is important but rather the quality of these friendships that makes a difference as to whether the friendship will serve in a protective capacity (Bollmer et al., 2005).

Further issues may arise in autistic students understanding and reporting of bullying. Differences in social understanding experienced by autistic individuals can make them either unaware they are being bullied or misinterpret the actions of others as bullying. They are also less likely to report bullying when it occurs, because they may incorrectly assume that others

are already aware of the situation or don't know where to go for help. There is also some evidence to suggest that some autistic children can display bullying behaviour towards others (Kanne and Mazurek 2010; Zablotzky, 2013).

2.34 SUMMARY

The research literature indicates that autistic adolescents in mainstream schools are more likely to have poorer quality of friendships and be bullied than non-autistic students. This is likely to impact on their ability to build and maintain effective peer relationships. In the following section I review a range of approaches used in the education of autistic children and young people to address this area.

2.4 EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

2.41 INTRODUCTION

Given the nature of autism, and taking individual abilities and needs into account, it is likely that autistic students will require support in a range of areas. This may include developing the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to being able to: communicate effectively in social situations and develop and maintain relationships; predict and manage change; access the curriculum and achieve educational outcomes in line with their potential; adapt and manage their environment to lessen the impact of sensory processing issues; regulate behaviours and emotions; manage repetitive and restricted patterns of behaviour; and generalise the skills learned in the classroom, home or community. Thus, a wide range of formalised approaches have been developed to meet these needs, both in the UK and internationally. Variations in criteria and classifications of these approaches exist in the research literature. A useful definition adopted by the NCTL (2014) is a three-tier classification

system that broadly categorise interventions by the number of areas of development they address: *Comprehensive Treatments Models*, such as Early Intensive Behaviour Intervention (EIBI), TEACCH or SCERTS, focus on many areas of development and can be argued to cover needs in all area; *Intervention Packages*, such as peer training and social skills packages, cover fewer areas of functioning and behaviour; lastly, *Focused Intervention Packages*, target very specific skills or behaviours in areas of functioning such as play, cognition or behaviour. In England there is currently an eclectic approach to autism education, reflecting a mix of the above interventions and supported by research evidence that states “*Given the diversity of needs on the autism spectrum, one type of approach or intervention is unlikely to be effective for all. Consequently, a range of provision should be maintained so there is a better chance of being able to provide appropriately for this diversity of need. More research is required to establish the effectiveness of interventions and types of provision as well as the value and relevance of these in everyday contexts including the home, school and beyond*” (Parsons et al., 2009, p.5).

2.42 FRIENDSHIPS

Much of the research literature on friendships has focused on programmes targeting the development of social skills for autistic students’ and sit within the classification of *Intervention Packages* (NCTL, 2014) that target several areas of functioning. Meta-analysis of the research into these programmes have not demonstrated large, socially important, long-term or generalised changes in the social functioning or competence of autistic children and young people (Reichow and Volkmar, 2010; Matson et al., 2007). Programmes often took place in decontextualised settings, such as community mental health centres or outpatient clinics, and showed limited maintenance and generalisation effects (Gresham et al., 2001).

A large study by Bellini et al., (2007) examined the effectiveness of school-based social skills interventions for autistic children and adolescents through a meta-analysis of fifty-five studies published between 1986 and 2005. Results indicated that Interventions delivered in the student's typical classroom setting produced moderate intervention and maintenance effects and low generalisation effects. When compared across age groups, the highest generalisation and maintenance effects were noted for adolescents (Bellini et al., 2007). However, the number of interventions was limited (n=9). A best evidence synthesis of social skills interventions for autistic individuals (Reichow and Volkmar, 2010) reviewed sixty-six studies published between 2001 and 2008. Only three involved social skills interventions for adolescents, with none of these interventions taking place in a school setting. Similarly, White et al., (2007) found in a review of thirteen social skills interventions for autistic children and young people, that only two took place in the school setting. Some programmes have been developed in response to this issue, such as PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills), which is based on the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy (Laugeson, 2012). The sixteen-week programme is delivered by professionals in school settings and targets social skills and functioning for autistic adolescents through a series of structured lessons. These include areas such as on-line conversations, handling disagreements and entering peer group situations.

A key criticism of the evidence base for approaches targeting friendships is that they focus on social skills rather than social competence. Social competence includes not only the effective development and use of social skills but also emotional (e.g., affect regulation), cognitive (e.g., fund of information, skills for processing and acquisition, perspective taking), and behavioural (e.g., conversation skills, prosocial behaviour) skills,

motivational and expectancy sets (e.g., moral development, self-efficacy) needed for successful social adaptation. This enables children and young people to develop the ability to take another's perspective concerning a situation, learn from past experiences and apply that learning to the changes in social interactions. This is an area of challenge for autistic children who often show 'active sociability' where they display learned social skills in a specific context but are poor at 'interactive sociability' reflecting their difficulty in determining when and how to apply skills that they know in real-life situations (Frith and Happé, 1994).

2.43 BULLYING

Research into educational programmes specifically targeting the bullying of autistic students is limited, despite the long-term and serious consequences bullying has on mental and emotional well-being (Kloosterman et al., 2013). Guidance on autism and bullying from the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA, 2012, p.5) recommends that *"A multi layered approach could help, based on improved autism awareness for everyone within the school community, close partnership with parents and identifying and implementing peer support and strategies that address the most pressing autism specific needs, enabling each pupil with autism to engage socially and be better understood by other pupils."* The guidance also highlights the need for staff training in schools so they can detect bullying incidents earlier and deal with them more effectively. This reinforces the need for a multifaceted approach to tackling bullying within schools and supports research indicating that peers have a critical role in reducing the risk factors for the bullying of autistic students (Humphrey and Symes, 2010; Cappadocia et al., 2012; Sterzing et al., 2012). Perhaps the best-known approach in this area is 'Circle of Friends', a model that promotes increased peer understanding and engagement in relation to autistic students in schools. The programme has been positively evaluated in primary schools

(Gus, 2000; Kalyva and Avramidis, 2005), though the research literature contains no reference to the approach being used in secondary settings. Sensitive disclosure of a student's diagnosis was a key part of this approach and it was found that peers were more likely to accept individual differences if they had been educated about the causes of them. Other research has also shown that raising the awareness and understanding of autism has had positive impacts on social inclusion outcomes for autistic students within settings (Boutot and Bryant, 2005; Ochs et al., 2001).

2.44 SUMMARY

The research literature indicates the need to develop approaches in schools that provide opportunities for autistic students to immediately practice and rehearse newly acquired social skills with similar age peers. This is more likely to lead to greater generalisation and social competence (Laugeson, 2014). A challenge in existing research is that social skills learned and rehearsed in laboratory or clinic settings may not necessarily be utilised and applied in daily life, at home or in school (Reichow and Volkmar, 2010). This points to the need for studies examining approaches with a research base that can be easily implemented in the school setting and can be used to target improvements in social functioning and competence for autistic children and adolescents (Hart and Whalon, 2011; White et al., 2007). The literature review led me to identify peer mentoring as one possible approach that fitted the above criteria. The following section provides an overview of this.

2.5 PEER MENTORING

2.51 INTRODUCTION

It is clear from the research literature that educational approaches should be appropriately tailored for individual needs (Parsons et al., 2009; Simpson et al., 2007) and that a more robust evidence base is needed to make recommendations on which approaches are most appropriate for which students and in which setting (mainstream, specialist or resource bases). Key to this is finding ways to implement and evaluate approaches in the educational settings where children and young people spend most of their time. Peer mentoring is one such approach and over the past ten years, mentoring of children and young people, has become an increasingly important feature of social policy in the UK (DfES, 2005). This has been mirrored by the rapid growth of mentoring schemes operating nationally. The main aim of peer mentoring in an educational context has often been that of subject learning. In this context, the term peer mentoring is often used interchangeably with that of peer tutoring, where older students impart knowledge and skills and provide support to the mentee. The personal development of the mentor, in addition to positive outcomes for the mentee, is a defining aim of this type of mentoring (Miller, 2002).

However, it is widely acknowledged that no one single definition or model of mentoring exists; rather there are several different models providing support to young people in a range of settings (Hall, 2003). Peer support is an umbrella term often used to describe a variety of approaches. Houlston et al., (2009, p.70) define this as *“School programmes which train and use students themselves to help others learn and develop emotionally, socially or academically. These may also be referred to as peer-counselling (or peer-listening),*

befriending, buddy, or mentoring schemes. These schemes may be used in addition to more traditional adult-based pastoral support systems.”

The following section looks at the research evidence for such programmes within mainstream schools.

2.52 IMPACT AND LIMITATIONS

Much of the existing research on mentoring is from the United States and has focused upon the ‘classic model’, that of a one to one relationship between an adult and a young person. A robust meta-analysis of fifty-five mentoring schemes found that these programmes had a significant and measurable effect on young people, especially those considered to be at high risk, but that the size of the effect was quite modest (Dubois et al., 2002). Other studies have concluded that participating young people are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, less likely to be violent and more likely to have improved school attendance, performance and relationships with their parents and peers (Jekielek et al., 2002).

The range of research focusing specifically on peer mentoring is more limited. Sheehan et al., (1999) studied an eighteen-month community based peer mentoring programme on violence prevention in the United States. The researchers found that, compared with a matched control group, children who had attended lessons on violence prevention given by their peers avoided an increase in attitudes that supported violence, showed a decrease in their violence-related attitudes and increased self-esteem. Another American study (Pringle et al., 1993) found that peer mentoring fostered strong bonds between mentors and mentees, encouraged academic achievement and helped new students and those with limited proficiency in English to integrate more successfully into the school environment.

Characteristics of successful peer mentoring programmes included the matching of mentors and mentees based on interpersonal bonds and recruiting and training at-risk students to become mentors, helping to reduce the stigma associated with receiving help.

In England, Nelson (2003) conducted a qualitative study of a secondary school based peer mentoring scheme that aimed to ease the transition of students from primary schools and have a positive impact upon students' key skills and learning. Year 10 students were matched with Year 7 students using several criteria: same gender; had attended the same feeder school, lived in the same vicinity and had common hobbies and interests. Students were matched to encourage the formation of friendships and enable positive outcomes for both mentor and mentee. Nelson concluded that the mentoring scheme had improved the literacy and communication skills of mentors and mentees, had made mentees less anxious about the transition from primary to secondary school and had improved students' self-esteem and confidence.

Further evaluations have similarly identified positive outcomes. Newburn and Shiner (2006) conducted an evaluation of a UK mentoring programme, 'Mentoring Plus,' designed to work with disaffected young people. The programme aimed to reduce youth crime and other at-risk behaviour and help young people back into education, training and employment. Positive effects were identified in relation to young peoples' engagement in education, training, and work; however, there was no clear evidence that the programme had any impact on offending, family relationships, substance use or self-esteem. The researchers concluded that 'Mentoring Plus' had the most impact in relation to areas where the structured activities related directly to the aims of the programme. Other studies have shown that peer mentoring

for typically developing students has led to positive outcomes such as learning to negotiate with others, learning to ask for help and support and improved social and communication skills (Cowie et al., 2002). Schools operating a peer mentoring programme were found to create a more favourable school climate and showed a decline in student drop-out rates (Stader and Gagnepain, 2000). It has also been shown to raise staff and student awareness of issues that affect emotional health, such as exam pressure, racism and peer and family relationships (Phillip and Spratt, 2007). Peer mentoring was also an important strategy for promoting the inclusion of children and young people with a disability, evidenced by the effect peer support models had on the reducing the levels of bullying in schools (Cowie and Wallace, 2000; Smith et al., 2003).

A large-scale study on peer mentoring in English schools by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (DCSF, 2008) reinforced the positive potential of this approach. The study, across mentoring programmes in 180 mainstream schools, identified that: peer mentoring provision within schools has experienced significant growth over the last ten years; from the data, it is likely that over a third of all schools in England had some form of peer mentoring provision; to date, much of the focus of peer mentoring programmes had been on reducing bullying; the current evidence base for peer mentoring is predominantly qualitative but more recent studies focused on collating quantitative data relating to specific targets such as attainment and well-being; mentors and school staff felt that the programmes were valuable for both mentors and mentees; there were wider benefits for the climate of the school; peer mentoring had helped to reduce bullying and promote self-confidence and self-esteem in students; and finally, that peer mentoring fitted well with policy initiatives such as participation, early intervention and volunteering.

Although evidence exists that school based mentoring is a positive intervention, and that there are educational and personal gains for mentees, reviews of school based mentoring programmes are needed to synthesise what significant gains do exist (Wheeler, et al., 2010). Some researchers view mentoring as an ill-defined concept built upon a questionable 'deficit' model (Hall, 2003). Furthermore, there are several identifiable gaps within the existing research on peer mentoring which need to be considered. Firstly, many of the studies are short-term and have relied predominantly on anecdotal data from participants and staff. Without the use of quantitative measures, focused on specific areas, it is hard to ascertain the full impact of peer mentoring on different areas of young people's needs. Secondly, meta-analysis research often looks at specific groups perceived to have difficulties, or at specific outcomes, and therefore they measure different factors. Thirdly, there has been a focus on mentoring interventions in general e.g., community based, that have not isolated specific gains for school based mentoring programmes. Lastly, despite an increasing body of literature on school based peer mentoring programmes in England there is a paucity of research relating to programmes involving autistic students, either as mentors or mentees.

2.53 SUMMARY

Following a review of the literature, peer mentoring was identified as an approach that could be used to target peer relationships for autistic students in mainstream schools. There were no studies or programmes in the literature that specifically targeted the involvement of autistic students. As such, it was necessary to develop a new peer mentoring programme for mainstream secondary schools that supported the involvement and inclusion of students on the autistic spectrum. The following Chapter outlines how principles and practice from Agency Theory were integrated into the new programme to provide a more inclusive,

autonomous and meaningful approach for students and staff. One that recognises diversity, individuality and the importance of student voice in the development of the curriculum within inclusive education.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, educational approaches for autistic students have been chosen based on information and data from a variety of sources (Jones and Jordan, 2008). These include the views and experience of parents and the expertise of school staff and visiting professionals such as autism advisory teachers, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. Other sources include: ideas from current theories (e.g., on autism, development and learning); well-documented case studies from practice; the parent's or practitioner's own working knowledge of the individual, and their response to previous approaches; and current social and cultural values. It is critical to have identified the range of abilities for an autistic student through a robust and ongoing assessment process. This can then be used to guide which approach may be best placed to meet the needs of the student and what areas of development to target. Promoting the idea of a flexible and eclectic approach that can change over time and is matched to the changing needs of the individual.

It is therefore important when developing a new approach to make sense of the different educational interventions being tried and developed in settings and the rationale and evidence for their use and effectiveness. Empirically based research evidence is an important part of this process, as is an awareness of the limitations of the evidence base. From personal experience as a practitioner it is only one of several sources of information that a teacher or parent might use. In addition, two reports by the AET on Good Practice (Charman et al., 2011) and Outcomes (Wittemeyer et al., 2011) have been important in providing key recommendations for the ways in which schools can work more effectively

with students, parents, and other services, to meet the needs of autistic students. This reflects the need to look at the wider context of autism practice in schools.

However, the gap between approaches recommended in the literature and actual practice in schools remains an ongoing concern (Snell, 2003). Enabling the views of key stakeholders on the acceptability and feasibility of educational approaches has been suggested as one pathway for promoting the implementation of evidence-based practices or EBPs (Elsabbagh et al., 2014). Though the views and perspectives of educational professionals and peers without special educational needs have been sought (Carter and Pesko, 2008), there is a lack of research into the views of autistic children and young people. No published studies have offered in-depth explorations of how they view key components of school-based social focused approaches, despite services and supports being identified as a research priority by autistic adults (Pellicano et al., 2014).

Current secondary aged students and young adults on the autistic spectrum can provide important insights into the acceptability and potential impact of peer focused approaches. Their motivation to participate and the extent to which they feel positive social outcomes occur are likely to influence their support for specific approaches. Furthermore, their involvement into how approaches are developed and implemented could assist teachers and researchers in facilitating practices to meet individualised needs. For example, qualitative studies involving younger students with physical and intellectual disabilities have highlighted concerns about the mixed impact of relying heavily on adults to support social inclusion (Mortier et al., 2011). This thesis adds to the emerging literature that values the input of

autistic children and young people on service provision and practice (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Pellicano et al., 2014), and on the design and delivery of peer focused approaches.

3.2 RATIONALE FOR PEER MENTORING

The research literature on approaches targeting peer relationships for autistic students evidenced the limitations of programmes focusing only on social skills. Studies that have taken place with autistic children and young people in non-school environments, such as health clinics or research centres, have shown limited transferability of newly acquired skills into educational settings (Reichow and Volkmar, 2010). Highlighting the need for approaches that allow autistic students to practice skills and knowledge in real life-contexts alongside their peers. Leading to the generalisation of skills and the development of social competence that is necessary for more effective peer relationships (Laugeson, 2014).

Several studies have identified that interventions focusing on social functioning and inclusion for autistic students should promote increased acceptance and understanding amongst their peers. For example, Frederickson and Jones (2010, p.1001) in their study on inclusive provision for autistic students in schools, concluded that *“Greater use of evidence-based peer mediated strategies to support social inclusion and learning across both types of placement may be a valuable direction for future development.”* It is argued that having peers who are committed to developing positive relationships is a critical part of improving outcomes for this group and may help reduce their feelings of distrust of other children and young people (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Humphrey and Symes, 2010).

The above findings are important when considering the use of peer mentoring as an approach aimed at improving outcomes for autistic students in mainstream schools. However, the lack

of research relating to peer mentoring and autistic students meant that there was not a mentoring programme in the literature that specifically targeted the involvement of this group. It was therefore necessary to develop a new programme for mainstream secondary schools that could be used to support the involvement and inclusion of autistic students.

When reviewing the literature, it was evident that a theoretical framework would be helpful for structuring the new programme. Consistent with contemporary theories of learning, I felt that education needs to reflect more collaborative learning approaches whereby staff share responsibility for moving learning forward with their students. Where learning is recognised as a social process and becomes a joint responsibility (Zimmerman, 2008). When students share responsibility for learning they are no longer passive recipients of instruction. Instead, they become active agents in their own learning who can respond to feedback, set goals and adapt their learning strategies when they perceive it necessary to meet those goals. I wanted to develop an inclusive and student-centred programme that shared these values and identified Agency Theory as a possible framework for the new programme. A systematic approach to reviewing the literature on Agency Theory was used and the findings are discussed in the following section.

3.3 AGENCY THEORY

3.31 INTRODUCTION

The concept of agency has been central to educational thinking and practice for centuries. The idea that education is the process through which learners become capable of independent thought which, in turn, forms the basis for autonomous action, has had a profound impact on modern educational theory and practice. The recognition of children's

rights to agency in policy has received a steady increase in attention, both nationally and internationally, since the United Nations '*Convention on the Rights of the Child*' (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) became the first legally-binding document to afford children the same comprehensive human and citizenship rights as adults. This gave children the right to autonomy and to fully participate in, and influence, matters that concern them (Page, 2008). The research literature, parallel to policy developments in this area, shows the importance of agency and active interaction in children's neurological development and functioning (Bandura, 2001; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

The concept of human agency is created through various philosophical, psychological and sociological constructs (Macfarlane and Cartmel, 2008; Paris and Lung, 2008), yet can be generally understood as a quality which enables a person to initiate intentional action to achieve goals that are valued. The main principle is that learning depends on the activity and initiative of the learner, more so than on any 'inputs' that are transmitted to the learner by a teacher or a textbook. Placing the emphasis on action, interaction and affordances, rather than on texts themselves. As a fundamental pedagogical principle, this is nothing new if we consider the work of Vygotsky, Montessori, Dewey, and many other educationalists over the centuries. Wertsch et al., (1993) argue that agency, from a sociocultural perspective (following Vygotsky), is 'intermental' as well as 'intramental.' It is not just an individual character trait or activity, but a contextually enacted way of being in the world. The role of the individual in constructing his or her experience of the world is active, in that people are "*agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences*" (Bandura, 2001, p.4).

3.32 AGENCY AND EDUCATION

Whilst children are legally entitled to autonomy and freedom, to fully participate in, and influence matters that concern them, the challenge lies in identifying how teachers might promote children's agency in practice. There are obvious tensions in maintaining group cohesion and a collaborative environment whilst balancing children's individuality and right to act autonomously (Paris and Lung, 2008). Further challenges to the facilitation of child agency include organisational and curriculum constraints, teacher-initiated instruction (Oda and Mari, 2006) and maintaining order and rules (Killen and Smetana, 1999).

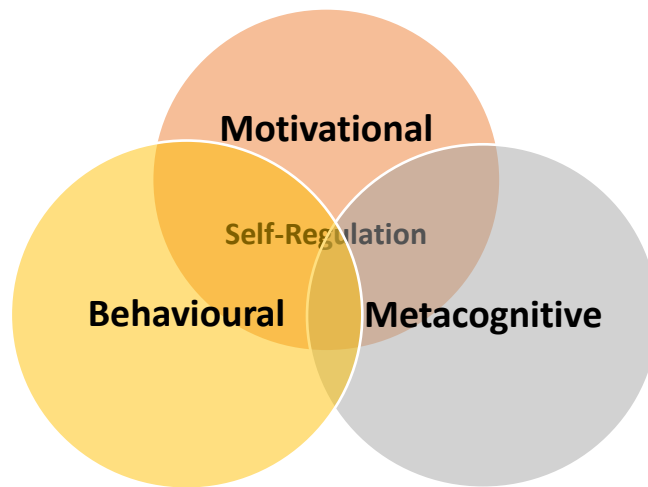
Yamazumi (2006, p.24) argues that traditional school lessons, learning and curriculum have focused on teaching as a means of transferring the contents of textbooks to students where *"educational institutions are tightly closed systems"* having little impact on the real world. He proposes that educational practice and theory must include forms of human agency that can transform traditional educational work. This can be achieved by the construction of a collaborative, shared and joint learning activity which breaks the well-defined segregation of teacher and student activity. Students then become the subject of whole systems of learning rather than mere subjects of separate learning actions. Several studies show that an increased sense of agency and self-regulation promotes pro-social, cooperative behaviour, and that engagement within a group can simultaneously emphasise individual agency and autonomy (Bandura, 2001; Rogoff, 2003). This is significant when considering those areas of ability compromised in autistic children and young people. Specifically, that they may not realise teachers and peers can be a source of emotional support, engagement and help. This was an important consideration in the development of the new peer mentoring programme as a collaborative learning experience for both students and staff.

3.33 AGENCY AND AUTISM

There is limited research on Agency Theory in relation to autistic individuals. While most research has focused largely on interpersonal or social cognition in autism, a recent shift has been towards understanding altered intrapersonal or self-related cognition associated with the condition (Lombardo et al., 2007). A review of studies of the self in autism, focusing on paradigms examining 'physical' aspects of the self (Uddin, 2011), suggested that physical and embodied self-representation are not impaired in autistic individuals. Studies of self-recognition, agency and perspective-taking in autism did not demonstrate specific deficits in these abilities associated with the condition. For example, Williams and colleagues reported that individuals with autism did not differ from typically developing individuals in that each group found it easier to monitor their own agency than to monitor the agency of the experimenter. Both groups showed a 'self-reference effect', in that they recalled their own actions better than those of the experimenter (Williams and Happé, 2009). These studies suggest that action monitoring and agency are relatively intact in autistic individuals.

However, the ability to be an active agent in one's own learning, termed self-regulated learning, is a significant challenge for many autistic students. Self-regulated learning is broadly defined as the constructive and intentional use of personal strategies to achieve academic and well-being goals. More specifically, as shown in Figure 2, this refers to the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their own learning processes. These processes do not operate independently but rather are integrated to form an overall approach to learning.

Figure 2: Self-Regulation Construct



In terms of metacognitive processes, self-regulated learners set goals, monitor their progress toward those goals and evaluate how well they are achieving them. They reflect on their learning approaches and adapt current and future methods. When students do this, they become aware of their learning and can make conscious decisions about how to manage it. The result of engaging in this kind of learning processes is that student motivation and feelings of agency are increased. Highly motivated students are more attentive to their learning processes than poorly motivated ones, and they expend extra effort to learn something difficult.

This has strong parallels to Executive Functioning which is defined by Ozonoff et al., (1991, p.1083) as *“as the ability to maintain an appropriate problem-solving set for attainment of a future goal.”* Though disagreements on the definition of Executive Functioning exist it remains one of three key cognitive theories of autism, along with Theory of Mind Deficit and Weak Central Coherence (Rajendran and Mitchell, 2007). A deficit in Executive Functioning

would mean that an individual may find it more difficult to set goals, use strategies to complete tasks, evaluate performance and maintain motivation (Myles, 2005; Harris et al., 2005). As such, their thinking and behaviour may appear rigid and inflexible (Mruzek et al., 2007) resulting in the need to follow routines and structure. Limited cognitive flexibility, including the inability to shift attention or multitask (Mackinlay et al., 2006), and differences in the ability to regulate motor control and cognitive acts (Hill, 2004), can also result in engaging in a single narrow interest or repetitively engaging in one stereotyped behaviour. For autistic children and young people this may result in a reduction of agency and self-regulation and negatively impact on their ability to complete simple tasks in the classroom, such as following instructions, a schedule or finishing an activity.

However, many approaches for autistic children and young people have often made use of extrinsic motivation to achieve gains. This is particularly common in behavioural based approaches such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA). Extrinsically motivated actions are those regulated by external rewards, pressures or constraint and are characterised by gaining something that is outside the activity itself (Brophy, 2008). Thus, it is possible that approaches promoting extrinsic motivation to achieve gains may inhibit intrinsic motivation, especially for academic tasks and social interaction. This may be at odds with the development of agency and self-regulated learning because these approaches often rely on controlling behaviour which in turn may be barriers to autonomy and self-determination (Clarke et al., 2004).

The following section will look at how the principles and practice of Agency Theory were integrated into the new peer mentoring approach to promote agency and inclusion for the autistic students participating in the programme. This is based on the belief that individuals

should not merely react to and repeat given practice but should have increased autonomous social action and take control of their own lives (Clarke et al., 2004; Ecclestone, 2007).

3.4 THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

3.41 DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The development of the new mentoring programme involved three interrelated stages; researching existing types of peer mentoring models, identifying key elements of good practice from the research literature on peer mentoring, and finally, developing a 'best fit' model that would consider the needs of autistic students and integrate key principles and practice from Agency Theory.

Stage One: Peer Mentoring Models

For the first stage the literature review produced the following as the types of peer mentoring models most typically used in schools (DuBois et al., 2002; Houlston et al., 2009).

Group mentoring

Peer mentors are assigned to a wider range of students, often to specific form groups, and provide support to any student who asks for it, typically on a weekly 'surgery' basis. This is a less formal approach than one-to-one peer mentoring and may be most applicable to deal with short-term concerns. It can also reduce the amount of time staff must spend on these 'lower level' issues. This is particularly popular with transition peer mentoring, where Year 7 students are linked with older peer mentors from the school through initial group sessions.

Drop-in sessions

This is an alternative to one-to-one mentoring which can attract more students because of its informal availability, it also encourages them to seek peer support with their friends if they are nervous about asking for help on an individual basis. Peer mentors are usually 'on duty' on a rota basis at a designated location which is widely-publicised around the school. However, with topics such as bullying it can be difficult to encourage young people to 'walk in' to a room which has been designated for the bullied.

Buddies/playground pals/circle of friends

This form of activity has become increasingly popular at primary schools, where around half of the mentoring could be categorised in this way. Here peer mentors have clearly visible roles (often wearing distinctive clothing) during each playtime, helping young people discuss their disagreements, listen to their problems, organise games and enhance fun and friendship throughout the school.

Peer mediation

A more specialised form of peer mentoring which can be used to help resolve individual or group disputes. Peer mentors are trained in conflict resolution so that they can help both sides express their viewpoint and look at ways to move forward and come to an agreement. Mentors act as peacemakers around their school and through the training gain in confidence and in emotional and social skills.

Cyber mentoring

This will be an option where peer mentors can provide advice and support to the young people subjected to bullying through IT applications. Schools can train young people to become online mentors and with the IT packages available, can ensure that there is a safe system in place when the mentoring takes place.

Stage Two: Best Practice

The next stage was to review the evidence for best practice identified from previous research outlined earlier in this Chapter. It was clear that the most successful outcomes were seen when peer mentoring programmes included one or more of the following features: training for peer mentors and staff; strong staff support of programmes, including senior leadership teams; systems for monitoring and evaluating outcomes; regular support provided to peer mentors; and regular meetings between mentors facilitated by school staff.

Stage Three: Autism Friendly Model

The third stage was to look at peer mentoring in relation to the needs of autistic children and young people and what would represent a 'best fit' model to meet their needs. The Autism Education Trust Outcomes Report (Wittemeyer et al., 2011) was an important starting point for the development of the new programme. The report sought the views of autistic people and their families to establish their outcome priorities. It included a consultation with key stakeholder groups, using online surveys, focus group discussions and individual interviews. The main consensus across stakeholders was that it is important to enable an autistic person to make their own choice on outcomes. Key recommendations from the report (see Table 3.1) provided a strategic context that informed the development of good practice within schools.

Table 3.1: AET Outcomes Report and the new Peer Mentoring Programme

Key Recommendations	Link to new peer mentoring programme
School staff should be trained to be aware of vulnerable students and the situations, particularly in mainstream settings, in which they are at risk of bullying. The possibility of offering a “safe-haven” for autistic students should be considered.	The programme is designed to offer autistic students a safe space to discuss issues that are important to them, including bullying. School staff will have training as peer mentoring co-ordinators. One of the aims of the programme is to reduce the levels of bullying for autistic students.
Local authorities should support the training of a member of staff to work as an “autism expert” across a network of mainstream schools, with the longer-term objective of employing an autism expert in every mainstream school.	The peer mentoring co-ordinators will have training to develop their skills and knowledge of supporting autistic students in mainstream school settings.
Schools and other service providers should make every effort to consult all young autistic people, including those with limited communication means, about their desired outcomes for adult life. This consultation should include, where appropriate, the opinions of parents and carers.	Central to the programme is the consultation of autistic students both before, during and after the programme and the promotion of agency and self-determination.
The Department for Education should provide written guidance on how teachers, particularly in mainstream settings, can find the right balance between teaching autistic students key academic skills and teaching them skills that fall outside of the National Curriculum (e.g. Independent living skills, social and emotional understanding).	The new programme may be considered part of the PSHE (personal, social, and health education) curriculum though it has a broader remit and potentially includes topics and issues that are not part of the normal school PSHE scheme of work.

Senior school management and teaching staff should regularly involve Learning Support/Teaching Assistants in educational planning for autistic students.	The use of support staff to be programme co-ordinators meant they were integral to the planning for the autistic students involved as peer mentors.
Schools should include time within their 'flexible' curriculum for autistic students to develop their self-awareness and to discuss their diagnosis, should they wish to.	The new programme was timetabled outside of lesson times. The questions of discussing a diagnosis was left to individual students but the programme aimed to provide a safe and supportive environment for them to do so.

In addition, it was necessary to reflect on the research regarding the effective use of support staff within schools. This was an important consideration given that teaching assistants are most commonly use to provide individual or group base approaches for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in schools. *'The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff'* (DISS) project (DCSF, 2009) was designed to obtain reliable data on the deployment and characteristics of support staff and their impact on student outcomes and teacher workloads over a five-year period (2003-08). This large-scale study, covering primary, secondary and special schools in England and Wales, was the first longitudinal study to analyse the impact of TAs on teachers, teaching and students' learning, behaviour and academic progress in everyday classroom settings. Contrary to common sense views about TA support (i.e. more adult support for those who need it most helps them to progress), the results showed a negative relationship between the amount of TA support received and the progress made by students in mainstream primary and secondary schools. These results were not attributable to student characteristics, such as their prior attainment or SEN status, or be explained in terms of decisions made by TAs. Instead, it was concluded that the

way schools and teachers deploy and prepare TAs, factors that are out of TAs' control, that best explain the results.

The DISS study raised serious questions concerning the way support staff were deployed in schools, and was one reason supported students, typically those with SEN, may not make as much progress as expected. The study recognised that support staff have huge potential in helping teachers and students, e.g., through their impact on teaching and learning, and made several recommendations to support this. These included increasing the liaison time and training for TAs and teachers; improved line management; and more research examining not just the amount of support but facets of the 'Wider Pedagogical Role' of support staff on student learning, behaviour and attitudes to learning. These recommendations were considered in the development of the new programme and explicit reference was made to the importance of communication between the programme co-ordinator and relevant teaching staff in the induction process. Having identified key research literature on good autism practice and the use of support staff within schools, principles and practice from Agency Theory were then integrated into the new programme (see Table 3.2).

This recognises that school staff can facilitate or hinder the development of agency and self-regulated learning through autonomy support. A profile of characteristics has emerged from research that describes staff who support autonomy in the classroom and school environment (Deci and Ryan, 2004). These were key principles that informed the role of the peer mentoring co-ordinator. Autonomy-supportive staff are active listeners, avoid using directives, offer support rather than giving students answers to problems, and allow

students time for independent work. They avoid criticism, praise mastery, communicate in an empathic manner, and engage in perspective-taking. They also acknowledge and accept negative feelings that may arise when students are asked to engage in difficult and challenging activities.

Table 3.2: Agency Theory and the new Peer Mentoring Programme

Principles	Practice
Engages Learners in meaningful and productive experiences.	Staff handing over position of authority to students to discuss what is relevant to them.
Addresses authentic and complex problems.	Staff acting as facilitators for the students to promote collaboration and joint problem-solving.
Creates spaces of learning which value learner's agency, authority and accountability in meaning making and knowledge creation.	Students negotiating ground rules for participation and content of the sessions.
Removes boundaries between formal and informal learning contexts.	Students taking on different roles and visiting past experiences as a learner.
Promotes schools as collaborative learning communities.	Students sharing experiences and ideas through discussion.

Staff can create an autonomy-supportive environment by providing students with meaningful rationales concerning why a lesson or way of behaving is important and relevant to their well-being. This allows staff to create relationships with students that promote flexibility and choice rather than control and pressure. As such, the framework for the new mentoring programme sought to establish a culture of collaborative learning in which staff position themselves as facilitators, enabling students to align with their position as agents of their own learning and social worlds. This recognises that agency is interdependent. It

mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context of school. Students must develop an awareness that there are consequences for the decisions they make and actions they take, and will take account of that in the ways they exercise their agency in learning. A greater understanding of the role that agency plays in educational practice for children and young people with autism may help determine how school practitioners can better support self-regulated learning for this group.

3.42 OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMME

The development process enabled me to identify overarching features of the new programme (shown in Table 3.3) and include the rationale behind the decisions made. This formed the basis of the programme which was further refined in the programme guidelines (see Appendix 16) and supported by induction training for the programme co-ordinators. The induction and guidelines included the following elements: an overview of autism; rationale and ethos for the programme; information for co-ordinators and mentors on their role; recommendations on how to set up sessions, and resources; and an example session.

Table 3.3: New Peer Mentoring Programme

Feature of Programme	Rationale	Autism Focus
Group Mentoring where all students are peer mentors for each other (there are no mentees).	This builds on research evidence from the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (2008) that over 80% of mentees had felt positively about their experiences of peer mentoring. However, over 90% of mentors had felt positively	Builds on the research evidence that the development of social competence is more successful through group interactions than individualised social skills programmes. All models of peer support identified in the research

	about their experience of being a mentor.	literature were hierarchical in nature and typically feature one group or individual acting as mentor for another child who is seen to have some form of difficulty or impairment. This reinforces a deficit model of autism which I wanted to remove from the new programme.
Member of school staff co-ordinates the programme.	Peer mentoring programmes that are more formalised and include training, support and management of the mentors are more beneficial in terms of impact (MBF, 2008).	Having a staff member who was experienced working with autistic students meant they could help guide discussions and problem-solving issues and ensure all the students had a voice. Training staff in how to be autonomy-promoting was key to enabling self-determination and agency for the students. It also raised staff and awareness of issues that may affect student's emotional health, such as exam pressure, bullying, and peer relationships (Phillip and Spratt, 2007).
Mentors given induction prior to the programme.	Peer mentoring programmes that are more formalised and include training, support and management of the mentors are	Given the differences in the motivation, understanding and anxiety levels of the autistic students with it was key to have

	more beneficial in terms of impact (MBF, 2008).	clear guidelines for them on what being a peer mentor meant and what the programme involved.
Meeting at the same time and location every two weeks.	It would be easier for schools to fit this into existing staffing, student and room timetables and not impact on other curriculum areas e.g., sessions were held during assembly or tutor times.	This provided a clear routine and structure for the autistic students and was designed to reduce their anxiety levels around the organisation and timetabling of the sessions.
Students have input into the content of the programme.	The use of Agency Theory to provide a framework for the programme was designed to increase the agency, self-determination and independence of the peer mentors.	This built on recommendations from previous research that we need to find positive strategies to enable the voice of autistic students to be heard (Parsons et al., 2009; Charman et al., 2011).

Guidelines for mentors were given to the co-ordinator for an induction session with peer mentors before the programme started (see appendix 16). This outlined the peer mentoring role, confidentiality, withdrawal from mentoring and how it may benefit them. One of the resources was a practical information sheet where the mentors could list the content they wanted the sessions to cover. The co-ordinators were encouraged to talk about the issue of disclosure with the autistic students prior to the programme starting so it was clear whether this was something the students were comfortable with discussing in the sessions. It was suggested that each peer mentoring group had four students from the same class including an autistic student. The co-ordinator would arrange an initial induction meeting and then arrange and co-ordinate meetings for the group. The guidelines recommended organising

two peer mentoring sessions a month during a time that didn't interfere with academic studies, such as tutor time or assembly. The staff co-ordinator was also asked to be available outside these times if the students needed to talk to them about the programme or any other related issues.

It was made clear to the schools that peer mentoring, as an *intervention package* (NCTL, 2014), should be seen as one of several proactive approaches to support autistic children and young people in schools. Educational research and practice efforts need to focus on both the individual student and contextual factors that increase the risk of social exclusion and bullying. For example, educating the peer group is an approach contributing to more holistic and accepting educational environments in which the differences associated with autism are valued. Direct interventions with the peer group have been demonstrated to have an impact on bullying behaviour in non-autistic students (e.g., training peers to avoid reinforcing bullying behaviour and offer more support to victims in Kärnä et al., 2011). Staff can also be targeted by means of training, such as the AET School's Programme (Guldberg et al., 2013), aimed at challenging attitudes, raising awareness of the impact of autism on students and the role of staff in supporting them. Furthermore, consideration should be made of the external factors which may be equally or indeed more important in reducing vulnerability to bullying and social isolation (e.g., appropriate activities for the individual to engage in during lunch breaks). Ideally a whole school approach to these issues should become embedded in the ethos and policy of settings to assist in prevention rather than simply reacting to problems once they have occurred. In this context, the new peer mentoring programme represents a proactive strategy as part of a range of individualised and whole school supports for autistic students, their peers and staff.

3.5 SUMMARY AND STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This literature review in Chapter Two examined peer relationships, educational approaches for autistic children and young people and peer mentoring within mainstream schools in England. Chapter Three has shown how this informed the process of integrating research and practice to develop a new, 'autism friendly,' peer mentoring programme for secondary schools. The issue of improving outcomes for this group has mainly been examined from a researcher led perspective focussing on the evaluation of approaches, yet few have looked at the experiences and perspectives of the young people with autism themselves.

There has been a strong history of legislation in the UK defining the rights of all children and young people to be consulted on matters that affect them. This includes '*The Children's Act*' (1989), '*Every Child Matters*' (DfES, 2004), '*SEN Code of Practice*' (DfES, 2001) and the '*Children and Families Act*' (2014). However, from a practitioner perspective, my experience is that many autistic students do not feel they have a voice, are listened to, or given opportunities to be autonomous in their own lives. This may partly reflect the lack of opportunities for all students in many secondary schools to be active participants in their own learning. It reinforces the need for schools to understand an individual student's perspective and to make use of that information to inform planning and support (Preece, 2002; Kammer 2009; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008).

Similarly, in research the role of autistic children and young people is often to be passive participants in studies that are often parental, observational, professional or statistical in origin. Meaning their perspectives and views may be overlooked or ignored, though some recent examples of good practice exist (Humphries and Symes, 2010). It recognised that

there is a need to accurately reflect the views and experiences of the autistic students involved in research projects and that this would add to the validity of the studies (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). This highlights that both practitioners and researchers should understand the *“Need to devise ways of developing mechanisms that both place the perspectives of autistic people ‘at the centre of the autism conversation’ and are attentive to the diversity of voices within the autism community. Such mechanisms must also be truly participatory (see Pellicano et al., 2011), actively seeking to overcome the power differentials that exist between autistic people and established authorities”* (Milton et al., 2014, p.2650). This argues for a reframing of research and the increased engagement and involvement of autistic young people in deciding the content and implementation of educational approaches. The use of Agency Theory as a theoretical framework to underpin the new peer mentoring programme sought to redress this balance and promote student autonomy and the voice of autistic students. Furthermore, the usefulness of Agency Theory in the development of a more peer led, as opposed to adult directed, educational approach will be explored through the different perspectives of the participants in the peer mentoring programme.

However, more knowledge is required on what and how external and internal pressures, drivers and barriers exist to the successful implementation of educational approaches for autistic children within schools. The findings from this thesis can help bridge the research-practice gap through extending the knowledge of peer mentoring as part of a comprehensive tiered response to meeting the needs of autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. This includes broader factors such as the relevance to participant priorities, feasibility in real-life (educational) contexts, flexibility to be adapted to individual

needs and the extent to which the approach enables the views of autistic children and young people to be considered. It is hoped that the overarching aim of the research, to test the effectiveness and impact of the new peer mentoring programme, will provide a useful starting point for students, school staff and support services in developing peer mentoring programmes within schools.

The overarching aim came from the need to explore four interconnected areas of investigation. These have arisen from both my experience as a practitioner within the field of autism education and a review of the associated research literature outlined in Chapters Two and Three:

Firstly, what can we learn about both autistic students' experiences of being a peer mentor?

Our understanding of the impact of peer mentoring on students in schools comes from research based on the traditional model of mentor and mentees and does not include reference to the experience of autistic students. The research project aimed to challenge this model through the development and use of a new mentoring model based on principles of equality and agency that promotes inclusion, participation and social competence.

Secondly, what is the impact on peer relationships for autistic children and young people with who participate in the peer mentoring programme? Many studies have detailed the increased likelihood of poorer outcomes for this group in mainstream secondary schools but fewer have tried to address the issue of improving them.

Thirdly, what are the views and experiences of the staff who supported the students on the new peer mentoring programme through the role of peer mentoring co-ordinator? This is key to developing a more robust understanding of the students' experiences and analysing

any differences or commonalities in the expectations of the programme from staff, school and students. It also provides information which is important to consider when answering the sustainability of school based approaches.

Fourthly, what factors are associated with the successful implementation of educational approaches, and specifically peer mentoring, for autistic students in secondary schools?

More information is needed in this area and the question of sustainability of any approach is an important one to address given the current policy pressures and financial constraints on schools. Literature on this topic is sparse due to the lack of longitudinal studies in this area and the lack of research into the factors that enable educational approaches in autism to be successfully sustained over time.

This led to the identification of the five underlying research questions (RQ) shown in Chapter one, and again below, (see Table 1.1). The following Chapter suggests a research design, methods and procedures to answer these questions.

Table 1.1: Research Questions

- | |
|--|
| <p>RQ1. Does being a peer mentor improve levels of social competence for autistic students?</p> <p>RQ2. Does being a peer mentor improve levels of social satisfaction for autistic students?</p> <p>RQ3. Does being a peer mentor reduce levels of bullying for autistic students?</p> <p>RQ4. Did the new peer mentoring programme promote participation and inclusion for autistic students?</p> <p>RQ5. What factors are key to the sustainability of the peer mentoring programme as an educational approach to support autistic students in mainstream secondary schools?</p> |
|--|

Chapter 4. Methodology, Design and Procedures

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter I outline the research paradigm for the study and justify the selection of research methodology, design and procedure. The selection of the pragmatic paradigm and the interpretive mixed methods approach is discussed. I then describe how a case study approach, using multiple and mixed methods of enquiry, was identified as the most appropriate research design to address the research questions. The criteria and selection of the units of analysis, five mainstream secondary schools, is given. A description of the survey design, and guidelines for the semi-structured interviews, is followed by a section on implementation procedures. The subsequent section on analysis describes how both the quantitative and qualitative analysis was undertaken. The last section discusses issues of validity and reliability, and a description of how the ethical procedures for research were followed.

4.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

While the primary objective of the research process is to increase knowledge, the type and validity of knowledge claims from the study depends on the theoretical framework and philosophical stance, research paradigm, that the research methodology is based on (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Research paradigms are distinguished by *“how researchers make claims about what knowledge is (ontology), how researchers obtain knowledge (epistemology), what values go into it (axiology), how we write about it (rhetoric) and the process for studying it (methodology)”* (Creswell, 2003, p.6).

Research can be described as a systematic inquiry, whereby data are assembled, analysed and interpreted to understand, describe and control a phenomenon or to empower individuals or communities. It is a valuable and important contribution to knowledge-generation in society and forms part of a continuous evolution of research methodology based on a history of philosophical thought and empirical processes of knowledge-generation.

Epistemology is defined as the study or theory of the origin, nature, methods and limits of knowledge. It should inform how we know what we think we know and how can we differentiate between truth and falsehood. Even if not made explicit, the selection on research questions and methods reflects the researchers' epistemological understanding of the world. Furthermore, the interpretation of any research findings will expose the researchers' underlying philosophies, drawing on, and extending the notion that all knowledge is knowledge from some point of view (Greene et al., 2001).

4.21 THE MIXED METHODS PARADIGM

The fundamental belief that all humans are universally equal and strictly rational, came from the Enlightenment (end of the eighteenth century) and was based on the principle that research should be performed for the betterment of humankind. Opposed to this was a view that humans' perceptions and decisions may depend on differences in knowledge bases and values, relative to gender, cultures and individual differences (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). These differing views led to the division between the qualitative, constructivist stance and the quantitative, positivist stance in social science research. The constructivist stance creates knowledge through understanding how humans perceive reality. Humans will react or behave per their subjective and circumstantial perception of the reality around them. The researcher

thus creates knowledge, theory and meaning from subjective descriptions of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). In contrast, the positivist stance, or 'scientific method', creates knowledge through reducing a phenomenon to a measurable research problem, with the objective of verifying or rejecting a hypothesis. This approach makes use of research instruments that measure causality using statistical methods between phenomena. Data should therefore be obtained in an unobtrusive way by an objective researcher (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

The emergence of new disciplines in the social and behavioural sciences such as sociology, psychology and education throughout the nineteenth century often created a division within disciplines, between the soft humanist practitioners often employing qualitative methods, and the hard-experimental scientific researchers (Abercrombie, et al., 2000). However, the strengthening of social sciences led to innovation and quality improvement in constructivist research methods. The mid 1960s saw the development of Grounded theory, a systematic analysis of narratives to develop theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), followed by the concept of thick descriptions and procedures for conducting ethnographic research in the 1970s and 1980s (Geertz, 1973). There was also a move by researchers to use different methods to cross-validate findings (Denzin, 1978) through the process of triangulation that would reduce the bias inherent in any method. Denzin (1978) defined four types of triangulation: data triangulation, where different types of data sources are used in the study; investigator triangulation, involving more than one researcher in a single study; theory triangulation, using multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data; and lastly, methodological triangulation, the use of multiple methods to study a single problem.

The start of the 1990's saw the emergence of a mixed methods paradigm that was seen to occupy the middle ground between post-positivist and constructionist research. Based on the pragmatic American philosophies of John Dewey, Charles S. Peirce, and William James, it views knowledge as being both constructed and based on the physical world. This offers an epistemological justification (via pragmatic epistemic values or standards) and logic (the combination of methods and ideas that helps frame, address and answer research questions) for mixing approaches and methods. Knowledge is provisional rather than absolute and affected by both cultural and historical contexts (Denscombe, 2010). This anti-representational view of knowledge implies that the purpose of research should no longer be to provide an accurate account of how things are in themselves but to be useful and to aim at utility for us. The idea of utility relates to the notion of reflexive research practice and the question of 'what it is for' and 'who it is for' and how do the researcher's values influence the research. The objective is to test theories based on their workability and applicability. While inquiry is viewed as a method to find solutions to problems it prefers action to philosophising and endorses practical theory. It therefore takes a value-oriented approach and endorses democracy, freedom, equality and progress (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The approach has been criticised as being based on a western individualist culture; failing to include critical inquiry around long term, societal and social justice issues; and focused on solving short-term quantifiable problems (Denzin, 2010; Kvale, 2008). However, it is also described as a new hybrid form of research that views the two research paradigms as compatible (Howe, 2009); and as being *"a bold, innovative, energising and disruptive discourse"* (Denzin, 2010, p.425).

As such, mixed methods research (MMR) now forms an important part of research projects in many disciplines internationally such as education, health, nursing, psychology, and sociology.

4.22 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARADIGM AND METHODOLOGY

Mixed methods epistemology views that the use of both a post-positivist approach of reductionist measurement and a constructivist approach of meaning-making can obtain complementary, richer and more meaningful knowledge than the use of a single method approach. Through a cycle of inductive-deductive research processes, studying the same phenomena using two different methods can result in a divergence or corroboration of data, contradictions and paradoxes which could provide surprising new knowledge (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989). As such, Mixed Methods Research, or MMR *“is a response to the long-lasting, circular, and remarkably unproductive debates discussing the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative versus qualitative research as a result of the paradigm “wars”* (Felizer, 2010, p.6).

The last decade has seen a significant increase in mixed methods theory development that has led to different directions within MMR (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Mertens, 2009). The mixed methods paradigm can be separated into four different strands, based on the strategy of inquiry and researcher (see Appendix 2). While in the first two strands, flexible social inquiry and pragmatist mixed methods experimentalism, the researcher takes a more neutral outsiders view, in the last two, mixed methods interpretivist and transformative mixed methods, the researcher enters a collaborative relationship with the people or community being studied. While the mixed methods interpretivism has a democratic stance

as a basis for involvement (i.e. as many voices as possible should be heard) the transformative stance has a clear emancipatory and social justice purpose, with the researcher taking the side of the oppressed minority.

MMR may not be linked to a specific mixed methods research paradigm and represent situational and flexible choices that researchers make in relation to the phenomenon studied. However, it is closely aligned with the pragmatist philosophy, focused on finding solutions through evaluating and measuring what works. The pragmatist mixed methods paradigm can be separated into two distinct strands. Firstly, mixed methods interpretivism (Howe, 2004), developed from a view of understanding relationships from an insider's perspective. In practice, this means the researcher establishing a level of inclusion and dialogue with the people and settings being studied and ensuring that different voices and perspectives become part of the study. This reflects a need to obtain the maximum diversity of viewpoints and *"multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished"* (Greene, 2008, p.20).

In this strand, the emphasis is on understanding people on their own terms and in their own social setting, based on democratic involvement, and seeking inclusion and dialogue with a variety of actors to ensure all relevant voices are heard (Howe, 2004). In contrast, the second strand, mixed methods experimentalism, sees the research performed from an outsider's perspective used for evaluation and solution-finding.

This thesis is located within the mixed methods interpretivist research strand and has a democratic approach to ontology in research, suggesting that for research to be valid and

meaningful there is a need to obtain as many voices on the issue or phenomena as possible (Howe, 2004). This implies that the ontology for mixed methods interpretivism is constructivist, where perceptions of the world will change depending on who you ask and when you ask. To obtain a full and deep understanding, you need to understand many realities. The mixed methods paradigm also sees the importance of obtaining survey data, in line with positivist thinking, to obtain 'situational facts about physical realities.' This supports the researcher's understanding of how constructed realities are formed by different voices.

While the last fifteen years have seen a significant increase in research published in autism education the extent to which all voices have been heard is debatable (Kasari and Smith, 2013). Suggesting that there is a continuing disconnect between educational research and practice, a lack of involvement of teaching professionals in research and limited studies exploring whether educational strategies are effective in school contexts (Kasari and Smith, 2013; Parsons et al., 2013). The following section provides an overview of the current debate around evidence based practice in this field.

4.3 EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE

In the past decade, several large reviews of evidence based practice (EBP) in autism have sought to identify the effectiveness of a large range of approaches that exist in this field (Parsons et al., 2009; Odom et al., 2010). Some reviews, such as the US National Autism Centre (2009) designated that Evidence Based Practices (EBP) can only be designated as such if they have randomised, quasi-experimental or single subject designs. This research is predominantly based on a knowledge transfer model of evidence-based practice. Practitioners are expected to implement evidence based approaches based on the findings of

studies conducted by researchers. The most recent review by Wong et al., (2015) evaluated the quality of evidence for *focused intervention practices* for autistic children and young people from 1990-2011. They included 456 studies and identified twenty-seven practices designed specifically for autistic individuals that are evidence-based (e.g., visual supports, social narratives, functional communication training, technology assistive intervention, etc.). Each strategy has been shown to impact several outcome areas (e.g., social, communication, behavior, play and cognition) across different age-ranges of children and young people. Most of the participants in the studies were children aged between six and eleven-years-old, with preschool-aged children (aged three to five-years-old) also participating in a large proportion of studies. Relatively fewer studies included children below three years of age (i.e. in early intervention). While a substantial minority of studies included participants above twelve years of age, this number declined as the ages increased.

Kasari and Smith (2013), in their paper on school-based programmes for autistic children, make an important critique of these approaches and the research that underpins them. The research designs often create a disparity between the priorities of researchers and practitioners, leading to differences between what the research evidence may prescribe and what happens in practice. Many EBPs are shown to mainly target the approach used to teach an intervention (the 'how') or the dose of the intervention (e.g., hours per week), rather than 'what' is taught. This means that the core areas of need for autistic children are not necessarily addressed. A good example of this is the use of pre-linguistic gestures, such as pointing to share and show an object to someone else. This is an important skill, commonly deficient in autistic children, needed for joint attention and later language acquisition. Research in this area was absent from the intervention studies.

Within these opposing methodological frameworks there are many approaches that claim to be effective for autistic children and young people and most differ in their rationale, aims and practice. This often results in the use of non-evidence based approaches and a growing disparity between what the research may recommend and what occurs in practice (Reichow et al., 2008). Furthermore, strong research data to support a specific approach may not exist. This is partly because the practitioners may lack the necessary tools, resources and expertise to evaluate their work. However, research in this area is problematic and studies which have been conducted have not always produced clear and conclusive findings (Jones and Jordan, 2008). These issues are not specific to the autism spectrum, although research involving this population does present specific challenges.

The main findings from the NSCE review by Parsons et al., (2009) were that most educational approaches and programmes had some evidence of their effectiveness, but this was variable in quality. The researchers found that no single approach had been entirely successful in producing a methodologically sound evaluation. This reflects the difficulties inherent in evaluating approaches for those on the autism spectrum. These include gaining a clear description of the rationale, aims and practices of an approach; having confidence in the diagnosis, particularly for very young children, and where the research team has not confirmed this; having confidence in the assessment results for matching purposes and for measuring change; reaching a consensus on what counts as a 'successful outcome', and from whose perspective; assessing the fidelity of implementation and 'therapist drift'; the fact that individuals may be engaged in more than one approach and move in and out of these during the research (Humphrey and Parkinson, 2006); ethical issues (e.g., informed consent); and

the knowledge that a person may improve for a variety of reasons not related to the approach (e.g., maturation).

Howlin et al., (2007) highlighted that the failure of some research to demonstrate good outcomes is often attributed to a lack of adherence to programme fidelity by school-based practitioners and not a limitation with the programme per se. This approach strengthens the researcher in the 'expert role' and does not promote an understanding of the needs and views of the practitioners or the real-life context in which they work. As a result, practitioners are expected to 'fit in' with a prescriptive intervention and research methodology that tends to exclude them. The is not to ignore the issue of 'therapist drift' but recognises that many teachers are more interested in a best fit approach to meet the needs of autistic students rather than EBP (Stahmer et al., 2011). This often requires them to use a variety of approaches at the same time to meet a range of different needs. This understandably questions the fidelity of each approach (Jones, 2002) as many research methodologies do not allow for this flexibility of interpretation. As such there is an inherent tension between pedagogical beliefs and expertise about the importance of supporting autistic children on an individual basis versus the need for a prescriptive implementation of a specific intervention. As both a researcher and practitioner I strongly support the view that *"that building collaborative partnerships between researchers and school practitioners is central to achieving improved understanding of, and outcomes for, pupils on the autism spectrum"* (Parson et al., 2013, p.269).

This informed my choice of research design and methods outlined in the following sections. It is important because most children on the autism spectrum attend mainstream school

settings or special schools where a range of educational approaches are offered, rather than specialised programmes in controlled 'lab-schools' or specialist units attached to universities or services (DfE, 2011; Kasari, 2012). Furthermore, the mixed methods interpretivist approach used in this thesis identifies that research should be mutually beneficial to the people and settings being studied in addition to knowledge creation. Mutual benefit was achieved through reporting results back to school staff and discussing the implications for sustainability with them.

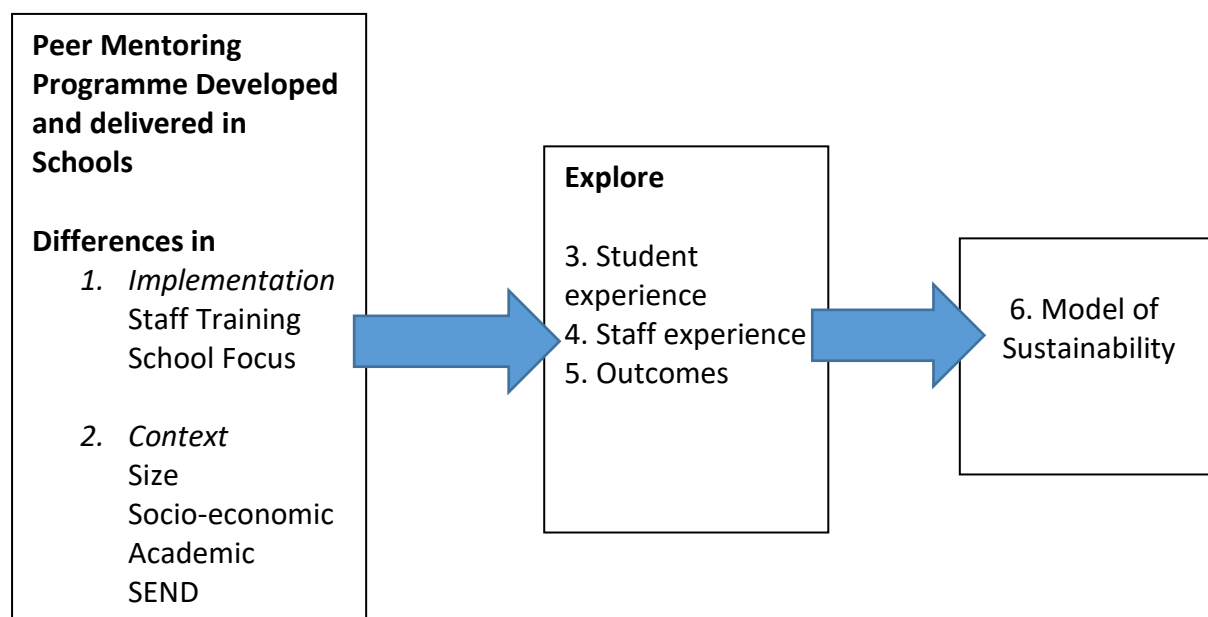
4.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed methods multiple case study research design was selected to examine the impact and outcomes of the new peer mentoring programme in five contextually different schools. This research design was selected for several reasons. Firstly, there is a need to understand and explain how features within the context of individual schools influence the impact and outcomes of the peer mentoring programme within those settings. Replicating the same methodology in five schools added to the complexity and richness of the study. This information is valuable in that it should enable the tailoring of the new peer mentoring programme to support the achievement of intended outcomes and identify broader trends on the impact of the programme. Secondly, as the new peer mentoring programme is being implemented across multiple contexts, there is little or no opportunity to manipulate or control the way in which the approach is being implemented. Thirdly, there is an opportunity for iterative data collection and analysis over the period of the programme. Finally, experimental, and/or quasi-experimental designs were unfeasible for both practical and ethical reasons.

4.41 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework (see Figure 3) shows the connections between implementation and contextual factors, the impact on student and staff perceptions and the outcomes for autistic students. These include the outcomes for autistic students and how they perceive being a peer mentor; the views and experiences of peers and school staff involved in the programme; what drivers and barriers exist for the implementation of new educational approaches within schools, and finally, recommendations for the sustainability of peer mentoring as an educational approach for autistic students.

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework for the Study



The same issues and phenomena are studied in both the quantitative survey and in the semi-structured interviews. The use of qualitative methods contributed to the understanding of student and staff student perceptions of the new peer mentoring programme and revealed broader issues around inclusion, friendships and bullying. The use of quantitative methods

enabled a 'situational picture' to be obtained on the impact of the programme for autistic students on selected outcome measures and factors affecting the implementation of the programme in different schools. This is helpful in the analysis of the motivations, drivers and barriers for embedding educational approaches within schools, and identifying the contextual factors that influence this. While the sustainability outcome is not measured, or quantified in this study, quantitative and qualitative data will be used to inform recommendations on this.

4.42 CASE STUDIES

Though case study research is one of the principal means by which inquiry is conducted in the social sciences there is little in the way of organisational structure to guide the intending case inquirer (Thomas, 2011). The different themes and priorities of disciplines such as education, business and politics influence the definitions of the case study. Simons (2007), in her review of several definitions of case study, concludes that it is a commitment to studying the complexity that is involved in real situations and to defining case study other than by the methods of data collection that it employs. A case study should not be viewed as a method in and of itself but as a design frame that may incorporate several methods; *"Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real life' context"* (Simons, 2007, p.21).

Thomas (2011) builds on this definition and states that for a case study to constitute research it must comprise two elements. Firstly, a practical, historical unity, which is the subject of the case study. Secondly, an analytical or theoretical frame, which is the object of the study. His definition of case studies incorporates these elements; *"Case studies are analyses of persons,*

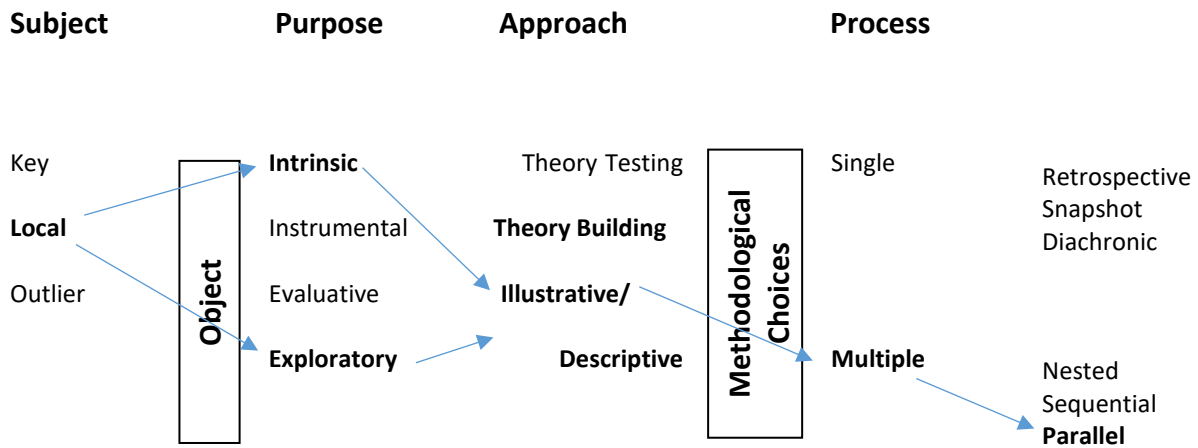
events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates” (Thomas, 2011, p.513).

In this thesis, the cases that are the subject of study are the five mainstream secondary schools. They represent local knowledge cases due to the researcher’s familiarity with the context and offered the opportunity for informed, in-depth analysis, identification and discussion. The analytical frame within which the case is viewed, and which the case exemplifies, constitutes the object, which is the implementation of a new peer mentoring programme for autistic students within the schools.

Thomas (2011) expands on the subject/object classification to develop a typology of case study that underlines the relationships between subject, purpose, approach and process. This provides a framework for a clear articulation of the distinctness and necessity of both subject and object and encourages consideration of theoretical or illustrative approaches, methodological decisions and decisions about process. This typology was used as a basis for this thesis and is shown in Figure 4. Using the typology, the thesis can be defined as a local knowledge case possessing both subject and object. It is of intrinsic interest, containing exploratory elements, and the aim was to describe the impact and outcomes of the new peer mentoring programme and to make a set of conclusions and recommendations on its use in mainstream secondary schools for autistic students. This process made use of a variety of methods and data collection techniques (see section 4.6) in parallel across five participating schools. As such, it is an example of comparative case studies as it involves the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across two or more cases that share a

common focus. The selection and characteristics of these schools are outlined in the following section.

Figure 4: Case Study Typology (from Thomas, 2011)



4.43 SELECTION OF CASES AND PARTICIPANTS

As a professional working for a local authority support service for autistic children and young people I am in a privileged position of having access to schools within Oxfordshire as part of my day to day role. To maintain my independence as a researcher I decided to approach mainstream secondary schools to participate in the study whom I did not have an ongoing professional involvement. This was done in May 2013 through presenting verbal and written information on the proposed project at a network meeting for school staff interested in autism education. Ten mainstream secondary school, to whom I was not linked to in a professional capacity, were represented at the meeting. Out of the ten schools, four expressed an interest in participating in the project. It is acknowledged that this may not show a representative sample of mainstream secondary schools; however, this was a purposive sampling of mainstream secondary schools from a range of geographical areas in Oxfordshire. Sample selection led to five different mainstream secondary schools in the South East of England agreeing to participate in the study. Four schools from the Oxfordshire network and

one school from a neighbouring local authority who agreed to participate. This was the result of contacting them following an earlier collaboration where I had done whole school training for staff.

The selection of cases in this study was made using the assumption of commonality in the overall objective and purpose as mainstream secondary schools. Though similarities exist, the staffing size, academic, socio-economic and SEN characteristics of each school are contextually unique. It is important to describe this in detail in each case, so as to identify common or different features. Key contextual differences are listed in Table 4.1. The table shows the number of students on roll; whether the school was situated in an urban or rural location; a measure of students eligible for free school meals as an indicator of socio-economic status; the percentage of students with SEN in each school; and lastly the number of students achieving five A*-C GCSEs as a measure of academic achievement. More in depth contextual information is then provided about each school, including participant characteristics.

Table 4.1: Background details for each school in the study

School	Size (number of students on roll)	Urban/Rural	Socio-economic status (% students eligible for free school meals)	Number of students with SEN (as a % of total roll)	Attainment (% Students With 5 A*-C GCSEs)
1	831	Urban	8	4.2	80
2	1069	Urban	5	7.9	73
3	804	Urban	21	14.1	28
4	799	Urban	18	22.7	41
5	1650	Urban	3	11.4	85

SCHOOL ONE

School one is located within an affluent market town that has a sizeable catchment area including small rural primary schools. It has 821 students on roll (aged eleven to sixteen-years-old) across five separate year groups. Both the numbers of students eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs were well below the national average. The number of students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C was well above the national average at eighty percent. The school has not run a formalised peer mentoring programme previously between students in the same year group or class. It had a more informal buddying system in place where Year 10 or 11 students were asked to volunteer to support younger students with specific issues.

One of the school's three Deputy Headteachers acted as the key person overseeing the programme whilst a TA from the Learning Support Department was selected for the programme co-ordinator role. Two autistic students and eight non-autistic students participated in the peer mentoring programme. The recruitment of mentors was done in consultation between the Deputy Head, co-ordinator, Head of Year and form tutors. The selection of mentors for school one was based on personality characteristics, gender and interests. Participant characteristics at the start of the programme are given in Tables 4.2 and 4.3.

Table 4.2: Participant characteristics for autistic peer mentors in school one

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
One	11yrs 5 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA+	Yes	Yes
Two	12 yrs 2 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes

**Students identified as having special educational needs in England at the time of the study were categorised according to their level of need and the additional provision needed to meet that need. Students at School Action (SA) had their needs met within the school's existing resources. At School Action Plus (SA+) students normally received support from external agencies such as autism advisory services. Students whose needs are not met at either SA or SA+ typically have a full statutory assessment which may lead to a Statement of SEN (SSEN). The SSEN outlines the needs of the students and legally recognises the provision and resources needed to meet those needs.*

Table 4.3: Participant characteristics for non-autistic peer mentors in school one

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Three	11yrs 10 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Four	11 yrs 6 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Five	12 yrs 4 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Six	11 yrs 8 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Seven	12 yrs 3 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Eight	12 yrs 2 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes

SCHOOL TWO

School Two is located within an affluent city suburb and has a mainly urban catchment area.

It has 1069 students on roll (aged eleven to eighteen-years-old) across seven separate year groups, including a sixth-form. Both the numbers of students eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs were well below the national average. The number of students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C was above the national average at seventy-three percent. The school had a formalised peer mentoring programme. Year 11 students were selected to mentor Year 7 classes to support their transition into secondary school.

The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) acted as the key person overseeing the programme whilst a TA from the Learning Support Department was selected for the programme co-ordinator role. Two autistic students and eight non-autistic students participated in the peer mentoring programme. The SENCo and co-ordinator discussed the

recruitment of mentors with Year 7 form tutors. The selection of mentors was based on personality characteristics, gender and interests. Participant characteristics at the start of the programme are given in Tables 4.4 and 4.5.

Table 4.4: Participant characteristics for autistic peer mentors in school two

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Nine	12yrs 1 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA+	Yes	Yes
Ten	12 yrs 3 months	7	Female	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes

**Students identified as having special educational needs in England at the time of the study were categorised according to their level of need and the additional provision needed to meet that need. Students at School Action (SA) had their needs met within the school's existing resources. At School Action Plus (SA+) students normally received support from external agencies such as autism advisory services. Students whose needs are not met at either SA or SA+ typically have a full statutory assessment which may lead to a Statement of SEN (SSEN). The SSEN outlines the needs of the students and legally recognises the provision and resources needed to meet those needs.*

Table 4.5: Participant characteristics for non-autistic peer mentors in school two

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Eleven	12yrs 1 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twelve	11 yrs 9 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Thirteen	12 yrs 3 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Fourteen	12 yrs 2 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Fifteen	12 yrs 1 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Sixteen	12 yrs 0 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes

SCHOOL THREE

School Three is located within an area of socio-economic deprivation in a city suburb and has a mainly urban catchment area. It has 804 students on roll (aged eleven to sixteen-years-old) across five separate year groups. Both the numbers of students eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs was above the national average. The number of

students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C was well below the national average at twenty-eight percent. The school had used a variety of peer mentoring programmes over the preceding years and currently older students mentored younger children who had been identified as needing additional support. These sessions involved the students meeting one to one and did not have a staff member present, though information was feedback to one of the Deputy Heads who oversaw pastoral care within the school.

The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) acted as the key person overseeing the programme whilst a TA from the Learning Support Department was selected for the programme co-ordinator role. Two autistic students and eight non-autistic students participated in the peer mentoring programme. The recruitment of the mentors was initially discussed by the SENCo and co-ordinator who selected the mentors based on interests, personality characteristics and gender. Participant characteristics at the start of the programme are given in Tables 4.6 and 4.7.

Table 4.6: Participant characteristics for autistic peer mentors in school three

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Seventeen	12yrs 0 months	7	Female	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA+	Yes	Yes
Eighteen	12 yrs 2 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes

**Students identified as having special educational needs in England at the time of the study were categorised according to their level of need and the additional provision needed to meet that need. Students at School Action (SA) had their needs met within the school's existing resources. At School Action Plus (SA+) students normally received support from external agencies such as autism advisory services. Students whose needs are not met at either SA or SA+ typically have a full statutory assessment which may lead to a Statement of SEN (SSEN). The SSEN outlines the needs of the students and legally recognises the provision and resources needed to meet those needs.*

Table 4.7: Participant characteristics for non-autistic peer mentors in school three

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Nineteen	12yrs 0 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty	12 yrs 1 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty-one	11 yrs 11 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty-two	11 yrs 6 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty-three	11 yrs 10 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty-four	12 yrs 1 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes

SCHOOL FOUR

School Four is located within an area of socio-economic deprivation in a town centre location and has a mainly urban catchment area. It has 799 students on roll (aged eleven to sixteen-years-old) across five separate year groups. Both the numbers of students eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs was above the national average. The number of students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C was below the national average at forty-one percent. There were no peer mentoring programmes in place though befriending schemes had run in previous years in the school where older students were assigned to offer pastoral support to more vulnerable Year 7 students.

A TA from the Learning Support Department was selected for the programme co-ordinator role while the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) acted as the key person overseeing the programme. Two autistic students and eight non-autistic students participated in the peer mentoring programme. The selection of mentors had been organised between the SENCo, the co-ordinator and the two form tutors whose classes the students

were in. The was based on personality characteristics, gender and interests. Participant characteristics at the start of the programme are given in Tables 4.8 and 4.9.

Table 4.8: Participant characteristics for autistic peer mentors in school four

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Twenty-five	11yrs 7 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes
Twenty-six	12 yrs 0 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes

**Students identified as having special educational needs in England at the time of the study were categorised according to their level of need and the additional provision needed to meet that need. Students at School Action (SA) had their needs met within the school's existing resources. At School Action Plus (SA+) students normally received support from external agencies such as autism advisory services. Students whose needs are not met at either SA or SA+ typically have a full statutory assessment which may lead to a Statement of SEN (SSEN). The SSEN outlines the needs of the students and legally recognises the provision and resources needed to meet those needs.*

Table 4.9: Participant characteristics for non-autistic peer mentors in school four

Participant	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Twenty-seven	11yrs 9 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty-eight	12 yrs 2 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Twenty-nine	11 yrs 8 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Thirty	11 yrs 10 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Thirty-one	11 yrs 8 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Thirty-two	11 yrs 11 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes

SCHOOL FIVE

School Five is located within an affluent county town and has a mainly urban catchment area.

It is a large secondary school with 1650 students on roll (aged eleven to eighteen-years-old) across seven separate year groups, including a sixth-form. Both the numbers of students eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs are well below the

national average. The number of students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C was well above the national average at eight-five percent. The school had a developed peer mentoring scheme, like school two, where selected Year 11 students were mentors to Year 7 classes with the aim of supporting their transition into secondary school.

One of the Deputy Heads who had a pastoral management role for the school acted as the key person overseeing the programme whilst a HLTA from the Learning Support Department was selected for the programme co-ordinator role. Four autistic students and twelve non-autistic students participated in the peer mentoring programme. The co-ordinator had discussed the selection of the peer mentors with the four form tutors whose classes the students were in. This was based on personality characteristics, gender and interests. Participant characteristics at the start of the programme are given in Tables 4.10 and 4.11.

Table 4.10: Participant characteristics for autistic peer mentors in school five

Participant	Peer Mentoring Group	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Thirty-three	9	11yrs 8 months	7	Female	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes
Thirty-four	10	12yrs 3 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA	Yes	Yes
Thirty-five	11	11yrs 10 months	7	Female	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SA+	Yes	Yes
Thirty-six	12	12yrs 0 months	7	Male	Yes Asperger Syndrome	SSEN	Yes	Yes

**Students identified as having special educational needs in England at the time of the study were categorised according to their level of need and the additional provision needed to meet that need. Students at School Action (SA) had their needs met within the school's existing resources. At School Action Plus (SA+) students normally received support from external agencies such as autism advisory services. Students whose needs are not met at either SA or SA+ typically have a full statutory assessment which may lead to a Statement of SEN (SSEN). The SSEN outlines the needs of the students and legally recognises the provision and resources needed to meet those needs.*

Table 4.11: Participant characteristics for non-autistic peer mentors in school five

Participant	Peer Mentoring Group	Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*	Survey data	Interview data
Thirty-seven	9	12yrs 1 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Thirty-eight	9	11yrs 9 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Thirty-nine	9	11yrs 10 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty	10	12yrs 3 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty-one	10	12yrs 2 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty- two	10	12yrs 1 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty-three	11	12yrs 0 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty-four	11	11yrs 8 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty-five	11	12yrs 2 months	7	Female	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty-six	12	12yrs 0 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty-seven	12	11yrs 10 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes
Forty- eight	12	12yrs 2 months	7	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes

In all cases, guidelines for school staff, students and parents were given to the key member of school staff. Two schools identified a deputy head and three schools a SENCO for this role. The key member of staff identified a member of staff who would act as the peer mentoring co-ordinator for the school. All schools identified a member of the school's support staff for this role and a training session was set up with them to discuss the programme. They were given co-ordinator guidelines which outlined the practical process of setting up the project and could discuss the programme with me in more detail.

The key member of staff and co-ordinator in each school led on the identification of students who they felt would benefit from the programme. In each case, staff felt that the focus should be on Year Seven students who had recently transitioned into the school from Primary school

settings. This is understandable given that the transition to secondary school for many children can be a time of additional stress and anxiety and lead to poorer outcomes (Evangelou et al., 2008). The lack of ability to predict future events, communications and environments mean that transitions can be more challenging for autistic children and young people. This can lead to a reliance on routine, structure and an aversion to change which can make any transitions, whether small or large, more difficult to manage. In addition, the capacities that have been found to predict successful transition in non-autistic students, including social competence, flexibility and self-regulation (Rudolph et al., 2001) are more likely to be areas of challenge for autistic students. Whereas the established barriers to successful transition in non-autistic students, such as bullying and high levels of anxiety, are more common for students on the autistic spectrum.

The selected students, and their parents, were then given information on the programme and consent forms to agree to participate as peer mentors in the programme and research project. The materials outlined the benefits and role of being a peer mentor and included a section where schools could add any incentive or reward system associated with participating in the programme within their setting. Twelve autistic students and thirty-six pupils without autism agreed to participate with parental consent (see section on ethics). No students or parents who were approached refused to give their permission for involvement.

4.5 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The values, experiences and background of the researcher is important for understanding how the researcher relates to the subject matter and people studied (Kayrooz and Trevitt, 2005). My educational and professional background (see section 1.3) gives me a very good

understanding of the complex issues involved in the education of autistic children and young people in England. It has also given me a wealth of experience working with both students and staff in mainstream secondary schools. Combined, I feel this made it easier for interviewees to relate to me and it helped in gaining trust and entering conversation about relevant issues with both students and staff.

As both a researcher and practitioner in the field I needed to ensure that my roles were distinct in the research project. I did not offer any practical advice regarding the autistic students to the schools as they were not on my advisory caseload. The autism advisory teachers who supported the schools continued to offer advice and resources regarding the students involved in the peer mentoring programme as they would normally do. Per the values of the researcher described in the mixed methods interpretive design, the researcher should establish mutual benefit for the study. Through working closely with schools, the study aimed to develop a programme that would improve outcomes for their students and provide feedback on embedding good practice within their settings. Funding arrangements may also influence the purpose, design and impact of a research study. For this research, scholarship funding from the University of Birmingham covered all the expenses involved in the study. The motivation and ethos of the study were well understood and supported by both ACER and the School of Education.

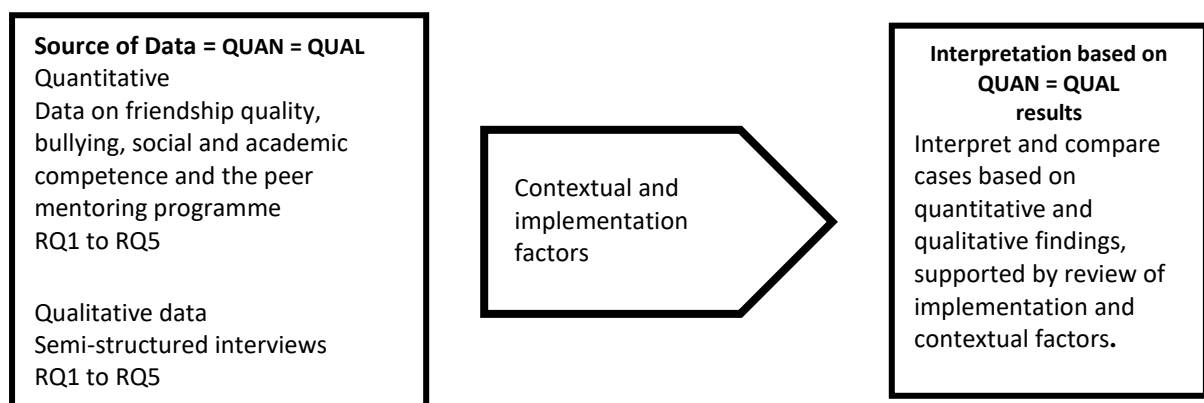
4.6 METHODS

4.61 INTRODUCTION

Figure 5 shows how the survey and semi-structured interviews were used *“to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic”* (Morse, 1991, p.122) to best understand the

research problem. The interrelated research questions (RQ1-RQ5) were examined using both quantitative and qualitative methods to establish a more in depth understanding of the effectiveness of the new peer mentoring programme, including outcomes for the autistic students and the impact of implementation and contextual factors.

Figure 5: Mixed Method Framework



(Adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark, (2007, p.68)

4.62 Survey

To increase internal construct validity, the survey instruments were based on questionnaires that had been well-tested and used within the age range of students participating in the programme and peer mentoring programmes in general. As stated in the introduction, autistic students are a vulnerable group and lengthy questionnaires and interviews could create anxiety and stress. Therefore, the questionnaire materials used were kept in a format that enabled students to complete them in approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. The materials had also been trialled successfully with secondary aged autistic students prior to

the study. The focus of the survey was to gather information regarding the following areas of interest, both pre-and post the implementation of the peer mentoring programme:

Levels of social satisfaction for autistic students

Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction (Asher and Renshaw, 1984)

This is a twenty-four item self-report questionnaire that assesses the degree to which students themselves feel satisfied with their peer relationships. There are sixteen primary items that focus on student's feelings of loneliness and social adequacy versus inadequacy or subjective estimation of peer status. Eight other items focus on student's hobbies or interests and are fillers designed to help students feel more relaxed and open answering the other items. Students responded to each of the twenty-four items by indicating on a five-point scale how much each statement was a true description of them (i.e. always true, true most of the time, true sometimes, hardly ever true, and not true at all). The sixteen primary items were scored between one and five, with one indicating the most loneliness or social dissatisfaction. A total loneliness score for each student is given by totalling each of the sixteen items with a range between sixteen (high loneliness) and eighty (low loneliness). The sixteen-item questionnaire (see Appendix 3) was found to be internally consistent (Cronbach's Alpha = .90), and internally reliable (split-half correlation between forms = .83; Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient = .91).

Levels of bullying for autistic students

ABA Audit Questionnaire for KS3/4 (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2007)

This is a measure that had been developed with support of the DfE for use in secondary schools. It is a thirty-five item self-report measure that assesses the frequency and type of

bullying experienced by students, including cyber bullying behaviour e.g., by social media. Students must tick how often different categories of bullying behaviour had occurred over the past term. This allows the researcher to identify the amount of times students have been exposed to those behaviours without students needing a conceptual understanding of what bullying is. This is particularly helpful in the current study as many autistic students may not recognise they are being bullied or may misinterpret other behaviour as bullying. Students were also asked to identify who they had told about the bullying behaviour, what was done about it and what the outcome of this was. The responses to the items on the frequency of bullying were summed to give a total score which can range from nought (no bullying) to five (high frequency of bullying).

The original questionnaire also included items about a student's involvement or witnessing of bullying in the community. These items were removed as the study focussed on student experiences of being bullied at school and their views of school in relation to this. The final measure had five items which required students to tick answers to statements (see Appendix 4).

Levels of Social and Academic Competence for autistic students

Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985)

This is a measure that has been standardised on large population of school children in the Scotland (Hoare, Elton, Greer and Kerley, 1993) and has been used in a study examining self-competence and emotional understanding of autistic children aged between nine and sixteen-years-old (Capps et al., 1995). The questionnaire has been designed to use for students aged between eight and thirteen-years-old to identify individual changes in

student's perceptions of their competence in different areas post educational interventions or to make comparisons between groups. It is a thirty-six item self-completed questionnaire that measures self-competence in five separate sub-scales: behaviour, academic, social, appearance, and physical, with a separate measure of global self-esteem. In this study, I was primarily interested in looking at pre-and post-programme changes in the autistic student's self-perception of their own social competence. The social competence items define the role of the self in promoting social competence or success. Thus, items refer to knowing how to make friends, having the skills to get others to like oneself, or knowing what to do to have others like or accept you. In addition, I looked at the autistic students pre-and post-programme scores in perceived academic competence due to this theme being identified by both mentors and schools as being an important focus of the peer mentoring programme. The academic competence items on the Self-Perception Profile refer specifically to perceived cognitive competence as applied to schoolwork. Thus, items refer to doing well at schoolwork and being able to figure out the answers.

Items within each subscale are divided into two statements. Three items are worded so that the first part of the statement reflects high competency, whilst three items are presented with low competency first. Each item is scaled from one to four with the mid-point being 2.5. Scores above 2.5 indicate higher levels of perceived social or academic competence. The questionnaire (see Appendix 5) was found to be internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha = .72-.83).

The experience of being a peer mentor for autistic students and their non-autistic peers

Questionnaire for Mentors (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2008)

This was an eight-item questionnaire that sought the views of the peer mentor on their role as peer mentors and the programme in general. Students responded on a three-point scale depending whether they agreed, neither agreed or disagreed or disagreed with the statements presented. The post-programme items on the questionnaire were the same as the pre-programme items but expressed in the past tense. Both questionnaires consisted of closed questions and took approximately 5 minutes to complete (see Appendix 6).

The experience of being a programme co-ordinator for school staff

I decided to adapt the Early and Late Process Questionnaires for Scheme Co-ordinators used in the large scale DCSF study on peer mentoring in English schools (DCSF, 2008). This was originally a twenty-eight-item questionnaire asking the peer mentoring co-ordinators within each school about their role and the schemes they supported. My knowledge of the peer mentoring programme used in this study meant that I could streamline some of the more generic questions from the DCSF questionnaire. I also added a section on autism. This resulted in a twenty-item pre-programme questionnaire asking the co-ordinators about their programme, including training, structure, management and wider school awareness. The post-programme questionnaire had eighteen-items focusing on the effectiveness of the peer mentoring programme and factors which aided or hindered the programme. Both questionnaires (see Appendices 7 and 8) consisted of mainly closed questions and took approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete.

4.63 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Interviews are among the most widely used methods for data collection in educational research and are commonly used to capture the views, emotions, feelings and experiences of participants. The objective of this method is to understand the respondent's point of view rather than to make generalisations (Livesey and Lawson, 2010). The strengths and weaknesses of semi-structured interviews are summarised in Table 4.12.

Table 4.12: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Semi-Structured Interviews

(adapted from Chris Livesey: Sociological Central, 1995-2010)

Strengths	Weaknesses
Positive rapport between interviewer and interviewee. A simple, efficient, and practical way of obtaining information	Dependent on the skill of the interviewer and articulacy of the respondent
Meanings behind actions may be revealed through this dialogue, which is non-directive	Time consuming/sometimes expensive
High validity as Respondents are given the opportunity to talk in depth and in detail.	Interviewer may give unconscious signals that influence the respondent
The interviewer can probe areas suggested by answers, picking up and responding to the information that emerges	Analysing data may be difficult, in terms of deciding what is and is not relevant and the personal nature of interviews means that it may be difficult to generalise the findings
The issue of pre-determining what will or will not be discussed is resolved. The interviewer is not pre-judging what is and isn't important information	Not very reliable in the positivist sense and they are difficult to replicate across participants, as different questions are likely to be asked and samples tend to be small
Reduces need for prior judgement and complex questions can be discussed and clarified	Validity: No real way of knowing if the respondent is giving authentic responses. The respondent may have imperfect recall Respondents may feel they must justify or rationalise their actions and so their explanation for something may be different from what they were thinking at the time.

Given the focus upon student voice in the research project, interviews were identified as the best form of data generation to explore the views and perspectives of being a peer mentor

for the autistic students. Similarly, semi-structured interviews were key to understanding the thoughts and experiences of the non-autistic peer mentors and staff co-ordinators for the programme. It is important to reiterate that the purpose behind this approach is not to make definitive statements or to 'prove' hypotheses; it is to provide unique insights and to acknowledge different perceptions and interpretations that can be integrated with the data from the survey questionnaires.

This semi-structured interview affords a means of collecting qualitative data by allowing each respondent the time and scope to talk about their opinions on a topic. Separate interview guides were created for the autistic mentors and their non-autistic peers (see Appendices 9 and 10). This was developed from both the selected research questions and the analysis of the initial survey data, then extended into relevant interview questions. As stated earlier (see Chapter One), specific measures were taken to enable and facilitate the views of the autistic students. The phrasing of questions was developed through my experience of working as a practitioner in this field, to avoid misunderstandings and avoid leading and overly abstract questions. The interviews were conducted at the end of the data collection process so the students had become familiar with the researcher and less likely to feel anxious about participating. Students were given clear start and end times and instructions and both interviews and questionnaires were conducted with the staff co-ordinator present. The interview guide for the staff participating as mentoring co-ordinators was adapted from one used in the DCSF mentoring study (2008) to interview school staff involved in peer mentoring programmes nationally (see Appendix 11).

4.64 SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION

The purpose of the survey was to obtain situational facts about the impact of the new peer mentoring programme within five different mainstream secondary schools. The implementation was structured into two strands, occurring over two time-periods:

November 2012 – before the start of the peer mentoring programmes:

Questionnaires on social satisfaction, self-perception and bullying completed by autistic peer mentors. Autistic and non-autistic peer mentors completed a questionnaire on being a peer mentor. School staff completed a questionnaire on the role of the peer mentoring co-ordinator. All the students and staff were given an information sheet prior to completing the questionnaires explaining the purpose of them, approximately how long it would take, where it would take place (agreed with school staff) and who would be there. This was primarily done to reduce the anxiety levels of the students with autism by making the whole process more predictable and familiar. The students were given the opportunity to revisit the information sheet prior to completing the questionnaires with the content being reinforced by the researcher. This included the ability of the students to withdraw from the process at any point. All the questionnaires were completed in school during an agreed time and in an agreed place (all were conducted in each school's learning support base).

The questionnaires on social satisfaction, self-perception, and bullying were administered to the students with autism by the researcher in the presence of a member of school staff. This was done individually so the researcher could start to establish a relationship with the students and to also explain and answer any questions they had about the programme. The programme co-ordinator for each school administered the peer mentor questionnaires to students as part of the induction process for the students. The researcher administered the

questionnaires for the staff co-ordinators as part of their induction process for the peer mentoring programme. This is 'Time 1' or T1.

June/July 2013 – at the end of the peer mentoring programmes:

Questionnaires on social satisfaction, self-perception, and bullying completed by the autistic peer mentors. Autistic and non-autistic peer mentors completed a questionnaire on being a peer mentor. School staff completed a questionnaire on the role of the peer mentoring co-ordinator. I administered the questionnaires on social satisfaction, self-perception and bullying again to the autistic students in the presence of a member of school staff. The follow-up questionnaires to students, about the peer mentoring role, were administered by the programme co-ordinators at the final mentoring group session. The researcher administered the staff co-ordinator questionnaire prior to the meeting where the staff member was interviewed about the project. This is 'Time 2' or T2.

All questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher resulting in a 100% completion rate for the survey.

4.55 INTERVIEW IMPLEMENTATION

Semi-structured interviews were used as they allow meanings and interpretations to be probed and explored in a more flexible and individualised manner than is possible through questionnaires or fully structured interviews. As such they potentially give deeper, richer and more insightful data for qualitative analysis. It was necessary to include all the participants in the peer mentoring programme (both students and staff) in the semi-structured interviews as this would provide a more robust and holistic view of the impact of the programme and answer the research questions.

June/July 2013 – at the end of the peer mentoring programmes:

All students and staff were given an information sheet explaining the purpose of the interview, approximately how long it would take, where it would take place (agreed with school staff) and who would be there. Each of the participants was given the opportunity to revisit the information sheets prior to the interview and I reiterated that they could decide to end the interview at any time. Again, this was done with the aim of reducing the anxiety levels for the students with autism by making the interview process more predictable for them. All the interviews took place in the school setting at an agreed time and a short de-briefing followed the interviews where I offered participants the opportunity to add any further information and/or to ask any further questions about the study. The autistic students were interviewed individually in the same room they had completed the questionnaires in and with the same member of school staff present to maintain consistency and familiarity. The interviews lasted between eleven and twenty-three minutes. I decided to interview the non-autistic peer mentors together in their mentoring groups. The reasons for this were two-fold. Firstly, it was more practical time-wise for both the students and staff to arrange and organise a group interview. Secondly, I was interested in the group dynamic element of the student's experiences of being involved in the programme. I had initially considered interviewing the autistic students along with their non-autistic peers as a group but felt that individual interviews would provide more opportunity for them to talk freely about their experiences and views of being a peer mentor and school. The interviews with the non-autistic students lasted between fifteen and twenty-four minutes. The interviews with the programme co-ordinators were arranged and conducted individually to fit around their work schedules and in all cases the follow up questionnaire was done prior to this session so it would inform the questioning. The interviews lasted between twenty-nine and forty-seven minutes. They were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were corrected

and checked by the researcher before undertaking the manual coding and content analysis of the transcriptions.

4.7 DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

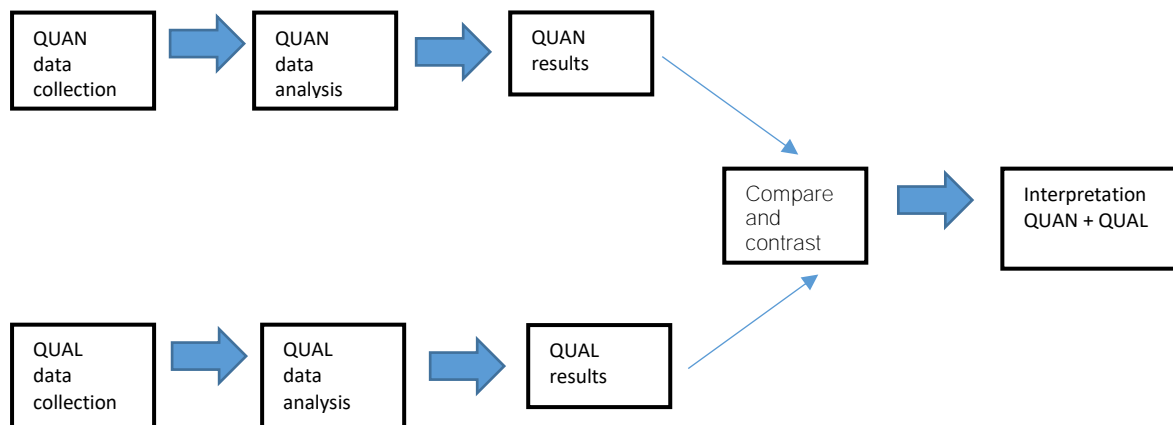
4.7.1 TRIANGULATION

Data integration is a crucial element in mixed methods analysis and conceptualisation (Fielding, 2012). It has three principal purposes: illustration, convergent validation (triangulation) and the development of analytic density or richness. Greene (2008) suggests that it should be made clear whether one method is dominant and whether the methods are implemented sequentially or in parallel. As such, a degree of interdependency between the different methods should be sought through the conceptual design and implementation of mixed methods research. Triangulation is used to mix qualitative and quantitative methods to measure overlapping, different and complementary data on the same topic. The research intent of triangulation is to directly compare quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings or to validate or expand quantitative results with qualitative data.

When selecting the research design for this thesis I made use of the '*Decision Tree for Mixed Methods Design Criteria for Timing, Weighting and Mixing*' (Creswell, 2006). This allowed me to make informed decisions related to the following three areas: the weight given to the qualitative and quantitative approaches within the study, the timing of the use of collected data and the approach to combining the two datasets. This led to the decision to choose a convergence triangulation design which involves the concurrent, but separate, collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data where both methods have equal weighting or importance (Creswell, et al., 2003). The two separate data sets are then brought together in

the interpretation phase through a process of merging the results and comparing the different results (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Triangulation Design: Convergence Model



In summary, the mixed methods convergence triangulation consists of one phase: quantitative and qualitative (Creswell et al., 2003). In this study, I collected and analysed the quantitative (survey) data and qualitative (semi-structured interview) data concurrently with the two phases connected in the interpretation stage. This allowed me to compare results and to corroborate quantitative results with qualitative findings. With the aim of developing valid and well-substantiated conclusions about the impact of the new peer mentoring programme with five mainstream secondary schools (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Creswell, 2003).

4.72 SURVEY ANALYSIS

The survey analysis was initiated by entering the data from the student and staff questionnaires into Microsoft Excel. All options within each questionnaire were maintained

for students and staff across all five schools. As stated previously, the quantitative part of the study is equal to the qualitative part within triangulation mixed methods design. It is deemed the best way to measure relationships between dependent and independent variables in real-life settings for a larger sample of people and with limited interference by the researcher. The survey questionnaires were primarily used to obtain a 'situational picture' regarding the impact of the peer mentoring programme on the mentors and the programme implementation and process.

Descriptive Statistics are used to present quantitative descriptions in a manageable form and involve summarising numeric data for each case from yes/no or Likert scale questions and recording them into easily interpretable tables, graphs or percentages (Teddle and Tashakkori, 2009). The design of the questionnaires on the experiences of the peer mentors and mentor programme co-ordinators, with nominal or ordinal scales, and small sample sizes made a descriptive statistical approach more relevant to the project. Frequency distributions for the questionnaires are shown using tables and bar graphs of frequency counts and percentages.

For the measures on social satisfaction, academic and social competence for the autistic students I was interested in whether the observed difference between the pre-and post-programme scores was a dependable one or one that might have happened by chance in this study. Paired sample t-tests were conducted for these measures to determine if the differences were statistically significant. For the t-test, significant association was met with the following assumptions that the P-value < 0.05 . Where the P-value is the probability of obtaining the observed effect (or larger) under a 'null hypothesis', which is an assumption of

no effect of the peer mentoring programme on levels of social satisfaction, academic and social competence for the autistic students. Thus, a P-value that is very small indicates that the observed effect is very unlikely to have arisen purely by chance, and therefore provides evidence against the null hypothesis.

With these descriptive and association tests, quantitative data provides not only a situational picture in each case, but also gives an indication of statistically significant differences in outcomes for the autistic students. This provides a starting point for discussions on possible inferences between the implementation and management process of the peer mentoring programme within each school and the influence on sustainability practices.

4.73 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Several methods of qualitative analysis were considered during the development of this study before deciding that thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) would afford the most appropriate method. Phenomenological approaches such as thematic analysis tend to use small sample sizes, focussing on capturing rich, detailed data rather than large quantities of data from multiple sources. It is arguably the most common approach to the qualitative analysis of data in the social sciences and is described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) as *“A method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data.”* The inductive analysis of the data generated through the semi-structured interviews utilised the steps outlined in Table 4.13.

Table 4.13: The process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description of the Process
Familiarising yourself with the data	Transcribing interviews, reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the transcripts in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating examples for each code (see Appendix 12 for an example of initial codes).
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential link.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis (see Chapter five).
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme (see Chapter five).
Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis of the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis (see Chapters five and six).

After phases 1-5 had been completed, in relation to the individual data sets, I looked at the body of data and abstracted a thematic map, a process which helped to identify the relationships between the themes and refine them further. It is emphasised that networks are only a tool in the analysis and are not the analysis itself. The work of Attride-Stirling (2001) informed this process and provided a detailed systematic method of analysis. This involves presenting the analysis as 'thematic networks', which systematises the identification of overarching, main and sub-themes, and the relationships between them. As such, the development of a thematic map provided an organising framework and an illustrative tool in the interpretation of the data and the themes generated. Reference must be made to several recent studies that used thematic analysis in the evaluation of secondary school transitions and educational programmes in schools (see Neal and Fredrickson, 2016; Stanbridge and Campbell, 2016). These were both influential in my thinking around the formulation of final overarching themes and how best to present the data.

The three data sets (autistic students, non-autistic students and staff) were initially analysed separately. The next phase sought to identify any themes that were evident across the data sets, as well as identifying differences, through revisiting the data and through the production of a thematic map. Followed by a process of deductive analysis in relation to the conceptual framework. Three overarching themes and nine substantive main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. These themes are explored in more detail through the five individual case studies in the following chapter. To provide a concise and coherent account of the narrative informed by the data, extracts from the interviews are presented to support the themes. Quotes from the autistic and non-autistic students semi-structured interviews are referenced by numbers which relate to the numbers assigned to them in the study e.g., a quote from student two would be referenced as *“I hadn’t talked to (student) before but he’s alright. He likes some of the stuff I do. Like Pokémon.”* ²

4.74 REPORTING MIXED METHODS RESEARCH

The differences found between reporting qualitative and quantitative data mean that care needs to be taken when choosing the appropriate representation of the results in mixed methods approach. Qualitative research is often written using more informal language, with the researcher’s voice more prominent in the findings. Alternatively, quantitative results are more likely to be written in formalised, neutral, and objective language, (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). It is important that mixed methods studies communicate in a way that is engaging for both qualitative and quantitative readers (Greene, 2012). Text must be written in such a way that it will appeal and persuade readers from diverse academic communities (Sandelowski, 2003).

In deciding how to present the quantitative and qualitative findings, the continuous revision of findings and coding of interviews led to an emergence of a logical structure linked with themes found in both the qualitative and quantitative data. This was then used to compare data from the two methods and to extend descriptive statistics with richer descriptions from qualitative findings. This structure was used to report on the findings in individual schools in Chapter Five, and to analyse and discuss differences and similarities between schools in relation to theory in Chapter Six. A summary of the data analysed for this thesis is shown in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14: Summary of data analysed

Data Source	Numbers
Case Studies	5
Social Satisfaction and Bullying Questionnaires	12
Mentor questionnaires	T1 – 48; T2 – 48
Co-ordinator questionnaires	T1 – 5; T2 – 5
Mentor interviews	T2 – 24
Co-ordinator interviews	T2 – 5

4.75 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Four types of triangulation (data, analyst, theory and methodological triangulation) were identified by Patton (1999) to increase the validity and reliability of research findings. Aspects of all four of these triangulations are found within the current study. Data triangulation is achieved through examining the consistency of different data sources from within the same method. The continuous process of testing findings in the study with theoretical perspectives

to examine and interpret the data achieves theory triangulation. Methodological triangulation is inherent in the study's mixed methods design and in the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, survey and document analysis). Analyst triangulation involves presenting results and receiving feedback from participants, thesis supervisor and peers. The impact of these triangulations on validity and reliability is discussed next.

4.76 INTERNAL VALIDITY

Validity is a key element of research design and it is concerned with “...*the accuracy of the questions asked, the data collected and the explanations offered...It refers to the quality of data and explanations and the confidence we might have that they accord with what is true or what is real*” (Denscombe, 2002, p.100). Internal validity is the extent to which the correct cause and effect relationships are being established. Yin (2003) suggests that internal validity is only of concern in explanatory and causal case studies, where the researcher is examining and establishing causal relationship between events or factors. When using an exploratory case study (as with this study) the research questions are not occupied with finding causal relationship, but rather finding potential causal relationships revealed through the description of contextual and implementation differences.

Internal validity was improved through research into contextual and programme implementation differences, the reassessing of theories in relation to findings and the attempts to explain phenomenon in relation to the literature on autism education, inclusion and Agency Theory. To ensure that the research design was fit for purpose I took several actions within each stage of the study. The initial step was to ensure that the research design

was relevant to the literature in this field. The designs within each stage were then carefully constructed to build on each other and ensure that they provided relevant data to answer my research questions. The questionnaire tools for the survey had been standardised and used with large populations of children and young people including those on the autistic spectrum. Internal validity was further strengthened in the design of the semi-structured interviews by seeking the views of different participants in the programme, as well as the overall number of interviews undertaken (n=23). Thus, providing multiple perspectives on the same issues.

4.77 External Validity

External validity (generalisability or replicability) is the extent to which the findings from one case can be said to represent or be generalised to apply to other groups or populations. This concept is problematic for research in social contexts as data is dependent on the interpretation of questions by the participants in the study and subject to environmental and personal factors influencing their responses. However, for case studies, generalisability, or external validity is not achieved by extrapolating the findings directly, but rather through theory developed from data gathered in the case (Yin, 2003).

The five cases in this study exhibit overall similarities in that they are mainstream secondary schools within a local authority, yet there were differences in the way the peer mentoring programme was interpreted and implemented by staff in the context of their specific setting. The issue of fidelity of implementation and differences in the understanding and competence between practitioners and ‘therapist drift’ is a real one. However, the new programme was developed as a framework that allowed and encouraged practitioners to be flexible in its use in response to the needs of the students they were working with. Each of the peer mentoring

programmes was individualised and as such replicability would be limited due to those differences.

Instead, case study research relies on analytical generalisation (Yin, 2003), yet with the comparative framework, important connections and contrasts can be explained through theory. The sample size for the survey is too small to generalise results for a larger population or sample. However, when used in conjunction with qualitative data these response rates are adequate to *“investigate contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”* (Yin, 2003, p.13). As such, the quantitative data was used to uncover contextual differences and similarities between the five cases rather than to generalise findings.

4.78 RELIABILITY

Reliability in research means that any significant results must be more than a one-off finding and be inherently repeatable at another time or through other means. To ensure that the findings from case are actually accurate, and not biased from either single sources of information or by the researchers own bias, the results need to be reliable. In this study reliability, has been sought through following a rigorous case study protocol, to limit the errors and biases in the research. To address reliability in the semi-structured interviews the researcher followed the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure a systematic and robust approach (see previous section).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify possible dangers inherent in thematic analysis such as using the data collection question as the ‘themes’, failing to move beyond description into making

conceptual links, being overly generic and failing to provide a convincing analysis where themes may not work or may overlap. This study adhered to strategies highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006) to avoid some of these dangers including the use of extensive quotations in reporting, exploring convergence with other sources of data, independent checking of the data from a third party and checking back with participants to see if hypotheses are accurate. Reliability in the quantitative survey was assessed using tests to determine whether quantitative differences found between cases for selected variables were statistically significant.

4.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND PARTICIPANT WELFARE

The University of Birmingham ethical review of research form was completed, and ethical approval granted prior to the start of the study (see Appendix 13). An amendment was subsequently sought, and approval given to interview students and staff.

Letters were sent to parents and staff outlining the research project and explaining that participating in the peer mentoring programme and related research is entirely voluntary (See appendix 14 for an example). These letters had a section for parental, student and staff consent which could be returned to school or emailed to the researcher. The contact details of the researcher were also given for parents and staff for any further information about the study. Informed consent was sought at three levels (school, parent and student) and all other standard ethical considerations in educational research (e.g., anonymity and the right to withdraw) were followed (see Appendix 15 for an example). In addition, the staff co-ordinator reinforced the right to for students to withdraw during their induction and programme meetings. There were no consequences for the participant withdrawing any data would be

deleted or destroyed. Interviewees were informed about their rights before the interview and the options of halting the interview, listening to the audio or reading the transcript for approval. They were also informed about the complaints procedures and contacts. No interviewee requested a review of the transcripts nor was any complaint received.

Confidentiality was ensured by assigning an ID number to participants and schools and no names were used in any data collection, papers or the final thesis. In terms of the storage, access and disposal of data, student questionnaires and interview transcripts were stored electronically on a password protected laptop and encrypted memory stick. Physical information e.g., consent forms and questionnaires, were stored in a secure and lockable filing cabinet in my home office. Physical information will be kept until the completion of the thesis and then shredded. Electronic information will be kept on encrypted memory stick and laptop in line with the Code of Practice for research which stipulates that data should be retained for ten years following publication.

The focus of the study meant that staff and student welfare was primary concern during the period of the research. It was made clear to participants that if a student or staff member became upset or anxious during the interview or questionnaire process then that session would be stopped and support sought from school staff. Disruption to the students and staff normal working patterns were avoided. Data collection was done at an agreed time that was convenient for the students and programme co-ordinators e.g., tutor time or assembly. The same ethos applied to the peer mentoring programme and staff co-ordinators and the key member of school staff overseeing the programmes monitored the welfare of participating students. Furthermore, if any of the self-report data showed that the autistic students had

significantly low levels of social satisfaction or were being bullied then this would be reported back to school staff.

4.9 SUMMARY

This Chapter had sought to locate the study within the appropriate research paradigm and justify the selection of methodology, design and procedures for the research. It has outlined the process for analysis and reporting, described the selection of participants and cases, and assessed the validity, reliability and ethical considerations of the method and data selected. The study is located within the mixed methods interpretivist research paradigm, identified as the best approach to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact and outcomes of a new peer mentoring programme in five mainstream secondary schools. The nature of the research questions, creating more knowledge around the experiences of autistic students on the programme and how implementation and contextual factors influence outcomes, justifies a multiple case study design. The study obtained rich qualitative data from students and staff involved in the peer mentoring programme, and situational information on outcomes, through the mixing of methods. The complexity of a comparative study across five educational settings necessitated that a strict research protocol be followed, where the same research procedures, questionnaires and interview guides would be used and followed. Construct validity was ensured using already tested instruments for the quantitative part of the study and research procedures for the qualitative study were implemented following protocols and coding procedures from thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The interpretive mixed methods approach seeks a democratic approach to data collection where many voices are heard about a phenomenon and both quantitative and qualitative

data is obtained from students and staff in all schools. Thematic analysis of qualitative data led to the development of overarching themes, main themes and subthemes. The analysis of quantitative data was primarily descriptive of situational facts about the impact of the peer mentoring programme, but included analysis to identify whether statistically significant differences were found in the levels of social satisfaction, social competence and bullying for the autistic students. Finally, the University of Birmingham standards for ethical research and procedures were put in place to ensure the welfare of both students and staff.

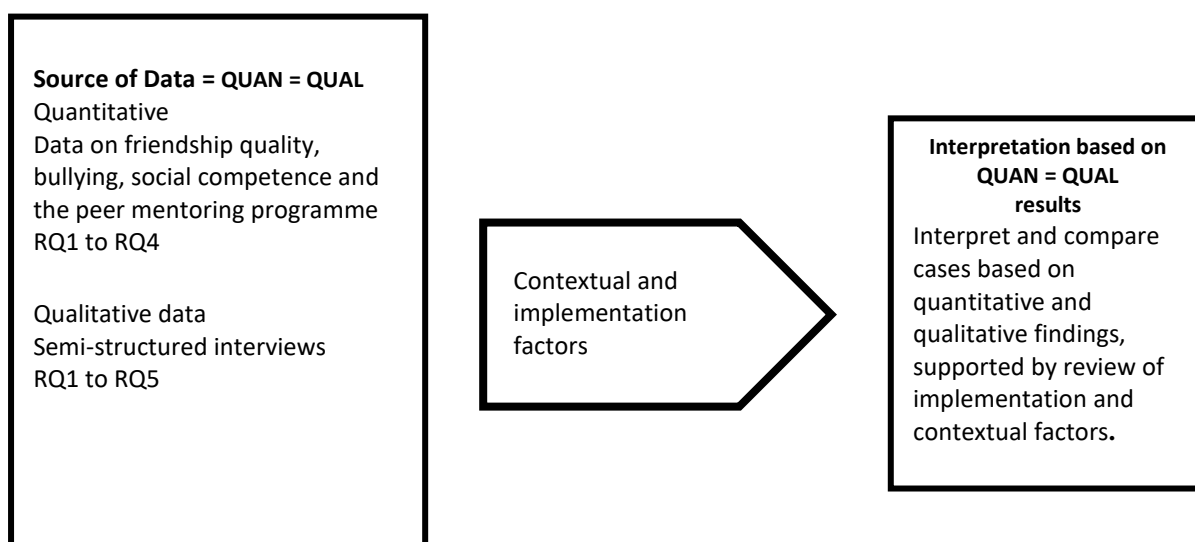
Chapter 5. PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME CASE STUDIES

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Chapter is to present and discuss the findings arising from the quantitative and qualitative data (see Table 4.14) obtained in five different mainstream secondary schools to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of a new peer mentoring programme within those schools.

The reporting structure will be the same for each school in response to the mixed method framework identified in Chapter Four, and shown below for ease of reference (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Mixed Method Framework



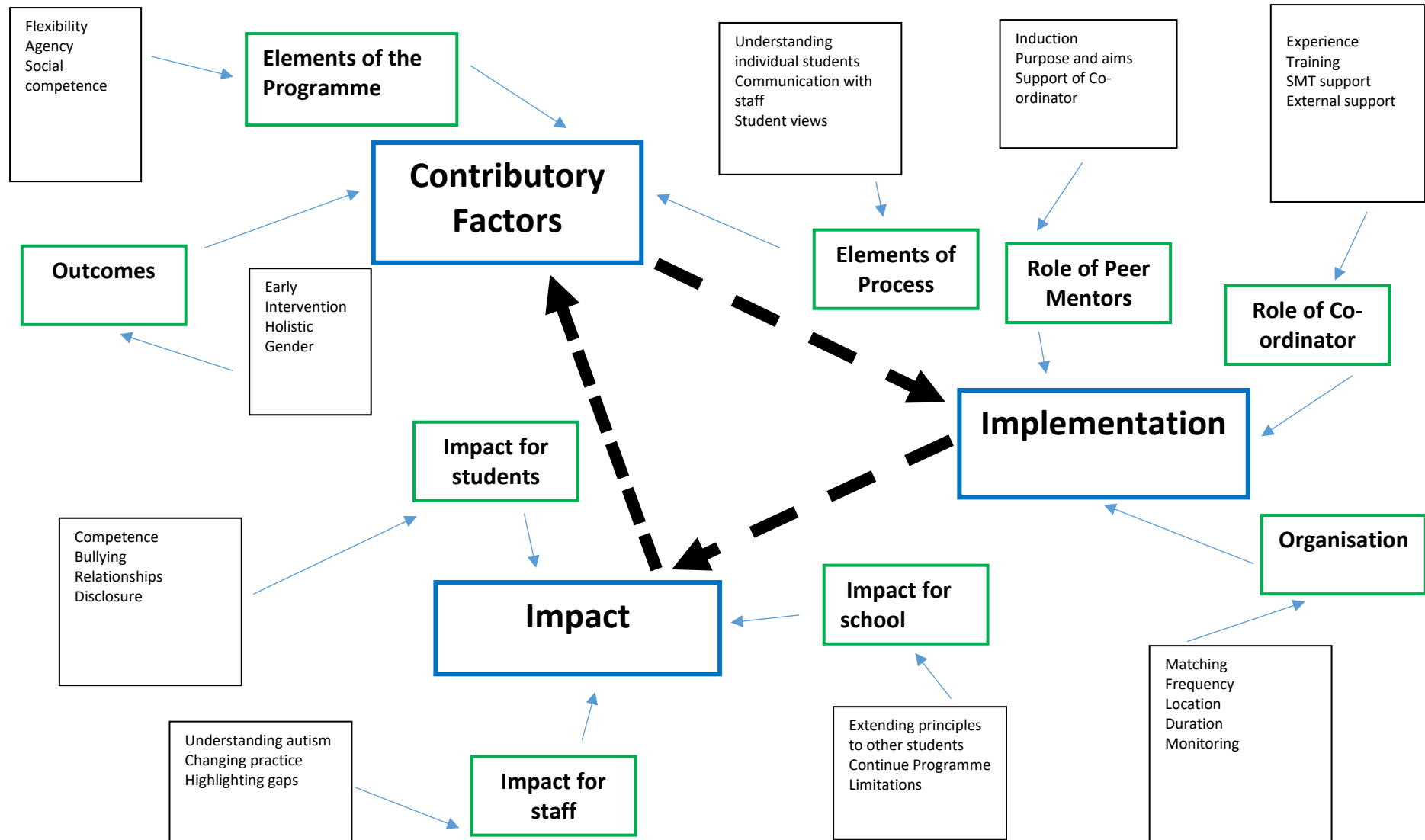
(Adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark, (2007, p.68)

I begin this chapter by providing an overview of the findings from the thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe how the sixth stage of a thematic analysis begins once researchers have a set of fully worked out themes. This involves the final analysis and write up of the

research report, a process described in Chapter Four and demonstrated in this Chapter. I discuss the findings analytically, highlighting the most pertinent findings in relation to my research questions, making links to the literature presented in Chapter Two. This move from the descriptive to the analytic is what Braun and Clarke (2006) identify as a key feature of a rigorous thematic analysis.

The themes presented in this Chapter have been inductively abstracted using the stages of thematic analysis described in section 4.7.2, and outlined in the thematic map shown in figure 7. Three overarching themes emerged from the data set (shown in the blue boxes): implementation; impact; and contributory factors. Nine main themes were organised under the three overarching theme areas (shown in bold text in the green boxes). The main themes were: role of the co-ordinator; role of peer mentor; organisation; impact for staff; impact for students; impact for school; elements of the programme; elements of process; and outcomes. Each main theme then had further sub-themes relating to these areas (shown on plain text in the green boxes). Although the overarching themes and main themes are distinct from one another they are not wholly independent, but interrelate.

Figure 7 : Thematic Map (generated following thematic analysis of 29 interviews)



5.2 THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME IN SCHOOL ONE

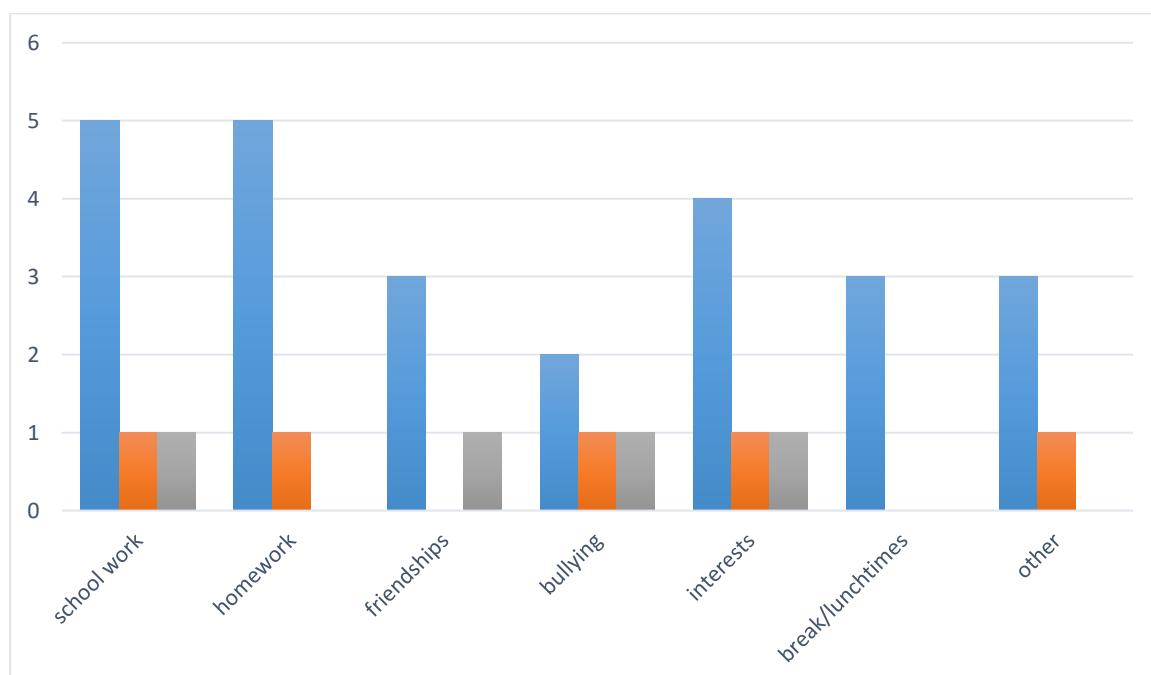
5.21 AIMS

The Deputy Headteacher had a role overseeing the pastoral care for students in school one and saw this programme as part of her extended brief within the setting. She identified supporting student transitions, academic support and enhancing provision as a main aim of the programme with the co-ordinator expanding on this to include an emphasis on improving the confidence of students through improved relationships. This included both autistic and non-autistic students. The co-ordinator identified in the survey at T1 that she wanted:

“.... the programme to benefit students with autism but also those students from very small primary’s. They can both feel lost.”

The topics the mentors in school one identified that they wanted sessions on are outlined in Figure 8. The non-autistic student’s responses are in blue, student one’s responses in orange and student two’s responses in grey. Homework and school work were priorities for most students with both the autistic students also identifying interests and bullying as important.

Figure 8. Pre-programme aims identified by mentors in school one



5.22 IMPLEMENTATION

This section outlines the factors identified as being important to the delivery of the peer mentoring programme in the five schools. Including a focus on the key roles of peer mentor and co-ordinator in the programme and organisational factors that influenced its implementation.

ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The co-ordinator for school one was a teaching assistant who had been at the school for three years. She worked daily supporting autistic students within the school and had completed both online and face to face training on aspects of autism education. The co-ordinator felt well placed to take on the role and was pleased that she had been given what she felt was:

“Recognition for my work with boys with autism over the last year.”

This was reflected in her survey response at T1 which indicated she was confident in both the co-ordinator role and training the mentors. She also felt that this was a good opportunity to widen her skills and knowledge within SEND and autism. The co-ordinator supported the two autistic students in several lessons and was aware of the non-autistic students involved in the programmes as well. In the survey at both T1 and T2, the co-ordinator found the training given to her by the researcher to be very useful in her role as peer mentoring co-ordinator:

“The preparation, in terms of the guidelines and training, was really helpful.”

Co-ordinators were asked at both T1 and T2 to specify what further training or support they thought they required. The co-ordinator in school one felt she would benefit from more opportunities to network and share good practice with other schools:

"I felt I was doing a good job but it is always good to see what other schools are doing. I think sharing practice is a good way of working."

The training of the mentors was viewed as being a successful process in school one. The co-ordinator had an individual session with the autistic students to explain the process and role. They had then joined a group induction process with the other mentors:

"It was important to give the two boys some extra time to process and understand the role and answer any questions they had about it."

The management experience of the programme was mainly positive. Despite seeing time management as a potential difficulty in running the programme at T1 the co-ordinator felt she was given enough time to plan and prepare for sessions and it didn't impact on her other workload within school. She felt that having one of the school Deputy Heads as the key person overseeing the programmes helped this process:

"They make sure I have the time I need for the programmes. I think for programmes like this to run successfully you need the backing of the senior leaders. You need some recognition that it's important."

In school one the staff body were made aware of the peer mentoring programmes through whole school briefings. The influence of the Deputy Head was again seen as important in this:

"He made sure it was on everyone's radar. It would have been impossible for me to do it as a TA."

This supported the co-ordinator's view that at both T1 and T2 that there was a good staff awareness of the peer mentoring programme within the school.

ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

The mentor questionnaires revealed how positively both autistic and non-autistic students had responded to the experience of mentoring in school one. Table 5.1 shows the results for school one.

Table 5.1: School One Mentor Views at T1 and T2

Mentor Views <i>The T2 items on the questionnaire were the same as T1 but expressed in the past tense</i>	% agreement T1 Students with autism	% agreement T2 Students with autism	% agreement T1 Non-autistic students	% agreement T2 Non-autistic students
I am pleased to be a mentor	50 (student 2 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor	100	100	100	83.3
I think I can be helpful to the other peer mentors	100	100	100	100
I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring	0 (students 1 and 2 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I think being a mentor will be good for me	0 (students 1 and 2 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role	100	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the all the mentors	0 (students 1 and 2 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well Organised	100	100	100	100
	n=2	n=2	n=6	n=6

This was reflected in the semi-structured interviews. The autistic students were initially unsure about some aspects of the role, as indicated in the T1 survey, and both felt that that being a mentor was not normally something they would be asked to do:

"(People) like me...I don't get asked to do stuff like this." 1

"It's normally for other people who are better at that sort of thing." 2

They felt it was important that peer mentors listened to each other though this was more centred around other peer mentors listening to them:

"It was good. (Others) don't normally like my ideas or listen to me in class but they did in this group." 1

The training and induction they had received had been helpful in trying to understand the role and that it got easier being a peer mentor as the programme had gone on:

"I didn't know what peer mentors were but now I do and I am one!" 2

The views of the non-autistic peers were generally positive about the peer mentoring role with the majority understanding the aims and purpose of the programme which they had helped develop during the induction process.:

"It's a chance to talk about stuff we're interested in and help each other."4

Though one student felt that the aims of the programme weren't clear enough:

"I understand what a peer mentor is but I wasn't always sure what we were doing it for."6

All the students felt included and engaged in the programme and thought it was positive that they all had the opportunity to bring issues or ideas to the sessions:

"It was really different to normal lessons. We get a chance to talk to each other about things important to us."7

For one of the students with autism this was generalised to wider feelings of inclusion in school:

*"It makes me feel a bit more like I have a role now. I sort of know how I fit in."*²

ORGANISATION

The co-ordinator felt it was important to recognise the different needs of the whole mentoring group as well as putting students together who would be supportive of each other when deciding on participants:

"We wanted to make sure we had students who would have things in common so they got on. We also wanted to make sure we could treat them as individuals."

She felt that it was important for her to have a high level of initial control over the programme. This was mainly due to the age of the students and the fact that none of the students had been involved in mentoring before. By the end of the programme the co-ordinator felt that she had handed over more control to the students but recognised that the more formalised structure had helped this process:

"I was always in the room for every session but the students seemed more confident and independent as the programme went on."

"I think having the regular meetings, at the same time and place, meant we got into a positive routine. It was helpful for all the students not only the two boys with autism."

The programmes in school one happened once every two weeks during tutor time and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The co-ordinator felt that this could have been increased, as often issues arose between sessions that would have been helpful to discuss. Incentives were used in the two mentoring programmes in school one in recognition of the role undertaken by the

students in supporting their peers. This included points towards the students form reward system and certificates.

The monitoring of the programme was done through session notes made by the co-ordinator and shared with the Deputy Head. There were no formal measures apart from the measures that were being done as part of the research study. The co-ordinator felt that the lack of tools to measure progress of students in non-academic areas was an ongoing issue:

“We really need a way to identify if we are helping students with things like their confidence or social skills. We have behavioural measures but these aren’t relevant to the students on the programme.”

5.23 IMPACT

IMPACT FOR STAFF

The primary impact of the programme was on the co-ordinator who felt that she had developed her skills and knowledge base with all the students but particularly the two with autism:

“It has made me think about the way we do things here. You really need to understand these boys and what makes them tick.”

Her understanding of how and why autism impacted on the two students was something she was keen to share with the wider staff at school. This was done informally though feedback to teaching and support staff and through a briefing session organised by the Deputy Head. The co-ordinator identified several areas of practice that she would change in the future because of being involved in the programme. These included spending more time listening to students, finding more opportunities for independent thinking and work and promoting a

greater awareness of autism to peers and staff. She highlighted the latter as a significant gap which lead to the briefing session being organised:

“I would like to think that all staff are autism aware. I know they aren’t and it’s something I have talked to (Deputy Head) about.”

IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

The mentors in school one all reported being happy with the group of mentors they had been selected to work with. One of the autistic students and one of the non-autistic students felt it was difficult building a relationship at the start of the programme as they didn’t know the other students that well. However, all the mentors thought that their relationship with the other mentors in their group got better over time. This was mainly attributed to getting to know them better and spending time with them:

“It’s easier to talk about things now I know them better.”¹

There was an improvement in both autistic student’s perceptions of their own social and academic competence over the period of the peer mentoring programme. Table 5.2 shows pre-and post-scores for the self-perception questionnaire. In addition to noting the means Table 5.2 also indicates the percentage change in student’s pre-and post-peer mentoring programme scores.

Table 5.2: School One scores on perceived social and academic competence

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
One	Social Competence	2	2.66	33.00
One	Academic Competence	2.5	3.66	46.40
Two	Social Competence	2	3.66	83.00
Two	Academic Competence	2	2.66	33.00

This finding is in line with the autistic student's pre-and post-scores for the questionnaire on social satisfaction shown in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: School One scores on levels of social satisfaction

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
One	Level of Social Satisfaction	35	45	28.57
Two	Level of Social Satisfaction	29	51	75.86

The link, between improved social competence and social satisfaction, was made very clearly by student two in their interview:

*"I feel happier around other people. Understand them better."*²

*"I can make friends ... If I want to. Yeah. It's helped with that."*²

For student one the increase wasn't as marked but he still felt that he could manage social interactions more successfully:

*"I know I have other students I can go to if I need to."*¹

Understanding how other students did things and sharing interests and ideas was something that they both felt was beneficial:

*"I hadn't talked to (student) before but he's alright. He likes some of the stuff I do. Like Pokémon."*¹

There were also improvements in both autistic student's perceptions of their academic competence and ability to manage task within school and at home. Both students saw themselves as being good at academic work and that the peer mentoring sessions had helped with solving academic related issues:

*"I'm doing well at school."*¹

*"Homework. I do it at school now. That's made things a lot easier."*²

The co-ordinator felt that focussing on this area during the mentoring sessions had been very

helpful for all the students and there had been a level of generalising skills and knowledge by the autistic students in class:

“I think so. Being in their class also made it easier for me to see if they were using the things we discussed.”

The relationship between mentors and the co-ordinator was positive and the students felt that it was good she was there in the sessions and available at other times if needed. They preferred the co-ordinator to organise the timings and location of the sessions and liked that they had a specialised room for the programme. The relationship between the autistic students and the co-ordinator were strengthened during the programme with both students realising that she was a source of support for them:

“I like (co-ordinator). I know she will help if I need it.” ¹

It was unclear whether this level of trust was generalised to the wider staff engaged with the students but the co-ordinator felt she provided a useful link to communicate and resolve issues with teachers and support staff.

There was a significant change in the level of bullying experienced by the two autistic students in school one over the period of the programme. Table 5.4 shows pre-and post-results for the questionnaire on bullying in school one.

Table 5.4: School One results on bullying

	Student One		Student Two	
Measure and time-period	T1	T2	T1	T2
Frequency of Bullying	15-20 times	0	10-15 times	0
Type of Bullying	Verbal and Physical	N/A	Verbal	N/A
Who they told	No-one	N/A	No-one	N/A

What was the outcome	Bullying Continued	N/A	Bullying Continued	N/A

The reasons for this reduction focused on both friendships and knowing what to do when they felt they were being bullied:

*"I have made some friends and that has really helped ... yeah, I would tell my mum and she would tell school. I can tell (co-ordinator) as well."*²

*"I can tell (the co-ordinator) and she will sort it out."*¹

This in contrast to their questionnaire responses that indicated neither student had told anyone about being bullied. This led to me informing the mentoring co-ordinator about the bullying and she subsequently met with both students individually and informed parents. The school then dealt with the incidents and both students reported that the bullying had stopped in the T2 questionnaire and that no incidents had occurred during the duration of the peer mentoring programme. The non-autistic peers felt that the two students were more aware of what to do if they were being bullied because of a session they had around bullying. This included being more aware of what bullying was for one student:

*"I don't think he knew when other kids were being nasty to him and we also look out for him ... look out for each other more."*⁶

When asked about the impact they felt they had on each other, both mentoring groups were consistent in their responses. The non-autistic mentors mainly commented on their autistic peers and focused on more emotional impacts:

*"Make them feel more confident"*³

*"Help them settle better in school."*⁵

*"He seems better in class. Not so stressy or angry."*⁸

The autistic students found this more difficult to answer though there was a recognition that being a peer mentor involved helping other students. They identified more concrete and practical impacts:

*"I know a lot more than other students in lots of things. Like computers, and I helped (another student) with a problem."*¹

Disclosing their autism was something that both students were happy to do having discussed this with the co-ordinator in their individual induction session:

*"It's not a big thing. Loads of people have it. Some in this school."*¹

For the non-autistic peer mentors this disclosure was helpful and helped them to understand the behaviour of the two autistic students:

*"Yeah. It made more sense. Someone in my primary school was autistic. Didn't know they were all different though. He's very chatty."*³

*"I think it really helped us understand him. (co-ordinator) was good. We had a session on it."*⁸

Both autistic students identified that they had developed more awareness of how their autism impacted on them. This was an ongoing process and they felt they would like to find out more information in the future:

*"Yes. I know some more about why I do things. Like having to do the same things."*²

*"My parents talked to me. I know I think differently."*¹

This was an area the co-ordinator planned to follow up through individual sessions with the students.

IMPACT FOR SCHOOL

The co-ordinator was asked in their interview about whether the new peer mentoring

programme would be useful for other students. The extension of the programme was something she was keen to support though her focus remained on the autistic students within the school:

"I could see it working for other students. I really would like to do it with the other autistic boys. It would need a bit of organisation and the staff would have to get behind it."

She felt it would be useful to continue the programme but questioned when it should stop or the criteria for stopping:

"I'd like to continue the two groups if I'm allowed by school."

"How long do they normally run for? Would they (mentors) decide or me?"

The co-ordinator felt that the impact of the programme on the school would be strengthened by continuing it in the next academic year. She identified organisational issues as a limitation to this as well as the pressure on staff and students to achieve academic results:

"It's hard to get a balance. We know (staff in learning support) how important these things are for them and they should be as important as the academic lessons.... it's not the same priority for lots of teachers."

She identified the role of the senior management team in this process:

"I think unless he (Deputy Head) backs it then it's not going to happen."

5.24 CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

This section outlines the factors that staff and students identified as influencing the effectiveness of the peer mentoring programme. Main themes include aspects of the peer mentoring programme itself, views on the process of the programme and outcomes that resulted from these two elements. The outcomes theme has factors that were identified as

important to facilitating the staff, student and school impacts described previously, but did not themselves represent the impacts.

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The co-ordinator indicated that the programme guidelines for her had been helpful as a starting point for the sessions. She felt it would be good to add to them given her experience and was keen to do this. The flexibility of the programme was something identified as having both positive and negative elements:

"It was fine for me. I like changing things and not being tied down to following stuff religiously.... Can see it could be a problem for other people if they need more structure."

She felt that more input from her during initial sessions was needed to develop a routine within the sessions and she felt the ground rules the groups established during the induction process were a helpful part of this process.

The idea that the programme should focus more on social competence than discrete social skills was one the co-ordinator agreed with in principle. In practice, she felt this had been harder to define or assess. When probed further she felt that all the students had developed their ability to interact positively and get along with each other. This included respecting and expressing appreciation for others and being able to work and communicate well with others and listen to others' ideas:

"It was a surprise. A good one. Especially the two autistic boys. I think it did help them in class."

ELEMENTS OF PROCESS

A key part of the programme for both the mentors, and more explicitly for the co-ordinator, had been a greater understanding of individual student's strengths, weaknesses, interests and challenges. For the co-ordinator, this was invaluable:

"I really got to know the boys in the groups. For (two autistic students) it was so helpful to get to know them as people and build on that in class."

She felt that this was helpful when communicating any issues from the peer mentoring groups to other school staff to enable them to have a better understanding of the student's needs. The co-ordinator saw this joined up approach as critical for the right support to be in place for the students in school:

"There's no point doing the groups without sharing (information) with staff so they understand the boys better. It need to be part of the programme."

The emphasis placed on enabling and listening to the views of the students in the sessions was something the co-ordinator thought was critical to this process.:

"They don't have much of a chance to do that in class. I think they liked that it was more relaxed and they knew they could bring their own ideas to the group."

This view was backed up by the mentors who were pleased that they could have an input into the programme and that they could bring issues or problems they had to the group. This was a difficult process to start with as they were not used to this approach in class and they felt the use of some structure at the start of the programme had been helpful:

"Having the list of topics was good." ⁴

"It would have been hard to think of things but it changed anyway. Got easier." ⁷

"I liked it ... much better than class. Don't get much chance to say anything I want to normally." ²

OUTCOMES

The importance of providing the right support at the right time for the autistic students was something noticed by the co-ordinator:

"This (peer mentoring programme) is good for picking up any issues early. Before they become worse or get them in trouble ... I think having it at Year Seven is a good idea so we can sort out anything in their first year."

The matching of all boys in the two mentoring groups was seen to have worked well by the co-ordinator:

"I just think they have more in common ... not sure it would have worked with mixed groups at this age. Maybe when they are older."

She recognised that a more comprehensive approach to meet the needs of autistic students was needed in school one. This was an important consideration to take forward and was:

"One of the things I need to talk to (Deputy Head) about."

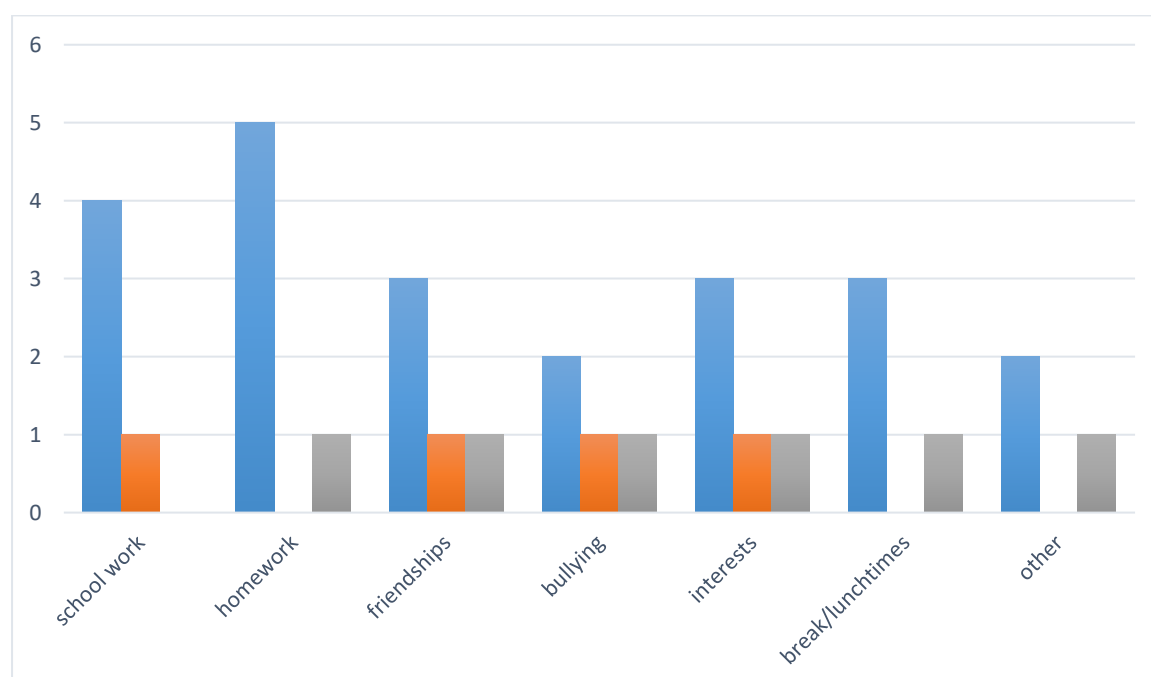
"Unless you help them (students with autism) in all areas then they're not going to be independent when they get older."

5.3 THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME IN SCHOOL TWO

5.31 AIMS

The main aims of the programme identified by the SENCo and co-ordinator were supporting student transitions and reducing bullying. The SENCo was very aware of the increased vulnerability to bullying for autistic students and was keen that this should be avoided. A further aim was to increase the provision available at school to students with SEN and to also enhance the reputation of the school for meeting the needs of students with additional needs. Figure 9 shows the range of issues the students had identified as topics for the mentoring sessions prior to the programme starting. Blue shows the non-autistic student's responses, orange is student nine and grey shows the priorities for student ten. Homework and school work were the most popular items though with both the autistic students identifying bullying and interests as areas they wanted covered.

Figure 9: Pre-programme aims identified by mentors in school two



5.32 IMPLEMENTATION

ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The co-ordinator for school two was a Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HTLA) who had been at the school for six years. She had been given an autism specialist role within the school and worked daily supporting autistic students and liaising with staff, parents and support services. This included running weekly social communication groups for autistic students. She had completed face to face training on aspects of autism education and was studying for a qualification in Autism (Children) at the University of Birmingham (ACER). The co-ordinator indicated on the T1 survey that she felt very confident in the role and in being able to provide induction for the mentors. She felt that this was a good professional development opportunity and would build on her specialist role within the school. The co-ordinator had not been involved in the buddying scheme at the school. She knew the two autistic students selected for the mentoring programme and had been involved in their transition into secondary school. She also supported them in several lessons and knew the non-autistic students involved in the programmes.

She rated the training given to her by the researcher at T1 to be 'fairly useful' and 'very useful' at T2. Following her experience of running the two mentoring programmes the co-ordinator found that the training has made more sense and on reflection was:

"A good starting point and it made more sense once we got, you know, the whole thing going."

"I'm a bit of a control freak and want everything to be just so. Which this isn't. But it meant I could bring my own things to it."

In terms of further training or support the co-ordinator indicated at T1 that it would have been helpful for another member of staff to run programmes in school two at the same time:

“It would help having another person doing this with other groups good to bounce ideas off someone.”

In addition, at T2 she felt that having more input from school staff regarding issues that had arisen for the mentors would have been helpful:

“So, the whole thing is more two-way.”

The training of the mentors was a good learning experience for the co-ordinator. She felt that overall it had been good but had realised that it would have been better to speak to the autistic students individually first as all the mentors were inducted together at the same time in a whole group session. She did have subsequent 1:1 sessions with the autistic students to reinforce the peer mentoring role, how the sessions were organised and answer any questions about the programme:

“I’m not sure (autistic students) got what mentoring was when we did the training maybe it was a bit of overload next time I’d have a chat with them before the group (session).”

The co-ordinator had identified in the survey at T1 that managing time may be a potential difficulty in the management of the programme. This was confirmed in the T2 survey and the co-ordinator felt that she didn’t have enough time to plan and prepare for the sessions:

“It was ok. I managed but the sessions could have been better if I’d not been so rushed with other work Nothing different there though.”

She felt that having the SENCo as the key person overseeing the programmes had helped her run the sessions. They had worked together for several years and had timetabled regular meetings each term to discuss the autistic students within the school:

“She’s as stretched as me but we talked about it (the programmes) when we had our normal meetings she did support me.”

The co-ordinator identified that at T1 most of the other school staff were ‘not aware’ of the peer mentoring programme. This had changed to ‘some are aware’ at T2, mainly due to her day to day role of liaising with teaching and support staff working with the autistic students in school two. She felt that a higher profile would have been useful but recognised that:

“We’re a big school and there are lots of other things going on all the time.”

ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

The mentor questionnaire results for school two are shown in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5: School Two Mentor Views at T1 and T2

Mentor Views <i>The T2 items on the questionnaire were the same as T1 but expressed in the past tense</i>	% agreement T1 Students with autism	% agreement T2 Students with autism	% agreement T1 Non-autistic students	% agreement T2 Non-autistic students
I am pleased to be a mentor	100	100	100	100
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor	100	100	83.3	100
I think I can be helpful to the other peer mentors	0 (students 9 and 10 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring	0 (students 9 and 10 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100

	disagreed)			
I think being a mentor will be good for me	0 (students 9 and 10 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role	100	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the all the mentors	0 (students 9 and 10 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well Organised	100	100	100	100
	n=2	n=2	n=6	n=6

The results indicated that there was some uncertainty from both autistic and non-autistic students on their abilities to be a mentor and whether it would benefit other mentors to be involved in the programme. This may reflect the induction process, though all the students indicated that they felt well prepared for the role in school two. It was more likely that some students were less confident in their own abilities around mentoring. For the autistic students, this may also have been a result of the challenge of answering questions that involved an element of prediction based on future, and past, experience. Without the experience of being a peer mentor the student may have found it more difficult to answer questions such as 'I think being a mentor would be good for me.' Similarly, questions that involved predicting the impact on other people such as 'I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful for all the mentors' could be too abstract for them.

The T2 questionnaire and interviews both indicated that the mentors in school two were positive about being a mentor. For the non-autistic mentors this seemed to involve elements

of being different to 'normal lessons', being given some additional responsibility and helping other people:

"It was fun. I felt a bit ... like ... you know bit more grown-up." ¹⁵

"I liked it It was different to normal school. Not as strict." ¹¹

"It was good (names of other mentors) and me. We all helped each other." ¹³

For the autistic students, there was a difference in the reasons they enjoyed being a peer mentor. This showed a clear distinction between a social and academic benefit identified by the two students:

"Being with my friends." ¹⁰

"... oh yeah. Homework. It helped." ⁹

For one of them, supporting other students was a role that she saw as an extension of her friendship with the group:

"We're all friends. We help each other anyway. Why wouldn't we?" ¹⁰

The overall aims and purpose of the programme appeared to be understood by the mentors while they could comment on individual aims which they had helped develop during the induction process:

"Other kids annoying me ... teachers being confusing." ⁹

"We could talk about things that were bothering us or things that were going well Or stuff like make-up and school uniform." ¹⁰

Bringing issues or ideas to the sessions was more difficult for one of the mentoring groups but became easier as the session went on:

"That was quite hard sometimes" ¹¹

“(Autistic student) always wanted to talk about his things. I think it got better the more we did. He listened more and we went over the rules (for the sessions). That helped.”¹²

For the other mentoring group, a challenge was agreeing what to discuss as everyone had ideas about what sessions should focus on. The role of the co-ordinator was important in this process:

“She (co-ordinator) was really good. She made sure all of us had a go (at speaking) and took turns, listened, things like that.”¹⁴

“We had a routine to take turns. Everyone got a go to talk ... and listen.”¹⁶

ORGANISATION

The co-ordinator felt the selection of the mentors had been a good process and the input of the form tutors was helpful:

“They know who liked who, or who didn’t, and if they would make a good group together It helped as I only see them in lessons where it’s hard to know sometimes.”

She felt that she had to maintain a fair degree of control over the sessions. For group one this was due to them needing more stimulus and guidance and for group two:

“to manage the conversations and topics They could spend 30 minutes talking about clothes.”

The duration of the sessions was the same (30 minutes) for both groups though initially this was problematic:

“It was a struggle to make this last for the boys at the start. The girls could easily have spent an hour (in the session).”

The co-ordinator felt this became easier as the sessions went on and she could improve the management of them though workload issues still meant she would have liked to have had more planning and preparation time:

"We got into more of a routine and they responded well to this. Especially (student 9) group. I think I found it easier as well."

Similarly, organising the sessions at the same place and time made things more manageable:

"Same thing. Made it a routine ... meant I didn't have to do another job finding a room. I'm lucky as (SENCo) let me book the room up here (learning support). Usually it's a nightmare trying to get a room."

Meeting once every two weeks during assembly time was felt adequate and the co-ordinator felt that it allowed enough time to allow students to bring new issues to the sessions. She felt that it would be good to consider different models dependent on the needs of the students. School two made use of incentives in the form of points towards the students reward system. They also had refreshments in the form of juice and biscuits available during the sessions. The monitoring of the programme was done through session notes made by the co-ordinator (shared with the SENCo), the readiness to learn scale (completed by the co-ordinator for each student at the start and end of the programme) and the measures that were being done as part of the research study. The co-ordinator felt that that it was important to have some more formal measure of progress of the students in non-academic areas and that:

"it made sense to use something (readiness to learn scale) that we used already."

5.33 IMPACT

IMPACT FOR STAFF

The co-ordinator felt that the impact of the programme had been limited in terms of the school staff. She felt this was a missed opportunity whilst the programme was running and that it would be good to develop awareness in the next academic year. She planned to do this through a staff briefing and discussing the model with the senior management team at the school. However, the challenges of raising awareness were recognised:

“(SENCo) would need to lead on this It’s easy for things to get missed ... I didn’t really know about the buddying system or how it works and I’ve been here a long time.”

In terms of her own professional development the co-ordinator identified many positives from her involvement in the programme. This included being more aware of the needs of the autistic students, increased confidence in the management of this type of programme and highlighting where practice could be improved. She identified communication and consistency of approach amongst staff as key areas that needed a ‘whole school’ approach to meet the needs of autistic students more effectively:

“I really understood how difficult it must be for them (students with autism) We (staff) need to be a lot more consistent a lot more aware.”

IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

Both the autistic and non-autistic peer mentors in school two reported that they felt they were well matched in their mentoring groups and were already friends with several of the other mentors:

“I know (peer mentor). I was at primary with him. The others ... I hang out with sometimes at break.”⁹

The results for the autistic students pre-and post-scores for levels of social satisfaction and social and academic competence are shown in Tables 5.6 and 5.7. A rise in student scores indicate an improvement in these measures. In addition to noting the means Tables 5.6 and 5.7 also indicate the percentage change in student’s pre-and post-peer mentoring programme scores.

Table 5.6: School Two scores on perceived social and academic competence

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Nine	Social Competence	2.33	3.00	28.75
Nine	Academic Competence	2.16	2.91	34.72
Ten	Social Competence	2.83	3.83	35.33
Ten	Academic Competence	2	2.33	16.5

Table 5.7: School Two scores on levels of social satisfaction

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Nine	Level of Social Satisfaction	27	37	37.03
Ten	Social Satisfaction	27	48	77.77

The scores indicate that both autistic students showed an increase in levels of social satisfaction and perceived social and academic competence over the period of the peer mentoring programme. A larger increase in the level of social satisfaction was seen for student ten compared to student nine. The possible reasons for this were highlighted in their interview responses. Student nine saw himself as having friends within school and seemed relatively content with his social group which also reflected his scores on social competence:

“I have lots of friends. You know. I’m a popular guy.”⁹

In contrast, student ten appeared to want to give the impression of having lots of friends. In contrast, the co-ordinator felt that student ten was more isolated within class and that the mentoring group had provided a positive social network for her. Something student ten seemed to agree with:

*"I like to spend time with my friends (mentors) and they help me if I need it."*¹⁰

The reciprocal nature of the mentoring role meant that the students did feel that they had a positive impact on each other which was reflected in the results of the mentoring questionnaire at T2. This was particularly noticeable for group two when they talked about student ten:

*"She joined in a lot more. Talked a lot more. I think we helped her confidence."*¹⁵

The impact of the peer mentoring programme on the autistic student's perceptions of their academic competence was less evident from their interviews. They both found it more difficult to articulate if any of the sessions had helped them access learning or changed the way they thought about themselves as learners, though both reflected that they saw themselves as doing well at school. The co-ordinator felt that the sessions had been beneficial in addressing specific academic issues that had arisen from school or home but wasn't as clear on whether these had been successfully translated into lessons.

There was a good relationship between the mentors and the co-ordinator with the mentors commenting positively on her approach:

*"She would sort out problems"*¹²

*"interesting and fun."*¹⁴

Other students felt that sometimes the sessions were too structured but most felt that the routine was good:

“easier to get to talk about things you wanted. I mean ... we all had the same chance.” 15

There was a marked decrease in the level of bullying experienced by the autistic students in school two over the period of the programme. Table 5.8 shows their pre-and post-results for the questionnaire on bullying.

Table 5.8: School Two results on bullying

	Student Nine		Student Ten	
Measure and time-period	T1	T2	T1	T2
Frequency of Bullying	20-25 times	0	10-15	0
Type of Bullying	Verbal	N/A	Verbal	N/A
Who they told	Parents and Member of Staff	N/A	Parents	N/A
What was the outcome	Bullying Stopped	N/A	Bullying had continued but had now stopped	N/A

Both students had been verbally bullied since they started secondary school. Student nine indicated that he had been bullied on the day the pre-programme questionnaire had been administered. Neither of them had told anyone at school but had informed their parents who had contacted school. Student nine felt that he could sort out any bullying issues himself with his friends and that:

*“It’s not a problem anymore”*9.

The non-autistic peers in this mentoring group also identified a change in the social interactions of student nine in school which may have impacted on levels of bullying:

“He was very good at winding people up. He doesn’t do that now.” 11

“Yeah. I think he knows he was annoying people before. Calmed down a lot.” 13

Student ten was less keen to discuss the issue of bullying in her interview but did say that:

*"The others (mentors) look out for me and it makes it safer."*¹⁰

She said that she would tell the co-ordinator or her friends (mentor group) if anything happened in the future.

Both autistic students in school two felt that they had helped their peers in the group. Student ten was less clear about what this looked like but student nine identified that he:

*"Knew a lot the others didn't like bikes and cars ... oh and Science."*⁹

The non-autistic mentors commented on the impact they had on each other and the autistic students:

*"I think we all helped each other in the group."*¹³

*"Homework. He was having trouble with English and we gave him some ideas."*¹¹

Having discussed the disclosure of their autism with the co-ordinator outside of the group induction session, student nine was happy to talk about this within the group but student ten was not. Student nine said that he had talked about it at primary school and thought that:

*"People know I'm different anyway."*⁹

For the other peer mentors in group three this was helpful in explaining why student nine had done certain things:

*"I know he sees the word differently. Makes it hard for him with other people sometimes ... like he used to get into arguments a lot."*¹³

Student ten had been diagnosed during the summer before starting secondary school and the co-ordinator felt that she was not very accepting of this and did not want to be viewed as different from her peers. The co-ordinator felt that she was *"Trying very hard to fit in."* She

planned to get the Communication and Interaction Service engaged to give advice around this area.

IMPACT FOR SCHOOL

The co-ordinator felt that the peer mentoring programme was something that could be developed in school two and would be helpful for lots of students, not just the autistic ones.

She compared the programme to the social communication groups she was running:

“I think it’s better. Having the mix of students. They learn more from each other ... I don’t think that always happens (in the social communication group).”

However, the issue around lack of staff awareness or engagement made her sceptical about the extent to which the programme would be continued:

“I don’t know. Unless the (Headteacher) agrees then it would be difficult. I also don’t want to do it all on my own. Other people need to help.”

The co-ordinator felt that the backing of the SENCo was important as was the view of parents:

“It would be a shame to stop. The parents, especially (the autistic students) were very keen for them to be involved and I know others would as well”

5.34 CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The co-ordinator felt that the guidelines could have been a bit more prescriptive as she liked to have:

“All my ducks in a row. But that’s probably just me.”

However, she also identified the flexibility of the programme as being positive as it meant she could introduce her own resources and ideas.

Giving more control of the sessions to the students was something she had found difficult but would like to explore further and thought in principal it was a good idea. The focus on social competence was different to her experience of running the social communication group where they tended to practice more discrete social skills. The co-ordinator was keen to develop this and felt it was especially important for the autistic students. Both groups had enabled the autistic students to build relationships with their peers and she felt that this would:

“Help them to move forward in school ... I think (student 9) had a lot of skills already but for (Student 10) I’ve notice a real difference. Like she’s happier in her own skin.”

ELEMENTS OF PROCESS

Enabling the views of the mentors to be heard was something the co-ordinator in school two identified as being an important part of the programme even though she had found it more problematic allowing them more control in the sessions. She had established a routine at the start of the sessions, in agreement with the mentors, to allow them to identify one positive and one challenge since they last met. This allowed her to:

“Have an idea about how they were feeling” and “Let me know about to any issues they wanted to discuss.”

It was something that the mentors also found helpful though it was sometimes difficult to identify positives and challenges:

“We all got a go though. I think it’s better than class where you always get the same people answering.” ¹²

"It seemed easier to think about things that had gone wrong so I liked that we had to come up with something good as well." ¹⁴

The co-ordinator felt that the programme was a good way of getting to know the students as individuals. She saw it as valuable time which doesn't normally happen as:

"We're always rushing ... going from this to that."

This was especially helpful in her role overseeing the progress of students with autism within school two and meant:

"I could speak to the teachers with a bit more authority on the subject."

OUTCOMES

The co-ordinator felt that gender had made a difference to the way the two mentoring groups responded to the programme. The non-autistic mentors in the female group were being explicitly more caring towards the autistic mentor even though her autism was not discussed:

"I think they knew she was different and she was obviously quiet in class. I think they saw themselves as her protectors a bit."

The group was also easier to get up and running as the girls were happier to talk in general and engage with the programme. In contrast the boys group took more time to establish and were initially more reserved, except for student nine who was:

"Happy to tell everyone anything and everything."

The co-ordinator felt that this improved as the sessions progressed due to the boys getting to know each other more and her providing the structure that meant they could all contribute. Identifying problems early was a benefit of the programme and allowed the co-ordinator to:

"Sort things out before they became a big issue."

This was the same for both autistic and non-autistic students and she felt that the joint

problem-solving and sharing of ideas among the students was an important element of this:

“They would bring things to me and expect me to do something about it. Which I often did. But I did encourage them to sort it out as a group which they all responded to.”

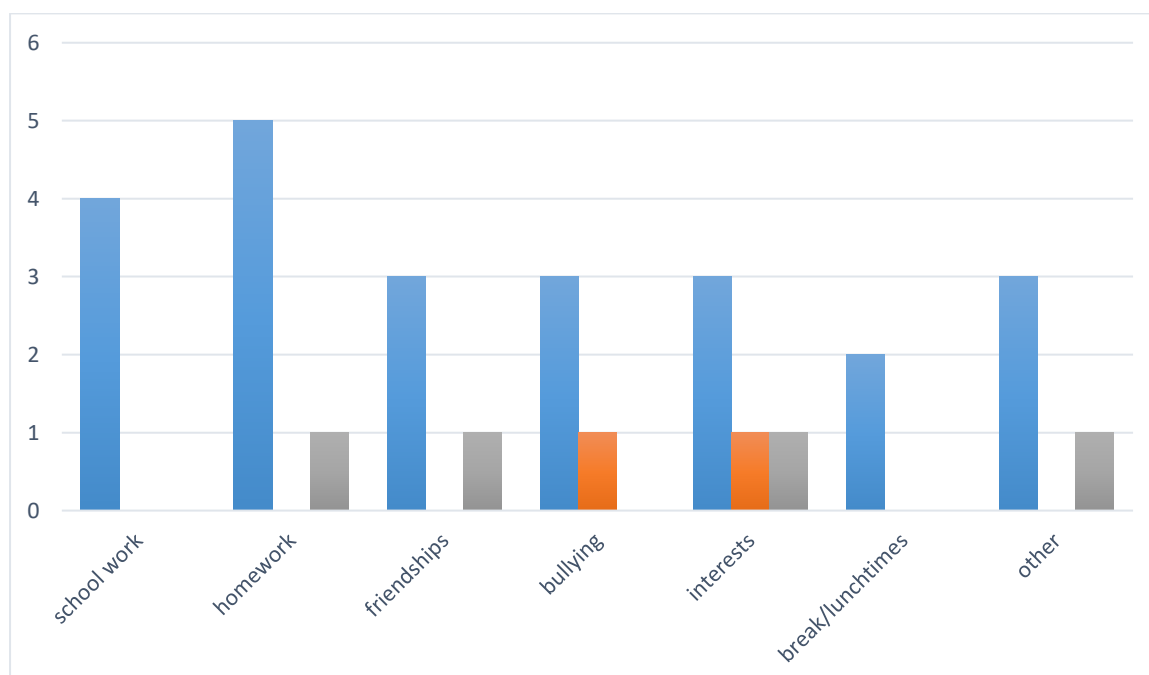
The benefits of the programme in addressing a variety of emotional and social needs, alongside academic issues, was something that built on the practice already established by the co-ordinator within school two. The importance of a comprehensive approach to supporting autistic students was something she had taken on from previous training and wanted to extend across the school with the support of the SENCo.

5.4 THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME IN SCHOOL THREE

5.41 AIMS

The main aims of the programme identified by the SENCo and co-ordinator were to support the students social and emotional development, and engagement in academic learning. Both the co-ordinator and SENCo identified the programme as fitting in with the school's current focus on improving academic attainment as well as the pastoral care that was already a strong element within the school. The topics that the mentors in school three wanted the programme to focus on are shown in Figure 10. The non-autistic student's responses are in blue, student seventeen's preferences in orange and student eighteens' choices in grey. Homework and school work were identified as priorities for the non-autistic students. Interests represented the only topic that both autistic students wanted covered with only student eighteen identifying an academic priority (homework). One of the autistic students (student seventeen), also indicated that she wanted to discuss her diagnosis as part of the sessions.

Figure 10: Pre-programme aims identified by mentors in school three



5.42 IMPLEMENTATION

ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The co-ordinator for school three was a teaching assistant who was in her second year at the school. She had limited training or experience prior to being appointed but enjoyed working with autistic students in the school and had a family member with autism. She supported students in class daily and worked with the SENCo to run weekly social communication groups for autistic students across different year groups. The co-ordinator was motivated to develop her skills and knowledge within autism education and felt the co-ordinator role provided an opportunity to do this. She indicated on the T1 survey that she had slight concerns about her ability to perform the role which was mainly due to her relative inexperience and the additional responsibility of the role. However, she did feel confident in providing induction and training for the mentors. The co-ordinator was not directly involved in the peer mentoring scheme already run at the school although several of the Year 8 and 9 students she worked with had been given older students as mentors. The two autistic students who were selected for the new peer mentoring programme were known to the co-ordinator and she supported them in several lessons across the week. They were not involved in the social communication groups.

The co-ordinator felt that the training she had received on the programme was 'very useful' at both T1 and T2. However, she did identify that further training in both mentoring and autism would be useful for her professional development:

I want to learn as much as I can, you know, to do a good a job as possible."

The co-ordinator also thought that having other members of staff run programmes would have been helpful:

“So, we could see what each other was doing ... get ideas and resources.”

Her T2 survey response showed that the co-ordinator’s confidence in training mentors had increased following the running of the programme. She identified that it had been important to speak with the autistic students separately as part of the induction process so:

“They had a chance to process the information.”

The co-ordinator also wanted them included in the whole group induction sessions so they were:

“Included from the start ... treated the same as the others.”

Time management and sustaining the interest of the mentors were potential difficulties in the management of the programme identified by the co-ordinator at T1. The T2 survey showed that while sustaining the interests of the mentors had not been an issue, time management had been:

“I think for this to work really well we would need someone whose role it was to do it all the time. Not added onto their everyday role.”

The co-ordinator identified that planning and preparation time needed to be ring-fenced to keep on top of the sessions. The SENCo had tried to do this but:

“As usual other priorities came up ... mainly covering for other people.”

The SENCo was seen a good source of support for the co-ordinator she did ask for regular feedback as well as joining some of the sessions. The co-ordinator also made use of the autism advisory teacher from the Local Authority who helped with advice and resources relating to the autistic students, who were both on her caseload. The co-ordinator found that this had been helpful and was a good example of joint working which had been well established in the school over the past few years:

“She (advisory teacher) is great... I talked to her about the programme and she had some brilliant resources that we used for some sessions. Like understanding bullying.”²³

At T1 the co-ordinator felt that some of the staff were aware of the programme due to it being mentioned in a whole staff briefing. This level of awareness didn’t change at T2 as no further updates had been given on the programme. The co-ordinator did feel that the teachers involved directly with the students on the programme were very aware of the peer mentoring scheme:

“... because I talked to them about it and I needed to let them know about some of the things that had come up.”

ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

The mentor questionnaires indicated that both autistic and non-autistic students had benefitted from the experience of mentoring in school three. Table 5.9 shows the results for school three.

Table 5.9: School Three Mentor Views at T1 and T2

Mentor Views <i>The T2 items on the questionnaire were the same as T1 but expressed in the past tense</i>	% agreement T1 Students with autism	% agreement T2 Students with autism	% agreement T1 Non-autistic students	% agreement T2 Non-autistic students
I am pleased to be a mentor	100	100	83.3	100
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor	100	100	83.3	100
I think I can be helpful to the other peer mentors	50 (student 18 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100

I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring	50 (student 18 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think being a mentor will be good for me	50 (student 18 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role	100	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the all the mentors	50 (student 18 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well organised	100	100	100	100
	n=2	n=2	n=6	n=6

The T1 survey indicated that one of the autistic students was initially less confident in his ability to be a mentor and to benefit from it. In contrast, the other autistic student in school three was very confident in the role which was reinforced in her interview:

"I think I made a very good mentor." ¹⁷

They both thought that being a peer mentor was important and had benefitted from their involvement in the programme by T2. They liked the training they had received and felt it had helped them understand the role of a peer mentor:

"It's helping people and me ... sorting out things." ¹⁸

The non-autistic peers were mainly in agreement over the aims of the programme and saw it as:

"somewhere we could talk and help other people." ²²

They had also picked up that the sessions were them to support their academic learning:

*"It was to make us better at school ... get better in lessons."*²⁰

Others saw the sessions as chance to do something different to their normal school routine:

*"Yeah ... it was better than tutor time."*²⁴

Most students indicated on the survey that they felt well prepared to be a mentor. However, one non-autistic student neither agreed or disagreed about being happy or prepared to be a mentor. This had changed at T2 to a more positive response on both questions. All the mentors liked that they could bring issues into the sessions though they recognised that this needed to be managed so everyone got a chance to speak:

*"She (the co-ordinator) was good ... helped to have rules so we took turns."*²¹

The co-ordinator appeared to have built up a good relationship with both mentoring groups and seemed liked by all the students. For one of the autistic students this had helped in class:

*"I see her in lessons ... it's better. Easier to sort things out."*¹⁷

The students liked the fact that the co-ordinator listened to them and they trusted her to sort any issues out:

*"She looks out for us."*¹⁹

ORGANISATION

When asked about the selection of the mentors, the co-ordinator felt that:

"We had a good idea who would be a good mix from seeing them in class."

However, it was important to checked this with forms tutors for the two groups and the Head of Year. The co-ordinator was keen to allow the students as much independence as possible in the sessions and provide a structure and routine which would allow this to happen. She felt

this had been easier for the girls group who were quicker to respond to the routines and take on some ownership of the sessions:

“They (the girls) had more to say and took on the routines themselves.”

The co-ordinator felt that she still needed to be in the sessions mainly to address some of the issues raised and to provide feedback to staff. There was also a need to manage the social interactions and group dynamics.

The duration of the sessions was 30 minutes for both groups during tutor time. The co-ordinator was concerned about sustaining the interest of the mentors for this period as indicated in the T1 survey. However, by T2 this had not been an issue and she felt that:

“Some of the sessions could have gone on ... in fact it was a shame we couldn’t extend some of them.”

Incentives were a useful motivator for the mentors and involved the students receiving merits and certificates for their involvement. The co-ordinator was also keen to establish a more relaxed atmosphere in the sessions and so snacks and juice were given to the mentors. The programme in school three was monitored through notes taken by the co-ordinator and feedback to the SENCo, who also looked at school records of academic progress and for each student. This was in addition to the measures used in the research study.

5.43 IMPACT

IMPACT FOR STAFF

The co-ordinator felt that the impact of the programme on her had been very positive:

“I got a lot more confident in the role. It’s been good as professional development.”

She wanted to use the experience to broaden her role within school as an autism specialist in the future and the process had also made her re-evaluate her own practice. The co-ordinator felt that there should be an increased focus and understanding of individual needs and more opportunities for students to be more active participants in school initiatives. This was particularly important for the autistic students whom she wouldn't necessarily have either the opportunities or support to do this within the normal curriculum:

"We do really well at this school with some really difficult kids but I can see how they (autistic students) might be left out."

The co-ordinator felt that it was more difficult to assess the impact of the programme on the wider staff and that the SENCo needed to do a briefing on the programme to make people more aware of it. She felt that the key lessons learnt would be very helpful in raising staff awareness and understanding of autism and it was important that training was extended to teachers. One of the key lessons learnt by the co-ordinator was that many of the resources that were used in the sessions, and were primarily focused on autistic students, were very effective for the non-autistic students as well:

"We did an energy counting form and they all really loved it. It gave me and them a really good idea of where they were each session with the stuff they had found difficult and what could help ... also good for them discussing ideas with each other."

She identified that the school needed to be 'autism friendly' and that this meant the whole school having the right ethos and consistency of approach which she thought was possible:

"We do a lot of things right and most staff are great. We just need to make sure it's part of what we do all the time."

IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

Most mentors in school three appeared to have been pleased with the mentoring groups they had been allocated in. They liked that they were all in the same class as this enabled them to talk about things that they were all aware of most of the time. They also liked that the sessions were in the same place and at the same time so it became part of their normal timetable. It also gave them more of a sense of belonging:

"Like a little club." ¹⁹

The two autistic students felt that the other peer mentors had been okay to work with, though one felt that:

"Sometimes they were annoying." ¹⁸

They both felt they had developed a better relationship with the other students over the course of the programme.

Table 5.10 shows the autistic students pre-and post-scores for the self-perception questionnaire. In addition to noting the means Table 5.10 also indicates the percentage change in student's pre-and post-peer mentoring programme scores.

Table 5.10: School Three scores on perceived social and academic competence

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Seventeen	Social Competence	2.16	2.5	15.74
Seventeen	Academic Competence	2.5	2.6	4.00
Eighteen	Social Competence	2.33	3.00	28.75
Eighteen	Academic Competence	2.3	2.5	8.69

The pre-and post-scores for the questionnaire on social satisfaction for the students with

autism in school three are shown in Table 5.11. In addition to noting the means Table 5.11 also indicates the percentage change in student's pre-and post-peer mentoring programme scores.

Table 5.11: School Three scores on levels of social satisfaction

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Seventeen	Level of Social Satisfaction	42	51	21.42
Eighteen	Level of Social Satisfaction	26	36	38.46

Both autistic students showed an increase in levels of social satisfaction and perceived social competence over the period of the peer mentoring programme. This increase was more marked for student eighteen compared to student seventeen whose levels of social satisfaction were higher to start with. She felt that she knew enough people already and that:

*"I have people there if I need them."*¹⁷

The impact of the sessions for student eighteen had been beneficial outside of the peer mentoring group:

*"I didn't really know what some things in school were about but I can ask my friend or the teacher if that happens now."*¹⁸

He identified that having shared interests was a useful way of building more positive relationships with other students in the group:

*"I didn't realise other people liked the same things I did."*¹⁸

The increase in perceived academic competence was small for both students and contrasted with the focus on this by the school. It was evident from the responses pre-programme that academic issues were not a priority for the two autistic students. The co-ordinator confirmed that she had covered school and homework issues in the sessions though the autistic students

hadn't raised many issues concerning this area.

The change in the level of bullying experienced by the two autistic students over the period of the programme is shown in Table 5.12.

Table 5.12: School Three results on bullying

	Student Seventeen		Student Eighteen	
Measure and time-period	T1	T2	T1	T2
Frequency of Bullying	0	0	15-20	5-10
Type of Bullying	N/A	N/A	Verbal and physical	Verbal
Who they told	N/A	N/A	Parent	Staff (co-ordinator) and friend (peer mentor)
What was the outcome	N/A	N/A	Bullying continued	Bullying stopped

Student eighteen indicated that he had been both verbally and physically bullied since starting school and had told his parents but no-one at school. His parents had contacted school but the bullying had continued. In the post-programme questionnaire, he indicated that had been verbally bullied though on less occasions than before the programme started. However, this time he had told another peer mentor and the staff co-ordinator and the bullying had been dealt with. Seeing staff or peers as a source of support and help had been significant for this student who said that:

*"I have made some friends and that has really helped."*¹⁸

When asked about their impact on each other, the mentors mainly focused on academic outcomes which may be a result of the school focus for the programmes:

*"It was good for Maths... everyone was having a nightmare."*²⁰

"You know work and that ... some of the teachers were really harsh." 23

For student seventeen a key impact was disclosing her diagnosis and the fact that:

"The others know about Asperger's" 17.

She was a keen advocate for autism and felt that it was important that other students understood what it was and that people with autism are:

"Just as good as anyone else. In fact, better than other people at lots of things" 17.

Student eighteen had decided not to disclose that he was autistic when this was discussed with the co-ordinator prior to the programme starting. The co-ordinator felt that it had been positive that student seventeen had disclosed and that the other mentors had been supportive of this. The mentors reinforced this themselves and had taken the difference not deficit message on-board:

"Yeah. We're all different and (student seventeen) is just a bit more different" 21.

They felt it had helped having the co-ordinator there to help them understand about autism:

"Didn't know there were so many (autistic students) in school. There's like loads of them." 20

IMPACT FOR SCHOOL

The co-ordinator indicated in her interview that the new peer mentoring programme was something that would be helpful for many students in the school, whether they were autistic or not:

"We have a lot of children with issues ... behaviour, learning, lots of emotional problems. It could be something we use for a lot of Year 7s as a way of supporting them with some of this. I think it fits in with what we're trying to do here."

This referenced the fact that the programme fitted in with the pastoral support that existed

within school three and that the school already valued a wider curriculum offer for many students.

When asked if she thought it was possible to continue or extend the programme the co-ordinator felt that it was more likely as one of the Deputy Heads of the school was aware of the programme:

“(SENCo) gives them information about it so I know they know it’s been going on. I would like it to continue even if we just use it for them (autistic students).”

The possible long-term benefits for the school were also identified:

“I think it would make things easier for them (autistic students) and that would make it better for staff. Less behaviour, better learning, better results.”

5.44 CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The co-ordinator identified the flexibility of the programme as being helpful:

“It meant we could discuss things that had happened that week or that day if needed.”

She used the programme guidelines as a starting point to structure the sessions but had felt more confident at changing things to suit the students as the programme went on:

“It was good they brought things to discuss. I kept reminding them at the end of each session. It was hard at the start but I also made sure I had stuff to cover in the sessions if the students were a bit asleep some weeks.”

She felt that discussing real life issue in the context in which they had happened had helped the autistic students to generalise some of the learning from the sessions into class. She felt that they had become generally more confident and less anxious in school. It had also helped

when there were some more specific issues or problems such as homework or how to interact with teachers in class.

The recommended resources in the guidance were found to be useful and were supplemented by the co-ordinator, SENCOs or autism advisory teacher's materials. The co-ordinator reinforced that many of the materials were useful for all the mentors to use:

"It meant (autistic students) weren't singled out as always needing help."

ELEMENTS OF PROCESS

The co-ordinator in school three was very keen to facilitate the views of all students in both mentoring groups. She recognised that there were issues around managing this and had worked with the students in the induction sessions to produce ground rules for the programme. These were written down and reinforced during sessions. The co-ordinator felt that it was important she was there to enable the autistic students to be part of this process and that they had their views heard. For student seventeen there was more of an issue about acceptance of the views of the other students when agreeing the ground rules but the co-ordinator has managed to overcome this. This had provided the co-ordinator with a useful insight in how to interact more positively with her and the importance of knowing the individual student was highlighted several times:

"There's no way I would have known what to do or what advice to give other staff about them (autistic students) if I hadn't been in these sessions. No way."

The transfer of information to the wider staff team about issues that had arisen from the sessions was particularly valuable for student eighteen. The co-ordinator felt that he was very

quiet and passive and could often get missed or ignored in class because his response to anxiety or stress was to effectively shut down. The sessions had helped her to understand this and enabled her to update his student profile to make staff more aware of triggers and signs that he wasn't coping in lessons.

OUTCOMES

The co-ordinator identified the importance of introducing the programme in Year Seven as part transition support into secondary school:

"I think the earlier the better. They may not need it later on but it's helped me and them when they start school."

It wasn't only the autistic students who benefitted from an early intervention approach:

"The other students had things they were struggling with which I think ... hope the sessions helped with. I know they helped."

The collaborative approach to problem-solving and giving advice and ideas was seen to be an important part of this process:

"Yeah. Sharing how they each did things. Made it a lot easier for them to follow advice rather than me or them telling them how to do something."

The co-ordinator felt gender was an important issue for several reasons. The first being her confidence in relating to some of the issues raised by the male group:

"I think it would be good for a male member of staff to be involved with the boys."

Secondly, the difference between the two autistic students:

"I would like to know a lot more about girls with autism. I really noticed differences in how (student seventeen) did things. Would be good have more training."

This related to the need for a more holistic understanding of the students' needs which

reinforced the view that every child with autism is different. The co-ordinator saw the programme as part of what school needed to do to meet the wider, non-academic needs of the autistic students. Something that:

“We do well”

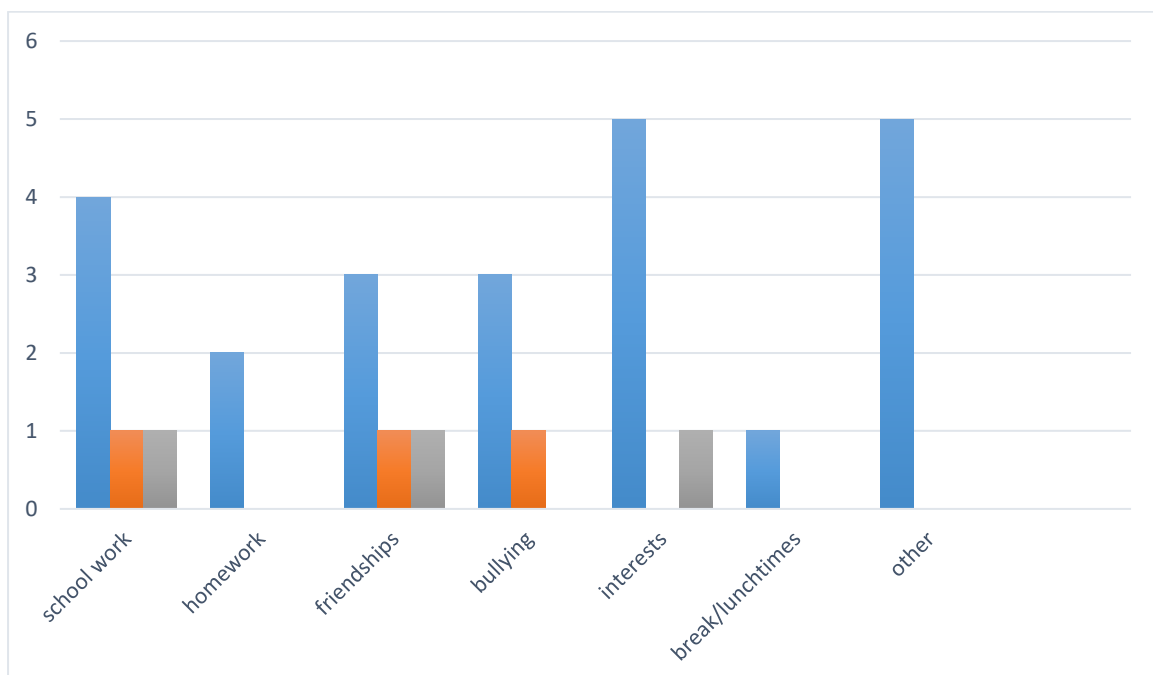
She felt that this shouldn't be forgotten in the drive to raise academic achievement in the school.

5.5 THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME IN SCHOOL FOUR

5.51 AIMS

The main aims of the programme identified by the SENCo and co-ordinator were to support the student's academic progress and to support their transition into Year 7. The co-ordinator identified the social and emotional development of the autistic students as an additional aim. The topic areas the mentors wanted covered during the sessions are shown in Figure 11. Student twenty-five's preferences are shown in orange, student twenty-six's in grey and the non-autistic students in blue. Results indicated that other and interests were the most popular topics whilst friendship and school work were both identified as priorities for the autistic students.

Figure 11: Pre-programme aims identified by mentors in school four



5.52 IMPLEMENTATION

ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The co-ordinator for school four was a very experienced teaching assistant who was in her first year at the school but had previously worked for eight years SEN support roles at two other mainstream secondary schools. She had been on a range of both school and external training in special needs. This included training in autism and the co-ordinator was looking to develop her qualifications further by undertaking a course at the University of Birmingham (ACER) in the future. She supported one of the autistic students involved in the programme in class on a weekly basis but was not directly involved with the other student when the programme began. The co-ordinator felt that the programme represented a good training opportunity and she was interested in bringing her own ideas to the sessions. On the T1 survey she indicated that she felt confident in the role of co-ordinator and had previously led on targeted approaches within schools for SEN students.

The co-ordinator felt that the training she had received on the programme was 'fairly useful' at both T1 and T2. She wanted to suggest modifications to the training based on her experience of co-ordinating the programme:

"I think it needs to be a bit more realistic about the potential problems you might face doing this."

She felt it would have been useful to get all the co-ordinators together either pre-or post-programme or both to discuss the project:

"It would have been really good to share experiences and ideas with the other people doing this. That's how I like to learn the most."

The co-ordinator identified that there had been some issues around the induction of the mentors. Separate induction sessions were arranged for the two autistic students to discuss the programme and mentoring with them. She felt this had been the right thing to do, though wasn't clear if the students had fully understood the programme or their role:

"They weren't entirely sure what the programme was."

Though the whole group induction sessions had been positive the co-ordinator felt it would have been helpful to have support from another member of staff.

The lack of awareness of the programme by other staff in school four was highlighted as an issue at both T1 and T2 by the co-ordinator:

"I was doing this on my own really. I don't think it had as much impact as it could have done if more staff had known about it. I did talk to staff if issues came up that they needed to know from the sessions but it's a shame we didn't make more of it."

The peer mentoring programme was one of several initiatives going on in the school and as such the co-ordinator felt it may have been overlooked:

"Got a bit lost."

The co-ordinator identified time management as a potential challenge in the management of the programme at T1. The T2 survey showed that this had been an issue during the programme:

"I had to cancel several sessions as I was put somewhere else to support or deal with other students. It was really frustrating but that's what happens in any school."

Though the SENCo had nominally given her some planning time for the sessions this was not seen as being enough alongside her other workload:

“You really need time each week ... dunno ... at least a lesson to plan properly for the sessions. I mean it was ok and I felt I was good at thinking on my feet but it always seemed last minute.”

The use of the Local Authority autism advisory teacher attached to the school was really valued by the co-ordinator. They had built up a positive relationship working together to support several students previously and the co-ordinator made use of the teacher for additional advice and resources when he had come in to school:

“That was really helpful. He (advisory teacher) always had good ideas and stuff I haven’t got. Especially on emotional management. Which I used with all the students.”

ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

Table 5.13 shows mentor questionnaires for school four. The results indicated that for both autistic and non-autistic students there was a lack of certainty about the mentoring role prior to the programme commencing.

Table 5.13: School Four Mentor Views at T1 and T2

Mentor Views <i>The T2 items on the questionnaire were the same as T1 but expressed in the past tense</i>	% agreement T1 Students with autism	% agreement T2 Students with autism	% agreement T1 Non-autistic students	% agreement T2 Non-autistic students
I am pleased to be a mentor	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.3	100
I think I can be helpful to the other peer mentors	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	66.60	83.30

I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	66.60	83.30
I think being a mentor will be good for me	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	66.60	100
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the all the mentors	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	66.60	100
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well organised	0 (students 25 and 26 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	83.30	100
	n=2	n=2	n=6	n=6

Both the autistic students neither agreed or disagreed with all the statements at T1. This suggests potential issues around predictability and a lack of understanding of the role and programme. It may also indicate a lack of confidence in their ability to be a peer mentor and supports the co-ordinators comments about the induction process. The co-ordinator did reinforce the voluntary nature of involvement in the programme and the autistic students were asked several times if they wanted to take part. Both agreed that they did. The change in their responses at T2 showed that they both thought they had benefitted from the programme and felt that they could support other peer mentors. The interviews with the autistic students suggested that they had become more confident as the programme progressed and had more understanding of the role and structure of the sessions:

*"I wasn't sure what it would be like but it's just like a place to talk and make friends. We helped each other with any problems."*²⁵

Several of the non-autistic students were similarly unsure about either the role or their ability to support other students at T1 though all felt pleased to have been a peer mentor. The interviews revealed that a couple of students were originally not convinced about being involved in the programme and one had taken part due to incentives:

*"It's sounded better than tutor and we got biscuits."*²⁹

Involvement in the programme had changed the views of one of the students:

*"It was good. Yeah. I didn't think it would be. I liked the games and it was good being with my friends."*³¹

The mentors appeared to understand the purpose of the programme and most felt that this had been useful for everyone:

*"We all got to talk about things we like"*³²

*"It did help all of us. It was like tutor but better. We had more chance to talk. Unless you didn't feel like it. It was more relaxed."*³⁰

Having ground rules was being important as was the co-ordinator in managing the programme.

*"... We can get a bit noisy and (autistic student) does go on if you let him."*²⁷

*"She's really nice. She's really good at letting us all speak and making sure we listened to each other."*³¹

ORGANISATION

The selection of peer mentors was seen to be a robust process by the co-ordinator:

“Getting the matching right was really important. Everything could have gone horribly wrong if you get a bad mix.”

Establishing routines for both groups was important for the co-ordinator. She saw this as being beneficial for all the students but particularly for the autistic students who needed that predictability in the sessions:

“It was good we had ground rules and I wanted to get into a routine at least for the first part of the sessions ... so we had some structure.”

The sessions in school four were run on a weekly basis as both the co-ordinator and SENCo felt the continuity of weekly support would be more effective. It also meant there would be less impact if sessions were missed for any reason. This impacted on the workload of the co-ordinator who felt that having one session every two weeks would have given her more time for planning and preparation. However, she did feel that weekly sessions were beneficial:

“You got to know the students and any issues they were having more quickly.”

It also meant the students got into a routine more quickly. This was helped by having sessions timetabled in the same place at the same time each week.

The use of incentives in school four was seen by the co-ordinator as being an important aspect of the programme. Students were given house points and an end of term event was planned where they were all taken out for lunch at a local pizza restaurant. The mentors were also given juice and biscuits during the mentoring sessions.

The peer mentoring programme was monitored in school four through session notes made by the co-ordinator which were shared with the SENCo and the measures that were being done as part of the research study. The co-ordinator felt that that it was helpful having the measures on bullying and social satisfaction for the autistic students and these were assessment areas that school lacked:

“We struggle to find out how to measure their progress in those areas.”

5.53 IMPACT

IMPACT FOR STAFF

The impact of being involved in the programme for the co-ordinator has been mixed. She felt that she had developed her knowledge and understanding of the autistic students in the mentoring groups and that the programme had been helpful for all the students. However, this had to be balanced against the impact on her day to day workload and impact the programme had on the wider staff:

“I felt I really benefitted from the programme. It gave me more confidence about understanding how they think.”

“If I had to pick a negative out ... well two things ... doing this on top of everything else I’m expected to do is hard. I did enjoy it but you need time to plan it and get materials. Some of the teachers need to be more switched on. It was really clear they (autistic students) were having problems in some lessons and I don’t think their teachers understood them at all.”

Though some teachers were excellent and took on the shared learning from the sessions this was not consistent. The co-ordinator felt that for the peer mentoring programme to be successful it needed more whole school engagement and understanding of the programme:

“If we do a good job in these sessions and come up with ideas and strategies ... or identify problems ... then we need other staff to know about them and use them or help to sort the problems if it’s in their class.”

The co-ordinator identified more staff training and listening to students as main areas of practice that she would change in the future because of being involved in the programme. However, she also identified a lack of time and funding for training as being barriers to this happening.

IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

The matching process for the mentors in school Four had been mainly positive for the students themselves:

“It helped being with your friends”²⁷

“We all got on ... most of the time.”³¹

Being in the same tutor groups had helped this process as they already knew each other and were familiar with some of the issues that were raised in the sessions. Both autistic students were pleased to be with the students in their groups rather than students from a different tutor group:

“They know me and I know them. I’m friends with some of them actually.”²⁶

Tables 5.14 and 5.15 show the autistic students pre-and post-scores for the self-perception and social satisfaction questionnaire. In addition to noting the means, Tables 5.14 and 5.15 also indicate the percentage change in student’s pre-and post-peer mentoring programme scores.

Table 5.14: School Four scores on perceived social and academic competence

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Twenty-five	Social Competence	2.33	3.00	28.75
Twenty-five	Academic Competence	1.83	2.33	27.32
Twenty-six	Social Competence	2.83	3.33	17.66
Twenty-six	Academic Competence	2.50	3.00	20.00

Table 5.15: School Four scores on levels of social satisfaction

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Twenty-five	Level of Social Satisfaction	26	43	65.38
Twenty-six	Social Satisfaction	37	46	24.32

The results show that both the autistic students at school four had an increase in their levels of social satisfaction and perceived social and academic competence over the duration of the programme. The level of social satisfaction for student twenty-five saw an increase of 65.38% though his T2 score was still below that of student twenty-six. This may have been a result of the increased awareness of other people as a source of support:

“I was a bit scared to start with but when I got to know them it was easier to trust them to help me if I needed it”²⁵.

For both students, there were still issues around friendships, bullying and inclusion but they felt that being on the programme had helped them in these areas as well as academically:

“I am getting on better in class now.”²⁵

There was an increased self-awareness for one of the autistic students in terms of his understanding of autism and how it impacted on his relationships:

*"I don't have as many friends as other children. I hadn't thought about it before but it's just because of my Asperger's and being different"*²⁶.

This relates to the issue of disclosure and was something that both students were initially concerned about. However, both autistic students ended up discussing this within the mentoring sessions. The co-ordinator felt that this was partly due to increased trust and understanding within the group:

"Everyone is different and has their own strengths and challenges."

This was reinforced by one of the autistic students:

*"I was worried about telling them (about my autism) but it was ok. Most of them knew someone already with it. I think having autism doesn't mean I can't do anything the other can. They are good and bad at stuff just like me."*²⁵

The impact of the mentors on each other was something that the non-autistic mentors were particularly aware of in relation to the autistic students:

*"I didn't know he had autism. You wouldn't really know. He gets on with most people but I know he gets really worried about things like noise and when it's busy ... things like that ... and we talked about stuff that might help."*³²

The autistic students focused more on academic support for their peers. For one student, his strength on maths meant he could support other mentors in the group:

*"I really liked that I know a lot about maths and could help the others when they didn't know what to do."*²⁶

Only one of the autistic students in school four reported at T1 that they had been bullied since starting secondary school. Table 5.16 shows their pre-and post-results for the questionnaire

on bullying.

Table 5.16: School Four results on bullying

	Student Twenty-five		Student Twenty-six	
Measure and time-period	T1	T2	T1	T2
Frequency of Bullying	5-10 times	0	0	0
Type of Bullying	Verbal	N/A	N/A	N/A
Who they told	Parents and Member of Staff	N/A	N/A	N/A
What was the outcome	Bullying Stopped	N/A	N/A	N/A

Student twenty-five had not told anyone at school about the bullying but had informed his parents who had contacted school and the bullying had stopped. He thought that the school was generally good on dealing with bullying:

“We have good anti-bullying stuff here and that helps”²⁵

He also felt that he was more confident on dealing with bullying and knew who to talk to at school about this:

“I know I can tell them (peer mentors) or (co-ordinator) and my form tutor if I’m being bullied.”²⁵

Student twenty-six highlighted this as well:

“We did a lesson on it. I’ve not been bullied but we talked about what to do if you were”²⁶

IMPACT FOR SCHOOL

In her interview the co-ordinator was positive about the potential of the new peer mentoring programme for other autistic students in school four. She felt it wouldn’t necessarily be right for all of them:

“I think the students who are maybe having real problems in school and the behaviour is extreme. Not sure it would be good for them ... they’re probably not in the right place.”

Using it as an approach to support the continued transition of Year 7 autistic students into secondary school was a valuable use of the programme:

“Anything that supports their (autistic students) understanding of school, other kids, teachers, should be used. Especially in Year 7.”

The flexibility of the programme content was also identified as something that could potentially be used alongside other whole school priorities:

“I think it did help all of them in class. We could talk through problems and some strategies ... general things and also certain subjects they struggled with.”

The issue of workload and staffing were possible barriers to any continuation of the programme in the following academic year:

“I would love to do it again after this experience but not unless I get some time to plan properly or it’s made sure I won’t get dragged into other things ... which is unlikely ... staff need to be able to do it as well so it’s not just down to me.”

5.54 CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The co-ordinator felt that the principle of handing over more control of the sessions to the students was a good one and aligned with her view on empowering students. In practice it was more difficult, and she felt that sometimes she needed to manage behaviours within the group to enable it to work:

“For older students it may be a bit easier but they’re still young ... especially the boys at this age.”

The development of social competence was more difficult to quantify though the co-ordinator felt that all the students had taken some of the learning from the sessions into the classroom and the wider school context:

“It makes sense not to teach them how to do things in isolation. It helped that they worked together to share ideas and solutions and I was impressed with (autistic students). They really tried to some of the strategies we talked about in the group.”

Having the ability to introduce her own ideas and resources, or that of external agencies such as the autism advisory teacher, was seen to be a strength of the programme and enabled her to model the sessions to the needs of the students more effectively. She thought that the resources referenced in the guidelines were helpful for both the autistic and non-autistic students and were a good basis for some of the topics discussed in the sessions such as bullying.

ELEMENTS OF PROCESS

Making sure the voices of all the students was something that the co-ordinator felt had been achieved and the emphasis placed on this in the training and guidelines were a useful starting point. This was a key piece of learning that the co-ordinator had reflected on both in her own practice and that of the schools:

“It needs to be much higher profile.”

It was helpful to have ground rules within the sessions that all the mentors had been involved in developing. They were referenced at the start of sessions and used to remind mentors of expectations for behaviour during the programme.

The increased knowledge about both the autistic students was a positive element of the programme. The co-ordinator felt that working with a student she supported outside the group was particularly helpful as she was then better placed to support them in class. This included being able to liaise with teaching staff more easily about strategies or resources, such as a time out card system. She found liaising with staff for the other autistic student more problematic and felt that this impacted on their ability to support him most effectively.

OUTCOMES

The use of same sex mentoring groups was something that the co-ordinator felt was appropriate for this approach. She thought it enabled the students to be more open with each other and that there were more similarities between them. This was something that helped in building up relationships:

"I'm not sure mixed groups would have worked. They were mostly interested in the same things and I think it's better having role models of boys for boys."

The programme highlighted the need to address a wide range of needs of all the students and the co-ordinator saw this as a priority for the school:

"Yeah. We did focus on academic support in the groups and that is really important we also did a work on friendships, social stuff, bullying, and managing stress or problems which is all part of the students managing school. Especially the ones on the spectrum."

The more integrated approach to meeting the needs of individual students was part of what the co-ordinator identified as an 'autism friendly school.' She thought that school four had the potential to become such a school and meeting needs early was an important part of what they did already:

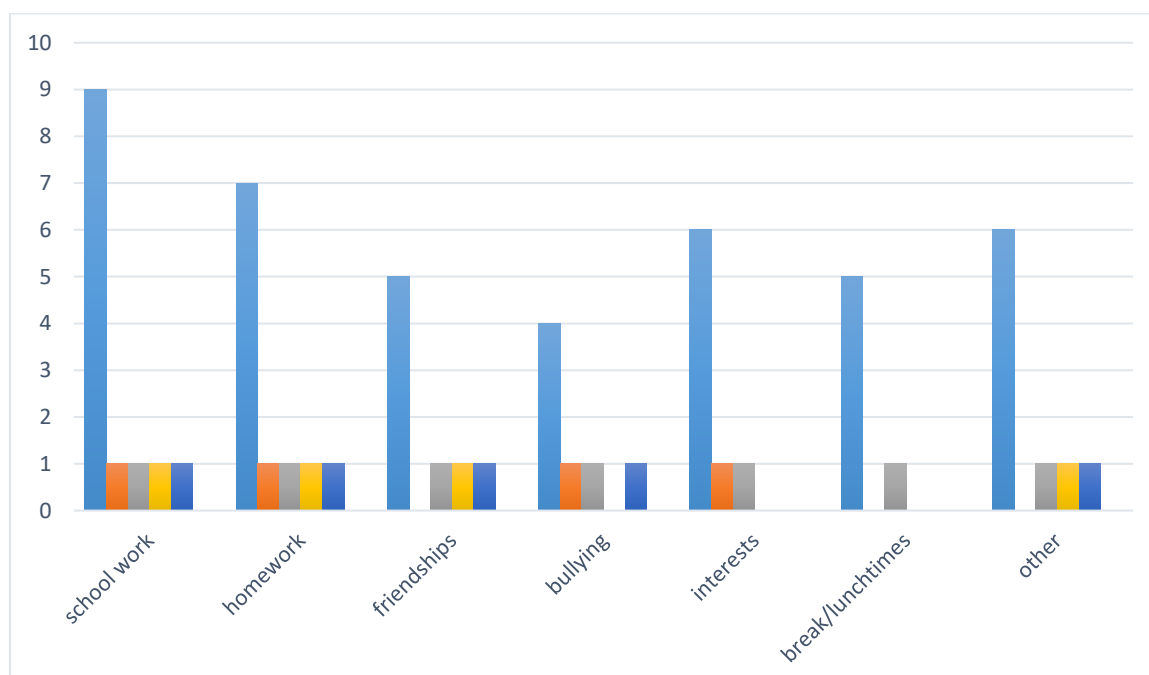
"We are good at putting support in early. This programme has made me think about what type of support should be in place."

5.6 THE NEW PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME IN SCHOOL FIVE

5.61 AIMS

The main aims of the programme identified by the Deputy Head and co-ordinator were to support academic achievement and the social and emotional development of the autistic students. This included a focus on friendships and bullying which they both recognised as issues for the autistic students asked to participate in the programme. The Deputy Head was also keen to explore the development of initiatives, such as the peer mentoring programme, that may be relevant for other students in the school. The range of issues that students in school five identified as topics for the mentoring sessions are shown in Figure 12. Light blue shows the non-autistic student's responses, orange shows the priorities for student thirty-three, grey for student thirty-four, dark blue for student thirty-five and the choices of student thirty-six are in yellow. Homework and school work were the most popular items identified by both autistic and non-autistic students whilst bullying and friendships were areas that three of the autistic students wanted to cover in the mentoring sessions.

Figure 12. Pre-programme aims identified by mentors in school five



5.62 IMPLEMENTATION

ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The co-ordinator for school five was an HLTA who was in her seventh year at the school. She had been given a specialist role to oversee the support for autistic students across the school and saw the co-ordinator role as an extension of this. She had been on a range of autism related training courses and was studying for a diploma at the University of Birmingham (ACER) in Autism (Children). The co-ordinator supported autistic students in class daily and ran weekly social communication groups across different year groups. The four autistic students who participated in the new peer mentoring programme were known to the co-ordinator and she supported them to varying degrees across the week. They were not involved in the social communication groups.

At T1 the co-ordinator indicated that she was highly confident in her ability to be the co-ordinator for the new peer mentoring programmes. This was due to her experience of running weekly group sessions for autistic students, her knowledge and understanding of autism and her existing role as an autism champion within school. She was also highly confident in her ability to provide induction and training for the mentors and to explain the programme to the students with autism. The co-ordinator was not directly involved in existing peer mentoring scheme already run at the school.

At both T1 and T2 the co-ordinator felt that the training she had received about the programme had been 'very useful.' She appreciated having the opportunity to ask questions directly about the programme and clarify issues relevant to her setting:

“A lot of training is very prescriptive and it’s hard you always feel like you’re taking everyone’s time up when you ask about your own school.”

The co-ordinator was happy to be the only member of staff working directly on the programme. She had experience of training other support staff in specific approaches and delegating roles and felt this was potentially something that could be done with the peer mentoring programme. She had a large bank of resources that she had used successfully with autistic students and felt confident in being prepared for the sessions.

The induction process had been cited as being ‘really useful’ and the co-ordinator felt that speaking with the autistic students individually had been very beneficial:

“I think it was much easier for them to process and understand the information. We did it in a calm space when they weren’t missing anything important and had time to talk through it with them.”

The group sessions had been equally successful, and it had given the co-ordinator an opportunity to see the interaction between mentors and involve them in the planning of the sessions. The co-ordinator used the topics identified by the mentors as the basis for planning all the groups and collating relevant resources. She recognised that there was flexibility needed in the sessions but having a structure and outline plan would help both her and the students.

The co-ordinator saw time management as a potential difficulty in the management of the programme at T1, partly due to the number of programmes she was running. The T2 survey showed that this had not been a significant issue in reality:

“(Deputy Head) was great at giving me time to do the programme. In some ways, it was easier as I planned similar sessions for all groups. So, I didn’t have to find lots of different resources. It’s a bit like having children. Once you’ve got past two it’s a bit easier.”

This wasn’t to underplay the planning and preparation time needed but she was given non-contact sessions each week:

“Of course, other priorities came ... come up ... but most of the time we were able to run the sessions and I had time to plan for them.”

The co-ordinator valued the support of the Deputy Head and saw this as being an important part of the process:

“She’s brilliant at supporting this type of thing and always works with you to make it happen.”

At T1 the co-ordinator felt that most of the staff were aware of the programme due to it being mentioned in a whole staff briefing. This level of awareness was maintained at T2 as further updates had been given on the programme as it progressed. There was a good understanding of the programme by the staff who worked directly with the mentors, but the co-ordinator questioned the impact on practice:

“It didn’t always mean they listened to advice or took on strategies.”

ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

The results of the pre-and post-programme mentor questionnaire for school five are shown in Table 5.17.

Table 5.17: School Five Mentor Views at T1 and T2

Mentor Views <i>The T2 items on the questionnaire were the same as T1 but expressed in the past tense</i>	% agreement T1 Autistic Students	% agreement T2 Autistic students	% agreement T1 Non-autistic students	% agreement T2 Non-autistic students
I am pleased to be a mentor	100	100	100	100
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor	100	100	100	100
I think I can be helpful to the other peer mentors	75.00 (student 35 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring	75.00 (student 35 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think being a mentor will be good for me	100	100	100	100
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role	100	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the all the mentors	75.00 (student 35 neither agreed or disagreed)	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well organised	100	100	100	100
	n=4	n=4	n=12	n=12

The results show that the non-autistic mentors were confident in all aspects of the mentoring role and felt that they had been well prepared by the co-ordinator to be mentors. This was mirrored in the results for the autistic students apart from student thirty-five, who neither agreed or disagreed with the statements that required her to predict her ability to be helpful

or the impact of the programme on others. This may again reflect the challenge of answering questions that involve an element of prediction based the students experience.

The mentoring role was identified as being positive by all the mentors at T2 and this was shown by both the interviews and questionnaire results. The autistic students could identify both how the programme had helped them and how they had supported other students:

*"I think it helped ... helped ... me ... in class. What to do if I got ... stuck ... ask (peer mentor) or the teacher."*³⁴

*"Well ... yes ... it's very good that I have a considerable knowledge about Maths and History ... yes I did help the others."*³⁶

The focus for the non-autistic mentors was more on the support they had offered other students though they all felt being in the programme had been a good experience for them:

*"It was good to share ideas and help each other. I liked the fact we were all supportive of each other."*⁴²

*"Lots of the things we all have problems with, so it didn't feel like we were picking on anyone."*⁴⁷

They appeared to have a good understanding of the aims of the programme and reflected on these as part of the induction process:

*"Helping others with work and friendships."*³⁸

*"Talking about things we might be finding hard with our work. Getting ideas from other people about what to do."*⁴⁴

The autistic students were aware of the overall purpose of the sessions and the topics they had put down individually during the induction process:

*"Homework. Hate it ... still hate it but now I can do it in school, so I don't have to do it at home."*³³

*"We did talk about that (bullying). Yes. Lessons. French and PE."*³⁶

When asked whether they brought ideas or subjects or problems to the sessions the mentors talked about the structure the co-ordinator had set up:

*"We all had to come with one good and one bad thing that had happened (since the last session)."*⁴⁵

This was something that most mentors had found useful and felt that it resulted in problems being sorted out earlier:

*"I liked that. It was a bit weird to begin with ... I mean listening to other people's problems but actually most of them we had as well, so it made it easier to solve."*³⁸

For one of the autistic students this had been more problematic, but it did reflect her level of self and social awareness:

*"(peer mentor) went on about herself all the time. I was told I needed social lessons at primary, but she could do with them."*³⁵

When asked if anything was done about this she said that the co-ordinator had reminded the group about the rules of the sessions and that this helped. The other mentors saw the role of the co-ordinator in the sessions as being supportive and positive:

*"We all like (co-ordinator). She let us talk."*⁴⁰

*"I like (co-ordinator). She's really helpful. More helpful than the other teachers."*³⁹

ORGANISATION

The co-ordinator felt that the selection of mentors had been a straightforward process with agreement on which students to approach to participate:

“We all decided fairly quickly which students would be a good fit. It did mean thinking a bit more about the ones with autism and who they do or would get on with.”

The organisation of the groups was something the co-ordinator wanted to establish with the support of the mentors. This was discussed as part of the induction sessions and though some differences did emerge there was a consensus that they should be weekly during tutor time and ideally in the same room. The students also felt that having their involvement linked to the school house merit system would be a good idea and that they would like to have a badge with peer mentor on it to identify themselves in this role. The school already had a system in place where students wore badges to signify that they had an additional responsibility or role. The co-ordinator felt that it was important to link the programme into existing school systems:

“It was more likely to become part of the what we do.”

The routines for each group were the same with an initial relaxation exercise or game followed by each student talking about one good or one bad thing that had happened since the last session. The co-ordinator then facilitated the group in celebrating their successes and problem-solving the challenges to enable the students came up with solutions themselves. Certain sessions were also targeted to cover the areas that had been raised by the mentors as topics they wanted covering during the induction process. The co-ordinator felt that this structure and routine was helpful for both the students and her. It provided continuity between the groups but still allowed individual student input:

“Each group brought their own ideas and problems, so they were all different ... all individual in that way.”

The monitoring of the peer mentoring programme in school five was done through session notes made by the co-ordinator that were shared with the Deputy Head and form tutors. This was in addition to the measures that were being done as part of the research study. The co-ordinator also felt that informal monitoring of progress in lessons for the autistic student was helpful:

"It was good to see them in both the groups and lessons. You know, to see if anything we discussed worked or they were more confident or settled."

5.63 IMPACT

IMPACT FOR STAFF

The co-ordinator felt that she had developed a much greater awareness of autism because of working on the peer mentoring programme:

"I did learn a lot. Especially about how they see the world and their sense of humour. Lots of things I wouldn't have realised or understood without seeing them and listening to them each week."

She felt that it had been easier to liaise with the tutors and other relevant staff about any issues for all the students due her existing role within school. It had been particularly helpful when updating or sharing information with staff about the autistic students:

"I think that was a real positive. The teachers here are generally supportive and they took on some of the issues raised in the group. It just made things easier and not blow up."

The impact on the wider staff had been positive as well due to the staff briefings and updates. The co-ordinator wanted to do some further training or briefings to staff because of what she had learnt. Developing training for staff was something she identified as an area of practice she would like to develop within school five:

“We have good CPD though there’s always pressure on money. The fact I can deliver training to staff for free is a bonus.”

The need to listen to all students, but particularly those with autism, was another area that the co-ordinator felt needed development:

“It’s so important ... or has been for this (peer mentoring programme). But not just listening. Finding a way to give some of them a chance to talk and feel someone’s listening. That’s key.”

IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

Being in the same class, as other mentors, was seen by all the students as being helpful as they knew each other already and could discuss things that had happened at school that they were all aware of. The sense of belonging to a group was enhanced for many of the students including those with autism:

“I don’t like it with lots of people around, so this was better... it was easier to fit in.”³⁴

There were clearly disagreements and differing views but their appeared to be an acceptance and tolerance of this amongst the mentors:

“It would have been pretty pointless if we all said the same things.”⁴⁷

Table 5.18 shows the autistic students pre-and post-scores for the social satisfaction questionnaire. In addition to noting the means, Table 5.18 also indicates the percentage change in student’s pre-and post-peer mentoring programme scores.

Table 5.18: School Five scores on levels of social satisfaction

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Thirty-three	Level of Social Satisfaction	22	62	64.51

Thirty-four	Level of Social Satisfaction	33	42	21.42
Thirty-five	Level of Social Satisfaction	22	43	48.83
Thirty-six	Level of Social Satisfaction	31	41	24.39

The results show that for all the students there was an increase in levels of social satisfaction over the course of the peer mentoring programme. This was most marked for student thirty-three whose scores saw a 64.51 percent rise between T1 and T2. The reasons for this increase were unclear from the interview with student thirty-three. The co-ordinator felt that she had made a small group of friends whom she saw outside of school, as well as interacting with in school, and this had helped. She thought that student thirty-three had also become more confident and less anxious in general, from observations in both the mentoring sessions and lessons. For the other students, there were clearly benefits from being involved in the programme in terms of their social interactions:

“Yeah. Made it easier to sit with them in class or talk to them.”³⁴

“Probably ... sometimes I say things without thinking and this has made me stop more before I say stuff.”³⁵

“I know them better ... they know me better... don’t always want to talk to them but If I do then it’s fine. I have got other friends.”³⁶

This was in line with the increase in their perceived social competence seen in Table 5.19.

Table 5.19: School Five scores on perceived social and academic competence

Student	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Thirty-three	Social Competence	2.00	3.00	50.00

Thirty-three	Academic Competence	1.83	3.00	63.93
Thirty-four	Social Competence	2.66	3.55	33.45
Thirty-four	Academic Competence	2.00	2.50	25.00
Thirty-five	Social Competence	2.50	3.66	46.40
Thirty-five	Academic Competence	1.83	4.00	118.57
Thirty-six	Social Competence	2.50	3.00	20.00
Thirty-six	Academic Competence	2.83	3.00	06.00

The focus on friendships and academic progress for the programme by both the school and the autistic students is reflected in the results on perceived academic and social competence. This was most marked in the results for the two autistic girls who took part in the peer mentoring programme in school five (students thirty-three and thirty-five). Though both students reported increases in social satisfaction and social competence they were not ready to disclose their diagnosis to the rest of the group. The issue of disclosure was something that had been discussed with the autistic students by the co-ordinator prior to the programme in their individual sessions. Both the male students were happy to talk about their diagnosis if they felt this was relevant. They did not feel the need to have this specifically covered in a session though it did end up being discussed and both were okay with this:

*"I didn't mind ... it's just part of me. I know I think differently. Lots of famous people have Asperger's"*³⁴.

Both the female students decided that this was not something they wanted to discuss or be raised as part of the programme. The co-ordinator felt that the girls were more self-aware and less comfortable with their diagnosis and did not want to appear different to their peers. She also felt that the girls were perhaps more worried and aware about the possible negative

consequences of disclosure. In contrast, she felt both boys were more accepting and less interested in fitting in or were not necessarily as self-aware as the girls. The non-autistic peers in the two boy's groups felt that it had been helpful to know about the diagnosis and that it helped them to understand why they behaved in certain ways:

*"I thought he was autistic. He was like someone in my class at primary who had it ... He is just different ... same as all of us really. We're all different in our own ways."*³⁹

When asked about the impact they had on each other the peer mentors were very positive and their views reflected both the academic and social focus of the programme. The autistic students recognised that they had helped their peers with some problem-solving issues around school work but also social situations:

*"She (peer mentor) said she didn't like being asked to speak in class. I told her to imagine she was talking to her pet. That's what I do"*³⁵

The change in the level of bullying experienced by the four autistic students in school five over the period of the programme is shown in Table 5.20.

Table 5.20: School Five results on bullying

	Student Thirty-three		Student Thirty-four		Student Thirty-Five		Student Thirty-six	
Measure and time-period	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
Frequency of Bullying	15-20 times	0	1-5	0	1-5	0	10-15 Times	0
Type of Bullying	Verbal and Physical	N/A	Verbal	N/A	Verbal	0	Verbal	N/A
Who they told	Parents	N/A	Parents	N/A	Parents	0	Parents and staff	N/A
What was	Bullying	N/A	Bullying	N/A	Bullying	0	Bullying	N/A

the outcome	stopped		stopped		stopped		stopped	
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Two of the students reported that they had experienced one or two incidents of verbal bullying prior to the programme and but that this had stopped without any intervention from staff. They had not been bullied in the period they were peer mentors. Student thirty-three reported that she was both physically and verbally bullied prior to the programme whilst student thirty-six reported being verbally bullied. In her interview, student thirty-three found it difficult to talk about the bullying but identified some positives about her school experience:

“(I am) getting on better at school”³³

“I have people to be with at school”³³.

The reduction in bullying and increase in social satisfaction for student thirty-three are significant given the levels reported in both areas pre-programme. The reasons for the reduction in bullying experienced by student thirty-six were more explicit:

“I know what to do know if I feel I’m being bullied ... I know what to do if other people are stressing me out”³⁶.

The co-ordinator had run a session about bullying and he had found this very helpful in developing strategies with the other peer mentors to identify or manage bullying in school.

IMPACT FOR SCHOOL

The co-ordinator was asked about any wider impact of the programme for the school. Having the Deputy Head involved was key to this:

“(Deputy Head) ... that’s her role ... well one of them ... to look at how to support social, emotional progress for students.”

She felt that the programme would have benefits for other students, both autistic and non-autistic, and would be something that might be considered part of a transition programme for vulnerable learners in Year 7:

“Getting the right support at the right time. I always go on about it but it’s true. We need to make sure those Year 7s who may need more support continue to get this. As well as students in other year groups.”

The co-ordinator felt that continuing the programmes into Year 8 and looking to extend the programme to other autistic students was something school five should consider. The need to prioritise time to manage and deliver these sessions was identified as a key issue, as was the need to train further staff to be able to run sessions:

“It would be really good to get someone else trained up. It’s helped loads having done four of them and I could lead on this for the school.”

5.64 CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The co-ordinator identified that focusing on real life issues for the students had been helpful:

“Probably more meaningful to them.”

This resonated with her view that social competence was more important than teaching discrete social skills that wouldn’t necessarily be generalised by the autistic students. In addition, she felt that there had been a positive impact on the students’ academic learning through the problem-solving and strategies developed in the sessions with other mentors. The co-ordinator saw the structure of the programme as supporting this process and encouraged the students themselves to have a greater say in the programme:

“Having a framework worked well as long as you have resources up your sleeve and a plan of what you want to cover. It changed sometimes and that was fine. It is the students group as far as I am concerned. I’m there to help and support but it’s great they can have as much responsibility as possible.”

ELEMENTS OF PROCESS

The co-ordinator felt that it was essential to communicate to other members of staff about issues that had arisen in the sessions. She already had a good network established in school for this and used both face to face meetings and emails. This was especially important for issues around learning and bullying where class teachers needed to be informed so they could take appropriate action.

Enabling the views of the students was something that the co-ordinator felt had been a positive outcome of the programme. The need to manage this was recognised though she saw the groups as working very collaboratively and the students were all supportive of each other. The equality of the mentors was something identified as being important for this process to work effectively:

“I really liked that there everyone was a mentor. It meant they all had the same role and no-one was singled out as needing help or having problems.”

The co-ordinator thought that her experience of working with autistic students was important but that it was her understanding and knowledge of the students in the group that made it work:

“It’s getting to know the individual that counts.”

This enabled her to use different approaches to facilitate the involvement and participation of the autistic students whom she saw as responding in different ways to the programme:

“I think it was very much individualised to their needs and that hopefully meant they got more out of it.”

It also meant the co-ordinator got to know the students in a way that would not have been possible through support in lessons:

“Sense of humour. Actually. That was something I had never seen before (for student thirty-five).”

This process also made use of existing strategies and support for the autistic students so they could manage situations they found stressful. The co-ordinator could identify if they needed time out during the sessions. This only occurred a twice across the five programmes and in both cases, was a result of another incident impacting on the student’s emotional state.

OUTCOMES

The co-ordinator was asked about gender and whether she felt any significant differences in the way male or female students responded to the programme or the way sessions were run. She felt that same sex groups had probably helped the process due to the students having more in common but wouldn’t rule out having mixed sex groups as the content across the sessions were similar. Both in what the students had wanted to cover and the issues that had arisen on a weekly basis for them. An understanding of the differences in how autism presents in males and females was identified as being helpful:

“Something I need to be more aware of. I think that has been something I’ve learnt and need to have training ... deliver training to staff on.”

The use of the programme as a support for transition into Year 7 had been highlighted by the co-ordinator. She felt that using sessions as a forum to share positives and challenges was key to getting further support or resolving issues through a collaborative problem-solving approach. This wasn't always easy for two of the autistic students who initially found accepting the ideas or perspectives of the other mentors a difficult process. The co-ordinator felt that this was a helpful process to go through and had been beneficial for both students in lessons when working in pairs or groups:

"We worked through it and having the ground rules really helped as we had all agreed to them."

Having a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of all students in school five, but particularly those students on the autistic spectrum, was something the co-ordinator was keen to continue:

"I think we do value that. We do get really good results but that wouldn't happen if students weren't happy and included."

Chapter 6. COMPARING CASE STUDIES

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter will compare and discuss the findings from the five mainstream secondary schools where the new peer mentoring programme was introduced. Comparisons will be based on both the survey and interview data obtained in each school (described in Chapter Five) as well as contextual factors for each school. This will make use of national statistical data from the Department for Education on English schools. It will discuss the findings in relation to the issues presented and discussed in Chapters Two and Three, and then relate this to the selected research questions, research contribution, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research in Chapter Seven.

The thesis has used both a survey and semi-structured interviews as part of a mixed method approach. The findings from the interviews in each school have been used to both explain and critically assess the quantitative differences found between cases from the survey, as well as contradictions in the survey results. Mixed methods analysis provides a more robust method for understanding what the impact and outcomes of the peer mentoring programme have been and why, with the findings related to the research literature discussed in Chapters Two and Three (Greene, 2012).

The structure of Chapter Five will be used as the basis for this Chapter and will begin by describing factors relating to the implementation of the new peer mentoring programme across the five schools. This includes looking at the role of the co-ordinator, the organisation of the programmes and the role of the peer mentors within each school. The next section focuses on factors relating to the impact of the programme. This looks at issues around school

staff awareness and practice; the impact on the autistic students involved in the programme, including social and academic factors; and the wider impact of the programme in each school. The statistical methods for the analysis were limited to using Excel for descriptive statistical comparisons and to examining whether differences between cases were statistically significant. To assess statistically significant differences relating to the social satisfaction and perceived academic and social competence of the twelve autistic peer mentors, the paired t-test was used. For this test, significant association is met when the P-value < 0.05. Further description of the statistical methods used can be found in Chapter Three. The final section will analyse the factors that the staff co-ordinators felt contributed to the effectiveness of the new peer mentoring programme. This includes elements of the programme itself, as well as sub-themes reflecting their perspective on the implementation and process of the mentoring programme. The co-ordinators also highlight direct outcomes of the programme that impact both students and the sustainability of the programme.

6.2 CONTEXT

The study sought to understand the impact and outcomes of a new peer mentoring programme in five local authority mainstream secondary schools in the south of England. Table 6.1 compares the combined contextual data for the schools with national figures from 2013 (DfE, 2013) when the data was taken. The five schools in the study were slightly above average in the total number of students they had in their population. This may have been due to two of the schools having a sixth form. The figures for students with SEN and eligible for free school meals was well below that of the national average whilst the numbers of students gaining 5 A*-C GCSEs was slightly above. This is broadly on line with the overall statistics for the two local authorities the schools were located in.

Table 6.1: Contextual data for all case study schools

	School Sample Average	National Average*
School Population	1030	978
Students with SEN	12.06	17.00
Students eligible for free school meals	11.00	16.30
Attainment (% students with 5 A* - C GCSEs)	61.40	55.90

When we look at the schools individually in Table 6.2 the contrast in these figures become more apparent between schools one, two and five and schools three and four.

Table 6.2: Contextual data for each case study school

School	Size (number of students on roll)	Urban/Rural	Socio-economic status (% students eligible for free school meals)	Number of students with SEN (as a % of total roll)	Attainment (% Students With 5 A* - C GCSEs)
1	831	Urban	8	4.2	80
2	1069	Urban	5	7.9	73
3	804	Urban	21	14.1	28
4	799	Urban	18	22.7	41
5	1650	Urban	3	11.4	85

The two schools with the largest school populations (schools two and five) both had sixth forms and had a strong record of academic achievement. Both schools had significantly higher attainment results than the national average, smaller numbers of SEN students and students eligible for free school meals. This pattern was repeated in school one and reflected the relatively affluent socio-economic areas that schools one, two and five were situated in. In contrast schools two and three were in areas of relative socio-economic deprivation which was reflected in there above national average figures for students eligible for free school meals. The numbers of SEN student as a percentage of total roll was well above the national average in school four but under the national average in school three. The academic

attainment of students in both schools three and four were below the national average. For school three the figures were considerably lower than the national average and improving academic attainment was a priority area for the whole school.

The key person overseeing the implementation of the peer mentoring programme differed between the schools. Schools one and five had one of the Deputy Heads in this role. In both cases, they saw this as an extension of their overall pastoral support role for the school and were interested in how this programme could enhance existing provision for students with and without autism. Schools two, three and four had the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) in the key person role which aligned with their focus on the programme to support the needs of autistic students within their school. The role of the SENCo has become increasingly important over the past few years in overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy. This role includes supporting the identification of children with special educational needs; co-ordinating provision for children with SEN; liaising with parents of children with SEN; liaising with other providers, outside agencies, educational psychologists and external agencies; and ensuring that the school keeps the records of all pupils with SEN up to date.

The most recent Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) states that the SENCO must be a qualified teacher and a newly appointed SENCO must achieve a National award in Special Educational Needs Coordination within three years of appointment. It also recognises that the SENCO has an important role to play with the headteacher and governing body in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and that provision will be most effective if they are part of the school leadership team (SLT). The SENCo in schools two, three and four were not part

of the senior leadership team for their schools. The potential impact of this on staff awareness and sustainability of the peer mentoring programme are discussed in following sections. Table 6.3 shows further contextual details in terms of each school's management, aims and prior experience of peer mentoring programmes initiatives.

Table 6.3: Programme management, aims and mentoring experience

School	Key Person	Part of SLT	Co-ordinator	Aims	Peer mentoring programme
One	Deputy Head	Yes	TA	Transition/Academic/Provision/Social/Emotional (TA)	Yes: Yr. 10/11 buddying younger students 1:1
Two	SENCo	No	TA	Transition/Bullying/Provision/Reputation	Yes: Yr. 11 mentor for Yr. 7 students 1:1
Three	SENCo	No	TA	Academic/Social/emotional	Yes: Older students mentor younger students 1:1
Four	SENCo	No	HLTA	Academic/Transition/Social/Emotional (HLTA)	No
Five	Deputy Head	Yes	HLTA	Academic/Social/Emotional/Bullying/Provision	Yes: Yr. 11 linked to Year 7 classes

Table 6.3 shows that four of the schools already ran a peer mentoring type initiative in the period the new peer mentoring programme was introduced into those schools. In all cases, there was limited ongoing formalised support for the programmes from school staff. All the

pre-existing programmes involved an older student, usually in Year 10 or 11, acting as a mentor to younger students. The mentoring models in schools one, two, three and four were not overseen or directly supervised by school staff though a staff member was assigned to be a link for feedback or information for the mentors. For schools one, two and three the mentoring was conducted on a 1:1 basis. School five had a Year 11 mentor assigned to each Year 7 class in an extended group mentoring model. Year 7 students could request input or support from the mentor rather than specific students being targeted for support. This contrasted with the mentoring model in the other schools where younger students (mentees) with specific identified needs were targeted to receive support from older students (mentors). This reflected the mentor/mentee mentoring model typically found in the research literature (MBF, 2010; Cowie et al, 2002).

There was a similarity amongst the five schools in terms of the aims each had for the new programme. The focus on both academic and social/emotional outcomes is a positive one but also reflects the tension that exists for many schools in relation to meeting the needs of autistic students or those with SEN. As discussed in the literature review on inclusion this can be tracked back to the Warnock Report (1978) but more significantly to the White Paper Excellence in Schools (DfEE, 1997) that focused on individual student achievement rather than broader educational objectives of social cohesion and inclusion. The interviews with the co-ordinators showed that the lack of cohesion between government initiatives and policy on achievement, attainment, inclusion and SEND has a real-life impact in schools in terms of the curriculum they offer, and the priorities they have, for students with SEND. This is discussed more in the section on contributory factors.

Tables 6.4 and 6.5 summarises the aims for the programme across all five schools and forty-eight peer mentors.

Table 6.4: Programme aims for all case study schools (shown as a percentage)

	Transition	Social/ Emotional	Academic	Bullying	Reputation	Provision
All Schools n = 5	60	80	80	40	20	40

Figure 6.5: Programme aims for all peer mentors (shown as a percentage)

	School Work	Home Work	Friendships	Bullying	Interests	Break/ Lunchtimes	Other
Autistic Students n = 12	75	58.3	75	75	75	25	50
Non- Autistic Students n = 36	61	61	47.2	38.8	58.3	38.8	52.7

This shows that the aims that the peer mentors themselves identified as being important to them had considerable overlap with the aims identified by the schools for the peer mentoring programme. Academic and social issues being a priority area for both though bullying was identified as a much higher priority for the autistic students. This is perhaps no surprise given the subsequent data regarding the levels of bullying experienced by the students in this study and the national statistics that show the increased risk factor of being a victim of bullying for autistic students (Wainscot et al. 2008; Humphrey and Symes, 2011). Of more interest was the finding that autistic students showed a higher priority for covering friendships in the mentoring sessions than their non-autistic peers. Supporting the research literature that

autistic children report having friends and best friends (Bauminger et al., 2007; Daniel and Billingsley, 2010) and their experience of school is just as likely to be influenced by friendships as their non-autistic peers (Connor, 2000; Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Ochs et al., 2001).

The pre-programme mentor forms indicated that there were similarities in the individual interests and topics both groups of mentors wanted covered in the mentoring sessions. These included social media, mobile phones, technology, computer games, films, sport, pets/animals, family, music, television programmes, fashion and literature. There was also a gender similarity in the interests identified by the male and female autistic and non-autistic mentors. Technology, computer games and sport were most commonly identified by the boys whilst social media, pets/animals and fashion were the most frequent themes for the girls. This contrasts with research suggesting that autistic boys are more likely to have 'odd' special interests like hoovers or stop signs while girls are more likely to develop similar special interests to their peers (Gould and Ashton-Smith, 2012).

Research statistics suggest that the ratio of boys to girls being diagnosed on the autistic spectrum is somewhere in the range of 3.3:1 (Baird et al., 2006), 4:1 (Ehlers and Gillberg, 1993) or 5.5:1 (Fombonne et al., 2011). The gender make-up of the autistic peer mentors shown in Table 6.6 reflects a higher ratio of girls to boys (2:1) compared to these figures. However, this should not be viewed as representative of any wider diagnostic rates due to the small sample size and selection process for participants. The under diagnosis of autistic girls and women is an area of ongoing debate with researchers suggesting that women and girls on the autistic spectrum may be better at masking their difficulties to fit in with their peers and have a more even profile of social skills in general (Attwood, 2000). This might be

because the diagnostic criteria are based on the behavioural characteristics of men and boys, who are often more noticeably different or disruptive than women and girls with the same underlying differences.

Only one of the students in the study had a statement of Special Educational Needs with the others being split between School Action and School Action Plus (see Table 6.6). This is broadly in line with national statistics that indicated that most students with SEN are in the School Action or School Action Plus categories (DfE, 2013) though students with autism are more likely to have a statement than any other category of SEN.

Table 6.6: Overview of autistic peer mentors

Participants	Peer Mentoring Groups	Average Age	Year Group	Gender	Diagnosis	SEN Support*
n = 12	n = 12	11 years 9 months	7	Male n = 8 Female n = 4	Asperger Syndrome n = 12	School Action n = 6 School Action Plus n = 5 Statemented n = 1

All the autistic students in the study had been given a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. As discussed in the research literature the diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome falls within the broader category of an Autistic Spectrum Disorder or Autistic Spectrum Condition. People who have this diagnosis do not usually have the learning disabilities that many autistic people have and they may have fewer problems with speech. However, underlying differences in their social understanding and interactions is a key feature of the condition and they may still have difficulties with understanding and

processing language. Though similar areas of functioning will be affected each autistic student in the study had an individual profile of abilities, including strengths and challenges, that meant it was important to individualise the programme to meet their needs. A prescriptive approach that treats all the students the same would not only miss the opportunity to build on a student's interests and strengths, but may also fail to address some of the core areas of need that significantly impact on their social and academic engagement within school.

6.3 IMPLEMENTATION

ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

The use of teaching assistants (TAs) had seen a steady increase in schools since the year 2000 with numbers increasing from 79,000 to 243,700 (DfE, 2014). Currently, a quarter of the workforce in mainstream schools in England is comprised of TAs which represents fifteen percent of the secondary school workforce. Of this number, approximately fifteen percent of TAs in publicly funded schools have higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA) status. Key to the increasing the number of TAs in schools has been the issue of reducing teacher workload. One of the aims was to have new and expanded support roles and responsibilities for TAs and other support staff to help raise pupil standards and tackle excessive teacher workload. The other main driver for the growth in the numbers of TAs has been the push for greater inclusion of students with special educational needs and disabilities into mainstream schools, with TAs often providing the key means by which inclusion is facilitated. In this context, it was perhaps not surprising that all five schools decided to appoint one of their support staff, rather than a teacher, to the role of programme co-ordinator for the new peer mentoring programme. Table 6.7 shows some contextual factors for the co-ordinators in terms of their role and experience.

Table 6.7: Role and experience of programme Co-ordinators

School	Role	Work with autistic students	Years at current school	Autism Training	Previous experience of mentoring
One	TA	Daily Supports autistic peer mentors in lessons	3	Yes	No
Two	HLTA Enhanced role supporting autistic students across school	Daily Supports autistic peer mentors in lessons	6	Yes	No
Three	TA	Daily Supports autistic peer mentors in lessons	2	No	No
Four	TA	Daily Supports one autistic peer mentor in lessons	1	Yes	No
Five	HLTA Enhanced role supporting autistic students across school	Daily Supports autistic peer mentors in lessons	7	Yes	No

In schools two and five the role was given to an HLTA who had already been given additional responsibilities for overseeing the support of autistic students within each school. The HLTA role was introduced in 2003, as part of the National Agreement initiative, and was awarded to support staff who met the national HLTA standards. In addition to the role that teaching assistants do, an HTLA has an increased level of responsibility within a school. For example, teaching classes on their own, covering planned absences and allowing teachers time to plan and mark. The creation of an autism expert role within schools in one of the recommendations from the AET Outcomes report (Wittemeyer et al., 2011) and both schools two and five had identified the support of autistic students across school as a priority. The co-ordination of the peer mentoring programme was seen a natural extension of this role by

both the Deputy Head, SENCo and co-ordinators working in schools two and five. In contrast, schools one, three and four did not have an autism expert role and the decision to appoint the co-ordinator appeared to be a pragmatic one based on a combination of which support staff were available, their experience and who was happy to do the role. These contextual differences were reflected in the responses of the co-ordinators to the survey questions on how confident they felt in their ability to do the role and how confident they were of training mentors for the programme (see Table 6.8).

Table 6.8: Programme co-ordinator confidence levels

Scores: 1= not confident, 2 = have slight concerns, 3 = confident, 4 = highly confident

School	Co-ordinator Role		Training Mentors	
	Confidence Level T1	Confidence Level T2	Confidence Level T1	Confidence Level T2
One	3	4	3	4
Two	4	4	4	4
Three	2	3	3	4
Four	3	4	3	3
Five	4	4	4	4

The results indicated that the two HLTAs who were appointed co-ordinators were both highly confident in their ability to be do the role and train mentors both pre-and post-programme. This was partly due to their existing knowledge, skills and experience but also because they saw this as part of their wider role supporting autistic students within their school. For the other co-ordinators, the experience of running programmes within their schools had meant that they all felt more confident in the role by the end of the programme. The training given to the co-ordinators by the researcher was also an important aspect of this. All the co-ordinators found the training to be useful to them in their role, as shown in Table 6.9.

Table 6.9: Impact of co-ordinator training

Scores: 1= Not useful, 2= Fairly useful, 3= Very useful

	Training Received on Peer Mentoring Programme	
	T1	T2
School		
One	3	3
Two	2	3
Three	3	3
Four	2	2
Five	3	3

Effective and appropriate staff training is clearly a critical area to support the development of good autism practice in schools as identified by both the Good Practice and Outcomes reports by the AET (Charman et al., 2011; Wittemeyer et al., 2011). It is also a key part of the recent guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (Sharples et al., 2015) on *‘Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants’* that reflects on recent research and makes recommendations for best practice in schools. This was largely informed by the findings from the *‘Deployment and Impact of Support Staff’* (DISS) project (Blatchford et al., 2012), conducted between 2003 and 2008 in UK schools. The guidance recommends that support staff are given at least five hours training from an experienced trainer or professional on any specific approach they are going to be delivering. This was the case for the new peer mentoring programme the co-ordinators were given approximately six hours induction training and support over several sessions.

Though the training was rated as ‘very useful’ by eighty percent of the co-ordinators there were still training needs that were highlighted through involvement in the programme. There was a consensus that more opportunities to network and share good practice, both within their own and other schools, would be of benefit. This relates both to the level of involvement of other staff within each school, discussed next, and the fact that all the co-ordinators were

the only members of staff running the peer mentoring programmes in their schools. The co-ordinators identified the need to share ideas, practice and resources as being key to improving practice in the programmes. Opportunities to visit an established peer mentoring scheme was also mentioned, as was the need for further support and training in developing information and resources for students.

As part of the survey, co-ordinators were asked about the level of awareness that school staff had about the new peer mentoring programme. Table 6.10 shows the pre-and post-programme results for each school. It was clear from the survey results and the interviews that awareness of the new peer mentoring programme amongst other school staff was greatest where a member of the senior leadership for the school was overseeing the programme. In schools one and five a Deputy Head was in this role and the co-ordinators in both school understood the importance of this. As one co-ordinator commented:

“He made sure it was on everyone’s radar. It would have been impossible for me to do it as a TA” Co-ordinator in school two.

Table 6.10: Staff awareness of peer mentoring programme in case study schools

Score: 5= All aware, 4= Majority aware, 3= Some aware, 2= few aware, 1= Not aware

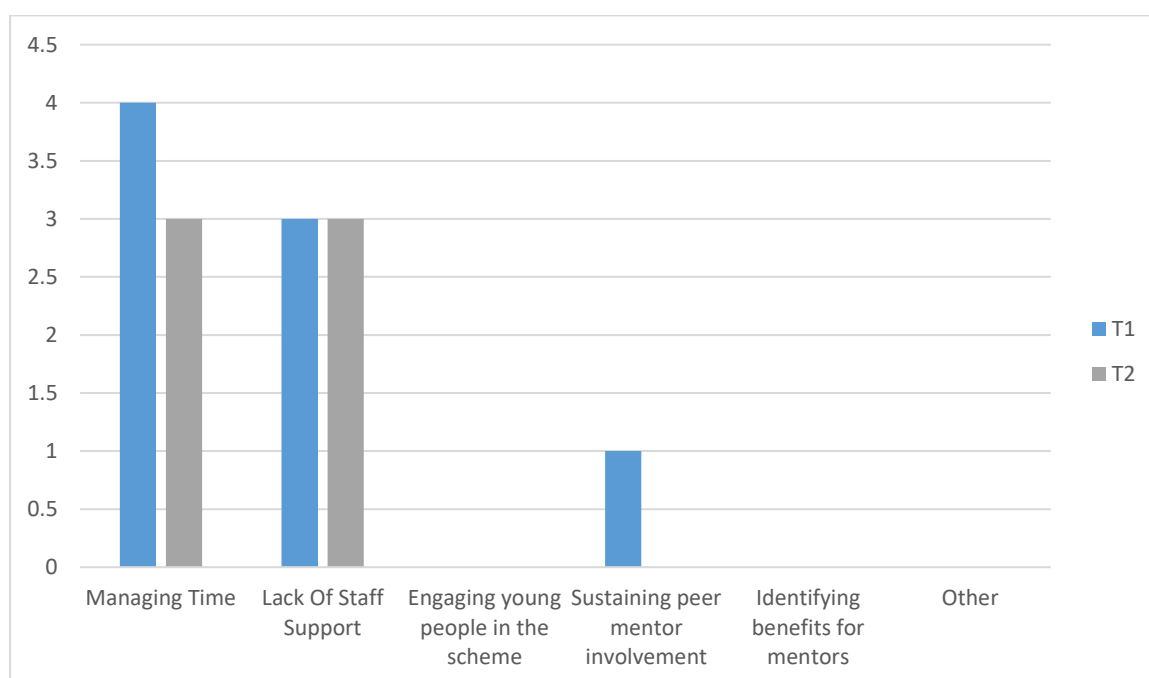
School	Level of Awareness T1	Level of Awareness T2
One	4	4
Two	2	3
Three	3	3
Four	1	2
Five	4	4

This finding supports research into effective leadership in schools such as *'The impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes'* (DCSF, 2009). The research showed how the educational values, strategic intelligence and leadership strategies of the senior management team shape school processes, practice and improved student outcomes. Furthermore, the study found that effective leaders apply strategies in ways that are sensitive to school and student background characteristics, to nationally defined needs and to their core educational ideals for maximising students' achievement across a range of academic, social and personal competencies. In this sense, the involvement of a member of the senior leadership team in the new programme cannot be understated in terms of highlighting the importance of meeting the needs of autistic students to the whole school body. In contrast, the level of staff awareness of the peer mentoring programme in school four was relatively poor and was seen by the co-ordinator as potentially leading to poorer outcomes:

"I was doing this on my own really. I don't think it had as much impact as it could have done if more staff had known about it" Co-ordinator in school four.

This result was reinforced by the survey results that showed the potential difficulties that were identified by the co-ordinators pre-programme and then reviewed post-programme to see if they had impacted on the effectiveness of the approach. Figure 13 shows the range of issues identified by the co-ordinators from the T1 and T2 survey. The results show that lack of staff support was an issue for three of the co-ordinators who were in the schools (two, three and four) where the person overseeing the programme was the SENCo and not a member of the senior leadership team. The issue appeared not to be with the direct support from the SENCo but the perceived lack of support from other staff: *"She's (SENCo) as stretched as me but we talked about it (the programmes) when we had our normal meetings she did support me"* Co-ordinator in school two.

Figure 13: Co-ordinator pre-and Post-Programme implementation difficulties



The issue of time management was the raised by all five the co-ordinators as a potential barrier to the effective delivery of peer mentoring programme. For the co-ordinators in schools two, three and four this had been a reality of the programme and an ongoing difficulty as shown by the results at T2. For the co-ordinators in schools one and five, time management was not seen as an issue at T2. For both co-ordinators, the support of the Deputy Head had been important in ensuring they had enough planning and preparation time to run the programmes:

“They make sure I have the time I need for the programmes. I think for programmes like this to run successfully you need the backing of the senior leaders. You need some recognition that it’s important” Co-ordinator in school one.

For the co-ordinator in school five, having four programmes to manage was viewed as presenting some advantages in economy of scale around resources and planning.

“In some ways, it was easier as I planned similar sessions for all groups. So, I didn’t have to find lots of different resources” Co-ordinator in school five.

The co-ordinators clearly valued the support and liaison with their deputy heads or SENCOs around the programme. In addition, the use of the local authority autism advisory teacher, was seen by the co-ordinators in schools three and four as being particularly beneficial. Supporting one of the key findings in the AET good practice report (2011) on the importance of joined up working with outside agencies around students with autism.

ROLE OF PEER MENTORS

The findings from the mentor T1 and T2 mentor questionnaires indicated that the responses to all eight items were overall very positive by the end of the programme. Table 6.11 shows the results across all five schools. The figures highlight a positive shift in the responses of the autistic students to their role and impact as peer mentors.

Table 6.11: Combined Mentor views on the peer mentoring programme

Mentor Views <i>The T2 items on the questionnaire were the same as T1 but expressed in the past tense</i>	% agreement T1 Students with autism	% agreement T2 Students with autism	% agreement T1 Non-autistic students	% agreement T2 Non-autistic students
I am pleased to be a mentor	75.00	100	94.00	100
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor	83.30	100	91.66	97.22
I think I can be helpful to the other peer mentors	58.33	100	91.66	97.22
I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring	33.33	100	88.88	97.22
I think being a mentor will be good	66.66	100	88.88	100

for me				
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role	83.33	100	100	100
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the all the mentors	41.66	100	91.66	100
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well organised	83.33	100	97.22	100
	n=12	n=12	n=36	n=36

The initial results at T1 show that many of the autistic student were unsure about their abilities as a peer mentor and the impact that they or the programme may have on other students. This may be due to a combination of several factors including the impact of autism on their understanding of the programme, their view of their own competency in this role and the effectiveness of the induction process. The differences in information processing found in autistic people may have resulted in several of the students finding it difficult to visualise, predict and process what being a mentor would be like (Bowler, 2007). Their ability to use past experiences to develop a picture of future activities or environments would also influence this process, as would differences around planning and organisation (Boucher, 2009). Differences in the ability to predict the thoughts and feelings of other people is similarly something that would make it more difficult for the autistic students to predict the possible impact of the programme on the other students (Baron-Cohen, 2001). This is supported by the questionnaire responses that were mainly 'neither agreed or disagreed' rather than 'agree' or 'not agree', indicating a level of uncertainty in the understanding of the role and programme by the autistic students. The more abstract nature of some of the items on the mentoring questionnaire meant that this was likely. The role of peer mentoring was

also something that none of the autistic students had been asked to do previously and so predicting whether they would be good or not at this may have been difficult. For others, it perhaps highlighted their own feelings of not being included in initiatives like this in school, as one of the autistic mentors in school one commented:

“It’s normally for other people who are better at that sort of thing.” ²

The positive results from the questionnaire about being well prepared to be a mentor indicate that there was a mismatch between some of the autistic students views about the induction process and their ability to see themselves as mentors. The induction materials were written to be autism friendly and be as concrete as possible in terms of what the mentoring role is and what the programme is about. In line with good autism practice the information was made as visual as possible and broken down into clear and concise language with ambiguity removed as far as possible. Having written material also ensured that the information was permanent and allowed the mentors and co-ordinator to return to this if needed. The induction process aimed to provide structure for the autistic mentors through the individual pre-teaching of information by the co-ordinator. From the co-ordinators interviews this was viewed as being a successful process for four of the schools:

“I think it was much easier for them to process and understand the information. We did it in a calm space when they weren’t missing anything important and had time to talk through it with them” Co-ordinator in school five.

The co-ordinator in school four was less sure about the effectiveness of the induction process for the autistic students and this was shown in responses to the mentor questionnaire that showed they ‘neither agreed or disagreed’ with any of the statements. The reasons for this were not clear from the interviews though the issue of ‘therapeutic drift’ (Jones and Powell,

2008) in the induction process may be a possible explanation. The co-ordinator in school four was very keen to bring her own ideas into the programme and found the training from the researcher the least useful compared to the other co-ordinators.

It can be seen from the previous section that the Deputy Heads, SENCOs and co-ordinators tended to select multiple aims for the new peer mentoring programme. The individual aims often related to factors identified by them as related to the achievement of the overarching aim of the school. The extent to which mentors understood the main aims of their school's peer mentoring project, as defined by the scheme co-ordinators, was generally high. Both autistic and non-autistic mentors understanding of the aims of the programme tended to reflect a generic rather than precise understanding. The views of the autistic mentors indicated that the majority understood the aims of the programme and this reflected both their personal aims and the overall aims of the school. Critically the mentors realised that involvement in the peer mentoring programme would mean both supporting other students and being able to receive support themselves (if this was needed):

*"Helping others with work and friendships."*³⁸

*"It's helping people and me ... sorting out things."*¹⁸

This suggests that a fundamental construct of the programme, that of equality for all the students, was understood by the autistic mentors going into the programme.

The questionnaire supported the findings from the mentor interviews regarding the positive relationship they had with the programme co-ordinator:

*"She (co-ordinator) was really good. She made sure all of us had a go (at speaking) and took turns, listened, things like that."*¹⁴

While adults are regularly cited as offering necessary supports for the social success of autistic children and young people (Muller et al., 2008), there needs to be an awareness of them inadvertently becoming a source of stigma (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008). Recent research into the views of older autistic adolescents and young adults that has shown that adult-driven strategies deemed too intrusive can undermine students' efforts to enter peer groups and improve social competence (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015).

All mentors rated the organisation of the programme highly in their school and knew who to go to if they had a difficulty with the mentoring role. This reinforced the importance of the induction process and ongoing support from the co-ordinator in the mentoring sessions. For the autistic students, this was particularly important given the differences in their social understanding and ability to seek support and trust other people. The programme co-ordinators already worked with eleven out of the twelve autistic students to varying degrees during the school week. This was mainly to provide class based HTLA or TA support for the students. As such, they had established or begun to establish a relationship with the autistic students who would become peer mentors. The continuity of support from the co-ordinators working across both the peer mentoring programme and classroom meant the potential to identify any issues and reinforce strategies was increased. Something that was identified by several of the autistic students as being helpful:

*"I see her in lessons ... it's better. Easier to sort things out."*¹⁷

The mentors felt that the sessions had been overwhelmingly positive. In many cases, they felt that they were more interesting than regular lessons and were held in a more relaxed environment and atmosphere (including having squash and biscuits as part of the sessions).

It was evident from their interviews that the students valued the increased involvement they had in the development and focus of the sessions:

“It was really different to normal lessons. We get a chance to talk to each other about things important to us.”²⁵

The increased sense of agency in their learning supported their own needs, and the other students, through the problem-solving approach developed as part of the programme. This was most clearly in place in the groups where they were asked to identify one positive and one negative thing about the previous week in school at the start of each session. This structure provided a framework for the scaffolding of joint problem-solving amongst the students that would likely not have been possible in a class based lesson due to curriculum and time constraints. For the autistic students, the role of problem solver was significant. As discussed previously, many autistic children and young people may find problem-solving abilities compromised due to their differences in executive functioning, and their social and emotional understanding and management. Therefore, the ability to seek support from their peers and to see themselves as sources of support for others was a key finding from the study:

“It was good. (Others) don’t normally like my ideas or listen to me in class but they did in this group.”¹

The use of the interests and strengths of the autistic students was a key enabler for them to support their peers as these topics were familiar and predictable:

“I know a lot more than other students in lots of things. Like computers, and I helped (another student) with a problem.”¹

This supports research that shows the use of specific interests, strengths and talents may lead to greater independence and success in vocational endeavours, increase self-esteem and create opportunities for socialisation (Lanou et al., 2012).

ORGANISATION

The organisation of the peer mentoring programmes across the five participating schools was broadly similar and used the programme guidelines as a framework to develop the programme in each context. Table 6.12 shows how the programmes were organised in each school.

Table 6.12: Mentoring sessions: frequency, duration, time, location, and incentives

School	Frequency	Duration	Location	Incentives
One	Every two weeks	30 minutes	Same room	Points and certificates linked to school system
Two	Every two weeks	30 minutes	Same room	Points linked to school system
Three	Every two weeks	30 minutes	Same room	Merits and certificates linked to school system
Four	Every week	30 minutes	Same room	House points linked to school system and pizza restaurant at end of term
Five	Every week	30 minutes	Same room	Merits linked to school system and peer mentor badges

Evidence from the case study schools suggested that there was a high degree of control exerted by programme co-ordinators over organisation of the sessions. School five was the only setting where this was a negotiation between the co-ordinator and the mentors as part of the induction session. For the mentors in the other schools this was not seen as an issue

and they were pleased that the co-ordinator had taken on this organisational role. This may have been a result of their age, the fact that they had only started secondary school in the previous term and had no previous experience of collaborating in this way. This is an area worth further consideration as student agency would be increased through extending the opportunity for them to discuss and agree the organisation of the mentoring programmes in their school. As such, practitioners could also discern student preferences regarding adult involvement. A recent study on the perspectives of youth with autism on social-focused intervention practices (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015), showed that an indirect approach was favoured. This could include logistical support such as finding a learning space, gathering materials and initiating interactions, and then fading support to allow interactions to unfold naturally. This study highlighted the lack of involvement in the topics or elements of social skills and understanding that the autistic adolescents and young adults (aged fourteen to fifteen-years-old) had been given, in contrast to the approach promoting agency and involvement in the new peer mentoring programme.

In relation to the content of mentoring sessions, all the co-ordinators said that they had initially assumed more control due to the need to get the sessions up and running effectively. There was a recognition that more control and ownership of the sessions were given over to the students once clear routines and structure had been established:

"I was always in the room for every session, but the students seemed more confident and independent as the programme went on" Co-ordinator in school one.

This is reflective of the research literature that showed peer mentoring projects were particularly successful when the supporting systems were strong (DCSF, 2008). The co-ordinators had all taken on-board the mentors suggestions for activities and topics in the

sessions and had encouraged mentors to take the lead and to be responsive to the individual needs and preferences of their peers.

For three of the schools the frequency of mentoring sessions was set at once every two weeks. For schools four and five, mentoring sessions occurred once a week. Though twice monthly sessions allowed more planning and preparation time there was a feeling that having weekly sessions may have been more effective:

“You got to know the students and any issues they were having more quickly” Co-ordinator in school four.

Having weekly sessions also lessened the impact of sessions having to be cancelled due to other commitments or staff and student missing sessions due to illness. Across all schools, mentoring sessions generally lasted up to 30 minutes and took place during tutor times. All the sessions were held in the same location, usually a room in learning support, and this enabled peer mentoring to become part of the formalised timetable for students and staff. The use of a consistent location, time and duration for the mentoring sessions provided a very predictable structure for the autistic students and both students and co-ordinators felt this approach had been beneficial. It also gave the sessions increased status as part of the wider curriculum being offered within the schools:

“Was more likely to become part of the what we do” Co-ordinator in school five.

Evidence from the five schools suggested that the mentor matching process was successful with mentors within each group matched by gender, similar interests and/or similar personality characteristics. Research had shown that matching of boy to girl (mentee-mentor) was deemed to be less successful by the mentees and/or mentors in the DCSF study (2008)

and all schools had chosen single sex groups for the new peer mentoring programme. In the new peer mentoring programme, it was left up to schools to decide on the 'best fit' for their students. The matching process was very similar in all the schools with the school lead and co-ordinator identifying mentoring groups in collaboration with form tutors and Heads of Year. The matching process was viewed as being key to the effectiveness of the programme by the co-ordinators and to have the input of staff who knew the students well was highly valued:

"They know who liked who, or who didn't, and if they would make a good group together It helped as I only see them in lessons where it's hard to know sometimes" Co-ordinator in school two.

Being in the same class as other mentors was generally seen as being a positive for the students on the programme. This reflected that they had an awareness of each other already and shared many of the same experiences through being in the same classes, though their perspectives may have differed. It also meant that many academic or social issues could be explored by the group that were relevant to all of them. This helped to bring a sense of purpose and focus to the group that may have not been possible without this level of shared experience e.g., if an older student was mentoring a younger student.

The use of incentives for the peer mentors was consistent across all five schools and made good use of existing school reward systems. This made it easier for students to understand and for the programme co-ordinators to organise and communicate to staff. There was also a feeling that using existing systems would help to embed the programme more fully into the school. For most students, the use of incentives in terms of points and certificates did not

appear to be a major motivator for their involvement in the programme. Though they commented on it positively when asked about incentives in interviews there was more focus on the more immediate reward of refreshments that were available during the sessions. However, for the students in school five, who had been involved more directly in the organisation of the programme, the use of merits linked to house points and peer mentor badges was viewed as being important to them. Again, this perhaps reflects the greater sense of agency fostered in the students in school five whose involvement in choosing the incentives meant they were likely to be more meaningful.

In relation to monitoring the programme, evidence from the five schools suggested that outcomes were being monitored but this tended to be subjective. In all schools the co-ordinator used a session log which was used to keep a record of all the sessions, for recording any problems there might have been and the progress that had been made. This information was routinely shared with the SENCo or Deputy Head who was the lead for the programme in school. School two made use of the 'Readiness to Learn' questionnaire that was already being used as part of non-academic assessments for students whilst other schools relied on the data that was being collected by the researcher. For the other co-ordinators, the lack of appropriate tools to measure non-academic progress of students was a familiar challenge. This reflects the evidence from the AET Outcomes study (2011, p.12) that recommended *"Schools should look beyond what is measured by National Curriculum level descriptors and be encouraged to include data that are collected as part of the school's standard or in-house assessments (e.g. on social-communication and independent living skills; sensory sensitivities).*

The recently developed AET progression framework (AET, 2016) has been produced with this challenge in mind and is a comprehensive interactive assessment tool for students on the autism spectrum. It is designed to support staff in identifying learning priorities and measuring progress in areas which fall outside the national curriculum. These areas relate closely to autism 'differences' as identified within other AET materials and the impact of these on students' social, emotional, independence and learning needs

6.4 IMPACT

IMPACT FOR STAFF

There was a clear and obvious impact of the new peer mentoring programme on the staff who had been co-ordinating the sessions. This had been overwhelmingly positive in terms of developing their knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting autistic students but also their ability to manage a programme like this in school. For the two co-ordinators who had already been given an autism lead role in their school it reinforced their ability to do this. For the other three co-ordinators, it gave them a strong indication that there was not only a need for this role in their schools but that they would be well placed to do this. Central to this was an increased understanding of autism and the way in which this affected individual students. The increased confidence and awareness of the needs of autistic students by the co-ordinators can be countered by the lack of understanding and awareness by other staff that was identified as a gap in practice in several schools. This reinforces the finding from *Ambitious About Autism* (2013) that sixty percent of all teachers in England do not feel they have had adequate training to teach autistic children. The co-ordinators felt that schools and staff should be aware of the individual needs of each student and adjust their curriculum and pedagogy accordingly (Jordan, 2008). Reflecting broader issues about the different levels of

principles and practice identified in relation to students with special educational needs (Norwich and Lewis, 2005). Those being universal (e.g., those that are common to every student), group (e.g., those that are common to autistic students) and individual (e.g., those that are unique to a given student) needs.

It is clear from previous research and the current study that a few members of staff cannot easily achieve positive outcomes; instead *“Schools need to buy in wholesale to inclusion if it is to work. Inclusion cannot rely on the interest, commitment, and enthusiasm of one or two individuals. Without a shift in the whole organisation’s attitude and approach it will fail children with autism and Asperger syndrome”* (Barnard, Prior and Potter, 2000, p.12).

A whole-school inclusive ethos can only be achieved through all staff having a clear and joined up understanding of the aims and expectation of inclusion within their school. This includes understanding the needs of autistic students attending their school and how best to meet those needs. The importance of the involvement of the senior leadership team in establishing an inclusive culture has been commented on previously (Horrocks et al., 2008) and this should ideally lead to collaboration and information sharing among teachers, educational professionals (Simpson, de Boer-Ott and Smith-Myles, 2003), and support staff (Abbott, 2007).

Staff training is therefore key if schools are to meet the needs of autistic students effectively and policies should be in place to ensure that it is received (Charman et al., 2011). Training teachers to work with autistic students not only makes them feel more confident in supporting their needs (Glashan, Mackay and Grieve, 2004), it can result in staff having a more positive attitude towards inclusion (Horrocks et al., 2008; Huang and Wheeler, 2007) and may

also reduce student dependency on TAs (Emam and Farrell, 2009). Maintaining an ongoing programme of training and CPD on autism for all staff, such as that developed by the AET, has been shown to build and consolidate autism expertise at a consistently high level in schools (Cullen et al., 2015).

IMPACT FOR STUDENTS

The study considered changes in both social satisfaction and social competence for the autistic students over the duration of their involvement in the peer mentoring programme. This process began with understanding their perspective on the matching process and their relationship with the other peer mentors in their group. Though the students had not been involved or consulted on the matching process it was evident from interviews that there was general satisfaction in the matching process and that the autistic students felt it was positive to have students from their tutor groups as peer mentors. This reinforces the findings from the programme co-ordinators about the importance placed on establishing peer selection procedures that focus on similar interests and activities based on colleagues, and their own, knowledge of the students. Lending support to Farmer and Farmer's (1996) theory of homophily within social networks that suggest that individuals are more likely to establish and maintain social bonds with others who are like them in terms of their personal, behavioural and social characteristics.

The students did not show any concerns about school staff leading the peer selection process or commented that the 'wrong' students were chosen. For several of the autistic students, the peer mentors in their group included students whom they perceived themselves as being friends with:

"I know (peer mentor). I was at primary with him. The others ... I hang out with sometimes at break." 9

The gender balance of the groups was not mentioned in the interviews though the shared interests of the peers was clear from their comments and is something that enabled relationships and interactions to build up over time. This is in line with research that showed autistic adolescents felt that common interests were an acceptable way for engaging with others, gaining acceptance and initiating friendships (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015). Overall there was a general perception that the mentoring sessions allowed all the students to become more familiar and trusting with each other. This was particularly important for the autistic students in relation to the issue of disclosing their diagnosis.

The mixed views regarding disclosure evidenced in this study are consistent with previous studies, though this remains an area where further research is needed (Ochs et al., 2001). For some adolescents, disclosure presents an opportunity to bridge the empathy gap created by insufficient knowledge about the autistic experience through instilling interactional expertise in their neurotypical peers (Milton, 2014). This attempt to overcome the 'double empathy problem' means that both autistic and neurotypical people have a severe difficulty in understanding each other, as neither share the same frame of reference within social interactions (Milton, 2012). For one of the students in school two, this issue of educating her peers about Asperger Syndrome was important and necessary for them to understand autistic people:

"(Autistic people are) just as good as anyone else. In fact, better than other people at lots of things" 17.

For the other three female students involved in the study the question of disclosure was more problematic and they had decided they did not want this discussed as part of the mentoring sessions. Though this wasn't discussed at interview with the students, their mentoring coordinators felt that the reasons for non-disclosure were due to their concerns about how other students would respond or view them. This reflects research showing that many autistic adolescents view disclosure as a potential source of ridicule (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008) or do not feel others will understand what it is like to have autism even after information is given (Carrington and Graham, 2001). This may be a pertinent issue for autistic girls who are often seen as being more aware of social interactions and feel a need to interact socially themselves. This increased level of social awareness and desire to 'fit in' may mean that they are more resistant to disclosing a diagnosis. An additional factor may be the age at which diagnosis occurred and the time a young person has had to understand how autism impacts on them, as Critchley states *"Whilst many young people who are diagnosed early grow up accepting their diagnosis as being just a part of them as much as their eye colour, people diagnosed in adolescence and late teenage years are already struggling with their identity"* (2016, p.23).

Results from this study support this view. Most the girls had been recently diagnosed whilst most boys had been diagnosed several years previously and had been given information and support from both parents and school around their autism. This had helped them to both understand and accept their diagnosis. Though not advocates in the same way as student seventeen they viewed their diagnosis in a positive light:

*"I didn't mind ... it's just part of me. I know I think differently. Lots of famous people have Asperger's"*³⁴.

The peer mentoring programme did not have the specific aim of developing the understanding and awareness of autism unless this was something that the autistic students themselves wanted to do. Therefore, it was important that this was discussed with autistic students prior to the programme starting. Disclosure is clearly a very personal process dependent on several internal and external factors and needs to be led by the individual themselves. This study provided evidence that the new peer mentoring programme can be supportive of this process and provide a safe and respectful forum for increasing the understanding and awareness of autistic students within schools. This was evidenced by the positive comments expressed by both programme co-ordinators and non-autistic peer mentors on the issue of disclosure. Key to this was the opportunity for the autistic students to talk about the subject themselves, when they felt ready to, and to explain how autism impacted on them and their view of the world. As such, planning for how information is disseminated should be done in consultation with autistic students to discern and respect their preferences. A process supported by the focus on autism as a difference not deficit in the co-ordinator materials and the need to appreciate and understand the range of abilities all students have:

“I thought he was autistic. He was like someone in my class at primary who had it ... He is just different ... same as all of us really. We’re all different in our own ways.”³⁹

The comments by non-autistic peers show that recruiting peers who have experience with autistic students, or who are known to be supportive of difference, may reduce concerns about potential negative consequences of disclosure. However, as suggested previously, this is only likely to be effective as part of a whole school approach to creating a culture of inclusiveness for students and staff.

The development of positive relationships within the mentoring groups was, in part, due to the co-ordinator providing a structure to the interactions. This structure allowed interactions to unfold naturally and provided a focal point that was based on the issues raised by the mentors themselves. This included the direct and indirect instruction of social skills that meant learning the ability to perform a range of discrete interactions appropriate to a specific social situation. There were specific skills learnt that were individual to the needs of the students, both autistic and non-autistic, and skills that were promoted and embedded as part of the programme. These built on practice from Agency Theory research and included asking for help, listening, sharing ideas, helping others and taking turns. Importantly for the autistic mentors, the development of their social skills was contextualised and related to activity based learning and collaborative problem-solving with socially competent peers (Kasari et al., 2012). As such, the focus was on supporting their social competence and ability to read social environments and interact appropriately in a variety of social situations, within school. The new peer mentoring programme also provided the opportunity for this to be a reciprocal process where the autistic students could support their peers with social or academic issues that were important or challenging to them.

Table 6.13 shows the data on perceptions of social competence for the twelve autistic students involved in the new peer mentoring programme.

Table 6.13: Overall pre-and post-programme scores on perceived social competence

Pre-Scores		Post-Scores		% change	t-Value
Mean	SD	Mean	SD	21.45	-2.79**
2.47	0.45	3.00	0.47		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

$n=12$

The paired sample t-test scores show that the autistic student's ratings of their perceived social competence were significantly higher ($\% = 21.45$, $t = -2.79$, $p < 0.01$) post-programme ($M = 2.47$; $SD = 0.45$) compared to pre-programme ($M = 3.00$; $SD = 0.47$) indicating they felt more socially competent at the end of the peer mentoring programme. This measure highlighted the role of the self in promoting social competence or success and referenced perceived abilities in making friends, social skills and acceptance.

The data on improved perceptions of social competence was supported through the comments made in the semi-structured interviews by the autistic students:

*"I feel happier around other people. Understand them better."*²

*"I can make friends ... If I want to. Yeah. It's helped with that."*¹

*"Probably ... sometimes I say things without thinking and this has made me stop more before I say stuff."*³⁵

*"I didn't really know what some things in school were about, but I can ask my friend or the teacher if that happens now."*¹⁸

This suggested that there was an impact for the students in the wider school context and that an element of generalisation had occurred outside of the mentoring groups. This is important given the concerns often raised about the ability of autistic children to generalise skills and knowledge to different contexts or situations (Kasari and Smith, 2013).

The positive change in perceived levels of social competence seen over the course of the mentoring programme was aligned with the data on levels of social satisfaction. Table 6.14 shows that the autistic student's levels of social satisfaction were significantly higher ($\% = 52.63$, $t = -5.83$, $p < 0.01$) post-programme ($M = 45.41$; $SD = 7.05$) compared to pre-

programme (M = 29.75; SD = 6.07) indicating they felt less lonely and more satisfied with their social interactions by the end of the peer mentoring programme.

Table 6.14: Overall pre-and post-programme scores on levels of social satisfaction

Pre-Scores		Post-Scores		% change	t-Value
Mean	SD	Mean	SD	52.63	-5.83 **
29.75	6.07	45.41	7.05		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

$n=12$

The questionnaire and interview responses showed that the autistic mentors viewed themselves more positively at the end of their involvement in the peer mentoring programme, in terms of the qualities they perceived as being needed for friendships, than they did before it started. The results are consistent with research showing that autistic adolescents do have the social desire to forge friendships and relationships with other adolescents their own age (Locke et al., 2010). The increase seen in the autistic mentors' perceptions of their own social competence can be argued to have impacted positively on their levels of social satisfaction as they are better able to connect what they want, with what is occurring, within their social networks and friendships. As such, the mentoring programme through the development of social competence, and the social skills necessary to support it, provided a framework for approaching social situations rather than just fragmented skills. This is necessary if we are to increase a young person's sense of agency over their own social interactions and reciprocate what they believe to be necessary for healthy relationships.

Research has shown that early social-emotional competencies, such as attentional skills, behavioural regulation, and the ability to problem solve are linked to children's academic outcomes (Blair, 2002). The results on academic competence (see Table 6.15) show that the

autistic students' perceived levels of academic competence across the five case study schools were significantly higher ($\% = 25.79$, $t = -2.95$, $p < 0.01$) post-programme ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 0.57$) compared to pre-programme ($M = 2.21$; $SD = 0.34$) indicating that they felt more academically competent by the end of the peer mentoring programme. The extent to which this supports previous findings is limited by the lack of school based evidence on academic progress and achievement for the students in the study over the period of the peer mentoring programme. However, an argument can be made for the autistic students developing their sense of self-regulated learning during the mentoring programme.

Table 6.15: Overall pre-and post-programme scores on perceived academic competence

Pre-Scores		Post-Scores		% change	t-Value
Mean	SD	Mean	SD	25.79	-2.95**
2.21	0,34	2.78	0.57		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

$n=12$

Approaches promoting extrinsic motivation to achieve gains may be at odds with the development of self-regulated learning because these approaches often rely on controlling behaviour, which in turn may be barriers to autonomy and self-determination (Clarke et al., 2004). Critically, in the current study there was internal motivation to improve academic outcomes, as evidenced by the choice of school work and homework as topics for the mentoring sessions by the mentors. Furthermore, the focus on academic progress from four out of the five schools involved in the mentoring programme reinforced the emphasis on jointly developing strategies to support students to manage their own learning more effectively. Where this wasn't the case, as in school three, the impact on the autistic students perceived academic competence was lessened.

Research has suggested that social support can reduce the risk of bullying and build the resilience needed to manage the negative effects of being bullied (Humphrey and Symes, 2010; Hebron et al., 2016). This is particularly significant for autistic students who are at least three times more likely to be bullied than peers, and report receiving less social support from parents, classmates and friends (Humphrey and Symes, 2010). The results on levels of bullying for the autistic students involved in the mentoring programme lend some support to these findings. Table 6.16 shows that ten out of the twelve autistic students involved in the peer mentoring programme had experienced bullying prior to the programme starting i.e. in their first two term of secondary school.

Table 6.16: Overall Pre-and Post-programme results on bullying

Measure and time-period	T1	T2
Frequency of Bullying	0 times = 4 1-5 times = 2 5-10 times = 1 10-15 times = 3 15-20 times = 3 20-25 times = 1	0 times = 11 1-5 times = 0 5-10 times = 1 10-15 times = 0 15-20 times = 0 20-25 times = 0
Type of Bullying	Verbal =10 Physical = 3	Verbal = 1 Physical = 0
Who they told	Parents = 8 Staff = 3 Friend = 0 No-one =2	Parents = 0 Staff = 1 Friend = 1 No-one = 0
What was the outcome	Bullying continued = 3 Bullying stopped = 4 Bullying continued but now stopped = 1	Bullying continued = 0 Bullying stopped = 1 Bullying continued but now stopped = 0

The frequency of bullying ranged from one or two incidents of verbal abuse to up to twenty-five incidents of both verbal and physical bullying. This is in line with research that shows some young people with autism are bullied more than others, and some are not bullied at all,

which is reflective of the range of risk factors that may affect autistic individuals (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Kloosterman et al., 2013). Studies have confirmed that the range of potential risks is broad, encompassing contextual factors (e.g., type of school attended), as well as behavioural, cognitive, social and emotional domains (Schroeder et al., 2014). For example, significant risk factors for bullying were identified as attending a mainstream (rather than special) school, being older, having lower levels of educational support and using public transport to travel to and from school. In this context, the autistic students in the five case study schools could be considered at higher risk of bullying due to their age, attendance at a mainstream secondary school, and that several of them travelled to school by bus.

The data, in terms of whom the students informed about the bullying, showed that eight of the students had reported the bullying to their parents. Out of this group, three had also told a member of staff. None of the students had informed a friend that they had been bullied and two students had told no-one about the bullying they had experienced. They may be a reflection that autistic students are less likely to report incidents of bullying to school staff because their social cognition differences can lead them to assume that others are already aware of what has happened. For four of the students this had resulted in the bullying stopping. For another student, the bullying had continued but had stopped by the start of the programme. However, three students reported that the bullying had continued and was still occurring at the time they completed the bullying questionnaire.

Post-programme results showed a comprehensive reduction in the incidents of bullying experienced by the autistic students over the course of the peer mentoring sessions. Only one student reported that he had been bullied since the programme began. Significantly he had

told both a member of staff (the programme co-ordinator) and a friend (a peer mentor) about the bullying and this had stopped. When asked about their experience of bullying the autistic students identified both internal and external factors as reasons why the bullying had stopped. Social support was a key factor in this:

*"I have made some friends and that has really helped."*¹⁸

*"The others (mentors) look out for me and it makes it safer."*¹⁰

This supports research indicating that social support is an important resource that protects children from the negative effects of life stressors, may help to build the resilience in autistic students that they need to cope with the negative effects of being bullied and may serve to reduce the risk of exposure to bullying (Humphrey and Symes, 2010).

Both autistic and non-autistic mentors identified the importance of discussing bullying in the mentoring sessions and developing strategies for identifying and managing this. This highlighted the role of peers and school staff in supporting them with bullying and included a recognition that some students did not understand that they were being bullied:

*"I don't think that he knew when other kids were being nasty to him and we also look out for him ... look out for each other more."*⁶

There appeared to be an increased level of trust shown by the autistic students that they could actively do something themselves about being bullied. Not only could they tell other people if they were being bullied, but that they could also trust them to do something about it:

*"I can tell (the co-ordinator) and she will sort it out."*¹

This applied not only to the students who had been bullied but also to the autistic students who had not experienced bullying:

“We did a lesson on it. I’ve not been bullied but we talked about what to do if you were”²⁶

The changes in levels of bullying experienced may also have reflected the increased understanding and awareness of peers around autism and how this impacts on the autistic mentors in school. The importance of educating the peer group is becoming more recognised (e.g., Campbell and Barger, 2014), though it is only one part of a more integrated approach needed to tackle bullying within schools. The ethos, values and leadership of schools can contribute to a more holistic and accepting educational environment in which the differences associated with autism are valued. Staff training in schools aimed at challenging attitudes and raising awareness of young people at heightened vulnerability to bullying is important (e.g., the AET schools programme), as is the effective application of anti-bullying policies by all staff. Programmes that support autistic students understanding of bullying can also highlight their vulnerability to being bullied and enable staff to provide the right support earlier. It is clear from the present study that autistic students should not only be given the opportunity to talk about bullying, but that staff need to build trusting relationships to enable them to do this. Raising awareness of the increased risk of bullying and lowering the overall number of risks present for autistic individual through targeted support should be a priority. For Hebron et al., (2016, p.8) *“This should ideally become embedded in decision-making processes in order to assist in prevention rather than simply responding to bullying once it has started.”*

IMPACT FOR SCHOOL

There was a consensus from the programme co-ordinators in all five schools that the peer mentoring programme could be used with other autistic and non-autistic students in their schools. These views were broadly reflective of the findings from the AET Good Practice

Report (Charman et al., 2011) that indicated staff in mainstream schools felt that good practice for autistic student was often useful for their non-autistic peers. Several co-ordinators identified the potential of the programme for supporting the transition of vulnerable Year 7 students to successfully manage the transfer to secondary school:

“We have a lot of children with issues ... behaviour, learning, lots of emotional problems. It could be something we use for a lot of year 7s as a way of supporting them with some of this. I think it fits in with what we’re trying to do here” Co-ordinator in school three.

For the co-ordinator in school three the peer mentoring programme was closely aligned with school priorities around the social and emotional support of students and was therefore relevant to the wider aims of the school. This is an important consideration regarding sustainability and is discussed further in the section on contributory factors.

The positive response of the co-ordinators to the continuation of the programme in their schools was countered by the barriers they identified to this happening. Limiting factors were aligned with the factors they had identified previously as being problems with the implementation of the programme. Firstly, the lack of involvement of other staff either directly in running the programme or their awareness of it. Secondly, the planning and preparation time needed for the effective organisation and running of the programmes:

“I would love to do it again after this experience but not unless I get some time to plan properly or it’s made sure I won’t get dragged into other things ... which is unlikely ... staff need to be able to do it as well so it’s not just down to me” Co-ordinator in school four.

Finally, and most critically, the co-ordinators were aware that it was not their decision whether the programme continued or not, either with existing or new students. Again, highlighting the importance of the school leadership team on the sustainability of educational

programmes within schools:

“I’d like to continue the two groups if I’m allowed by school” Co-ordinator in school one.

“I don’t know. Unless the (headteacher) agrees then it would be difficult” Co-ordinator in school two.

These limitations are aligned with those identified by school staff co-ordinating peer mentoring programmes in the DSCF study (2008) which indicated that lack of staff support, low status/profile of the scheme in the school and time management were significant barriers to successful and sustainable programmes.

6.5 CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

Several studies have indicated that the type and quality of TAs’ interactions with students has the most positive impact on their learning (Rubie-Davis et al., 2010). These include interactions that are less formal, more personalised and those that support student engagement. However, other research has highlighted the negative consequences of over-intensive levels of TA support (Giangreco, 2010). The DISS project showed that TAs tended to talk down, and ‘spoon-feed’ answers, to students and that over time this limited student understanding and sense of control over their learning (Radford et al., 2011). The use of Agency Theory in the development of the new peer mentoring programme was intended to promote more self-regulated learning for the students and avoid over dependence on support staff. This meant an emphasis on the co-ordinators working with their students to share the responsibility for moving learning forward and promoting an awareness, particularly for the autistic students, of the responsibility of one’s own actions on the environment and on others.

“It is the students group as far as I am concerned. I’m there to help and support but it’s great they can have as much responsibility as possible.” Co-ordinator in school five

The results on perceived levels of social and academic competence and interviews with the autistic students suggest that they had begun to develop a greater sense of agency over their own learning and social interactions within school. The positive changes in levels of social satisfaction and reduction in incidents of bullying also supports the research showing that increased sense of agency and self-regulation promotes pro-social, cooperative behaviour (Bandura, 2001; Rogoff, 2003).

Several studies have shown that the strongest evidence for TAs having a positive impact on student attainment is their role in delivering structured interventions in one-to-one or small group settings (Slavin et al., 2011; Higgins et al., 2013). This research shows a consistent impact on attainment of approximately three to four additional months’ progress over an academic year. However, these effects were only seen when TAs work in structured settings with robust support and training. When TAs were used in more informal and unsupported roles there was little or no impact on student outcomes or independent learning skills. The findings from this research were primarily focused on academic outcomes as opposed to the broader range of outcomes identified by schools for the new peer mentoring programmes. In this context, the co-ordinators saw the flexibility and structure of the mentoring sessions as both a positive and negative factor in the effectiveness of the programme. The guidelines were generally seen as being a supportive framework for the sessions though the co-ordinators comments reflected that they are used to delivering more prescriptive approaches in school:

“It was fine for me. I like changing things and not being tied down to following stuff religiously.... Can see it could be a problem for other people if they need more structure” Co-ordinator in School one.

There was an understanding and awareness from the co-ordinators that the programme needed a degree of flexibility to allow the students to raise and address authentic issues through a collaborative problem-solving approach. This is important given Roffey’s (2010) findings that interventions related to socio-emotional well-being need to be flexible to the setting and individual children, rather than containing an imposed and rigid structure. A very prescriptive and scripted approach, suggested as being necessary for effective attainment outcomes for TA delivered interventions (Sharples et al., 2015), would have been problematic in the context of the current study. A more flexible approach enabled the co-ordinators to make use of existing resource and strategies more effectively. However, the issue of adequate planning and preparation time, as discussed previously, was a barrier to this:

“Having a framework worked well as long as you have resources up your sleeve and a plan of what you want to cover. It changed sometimes and that was fine” Co-ordinator in school five.

It was evident that the approach of the co-ordinators within the sessions was critical in developing the agency and self-regulated learning of the students. There is considerable overlap between the principles and practice of Agency Theory and key elements seen as encouraging independent learning from a recent study on the use of TAs to scaffold independent learning (Radford et al., 2015). These overlapping elements include students retaining responsibility for their own learning, staff handing over ownership of tasks, avoiding over prompting and ‘spoon feeding’ answers and avoiding limiting discussion time and student voice. The encouragement of students to share experiences and discuss issues that

were important to them meant a continued focus on the development of social competence within the sessions, and the generalisation of this into the wider school context. This enabled the co-ordinators to support the autistic students with the self-management of learning behaviours.

ELEMENTS OF PROCESS

It was evident from the co-ordinator interviews that the peer mentoring sessions enabled them to develop a much greater understanding of the autistic students in their groups:

“It’s getting to know the individual that counts” Co-ordinator in school five.

“There’s no way I would have known what to do or what advice to give other staff about them (autistic students) if I hadn’t been in these sessions. No way” Co-ordinator in school three.

The understanding of the individual was critical to correctly identifying the students learning needs and enabling both students and staff to meet them effectively (Jordan, 2005). This is supportive of research by Norwich and Lewis (2007) highlighting that autism is one of the categories of SEN where understanding the nature of the SEN group is a particularly critical ‘filter’ through which teaching strategies for a learner should be developed. They view the understanding and awareness of a student’s SEN by staff as *“valuable in its own right as underpinning the learner’s development”* (p.141). The degree to which this was achieved across the five-case study school varied and reflected the existing role of the co-ordinators, senior leadership support and the extent to which other school staff were aware of the peer mentoring programme.

However, the importance of integrating learning from everyday classroom contexts and structured approaches for students with SEN has been highlighted in several recent studies

(e.g., Webster and Blatchford, 2014). Evidence suggests that TA led approaches, such as the new peer mentoring programme, do not on their own lead to improved outcomes for autistic students or those with special educational needs. Typically, students are withdrawn from class for targeted individual or group activities, as was the case in the current study, so it is vital that there is effective liaison between TAs and teachers to ensure learning, strategies and resources are shared. Enabling a consistency of approach, through effective staff communication staff, is a key recommendation from the AET Good Practice Report (Charman et al., 2011) and the recently updated SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). This was a consistent theme across all five-case study schools and highlighted by co-ordinators in their interviews: *“There’s no point doing the groups without sharing (information) with staff so they understand the boys better. It need to be part of the programme”* Co-ordinator in school one.

This recognises the potential danger of separating the peer mentoring programme from classroom activities meaning the challenges for the autistic students in generalising any learning from the sessions into the classroom are increased. To a large degree this was avoided in the new programme through using the sessions to discuss, and address, classroom or school based issues. This meant a greater connection between the students experience in school and the sessions, enabling them to make stronger links between strategies to support their own learning and social interactions. This was strengthened through the co-ordinators who saw them regularly in classroom contexts and could reinforce that link when needed:

“I really got to know the boys in the groups. For (two autistic students) it was so helpful to get to know them as people and build on that in class” Co-ordinator in school one.

The co-ordinators acted as a bridge to effective information sharing with the teachers of the autistic students. This appeared to be easier for the two co-ordinators who had already had

an autism specific brief within their schools. As such, there was a system in place for them to discuss the students with staff and an acceptance by teachers that this was part of their role.

“I could speak to the teachers with a bit more authority on the subject” Co-ordinator in school two.

Importantly, the views, perspectives and experiences of the students informed the content of the dialogue between co-ordinators and other school staff. Milton (2012) argues that the social subtext of a situation is never a given, but actively constructed in the interactions people have with one another. From this perspective, the idea of an individual having a ‘social’ deficit is redundant. Rather, when autistic people and those not on the autistic spectrum attempt to interact it is both that have a problem in terms of empathising with each other. The ‘double empathy problem’ referred to previously. The interviews with the mentors and co-ordinators across the five schools showed that the peer mentoring programme had promoted the mutual understanding of autistic students and their non-autistic peers through the sharing of views, ideas and collaborative working. There was recognition that the autistic students did not necessarily have the same opportunities for this within everyday classroom contexts:

“They don’t have much of a chance to do that in class. I think they liked that it was more relaxed, and they knew they could bring their own ideas to the group” Co-ordinator in school one.

The creation of a supportive ethos within the peer mentoring sessions to enable the students to express their views was something that both students and co-ordinators had found helpful. The structure and ground rules provided expectations around reciprocal behaviour for the sessions and more predictability for the autistic students. The equality of roles, established by

having all the students acting as peer mentors for each other, was an important part of this process:

“I really liked that there everyone was a mentor. It meant they all had the same role and no-one was singled out as needing help or having problems” Co-ordinator in school five.

OUTCOME OF PROCESS

Three out of the five schools identified transition support as one of the aims of the new peer mentoring programme. In effect this was an extension of the transition programme each student had been involved previously when they had started Year 7, as the mentoring programme started after the students had already been at secondary school for two terms. This was viewed as being beneficial by the co-ordinators in all five schools as it enabled them to identify any ongoing or current issues and to intervene earlier and more effectively:

“I think the earlier the better. They may not need it later on but it’s helped me and them when they start school” Co-ordinator in school three.

“This (peer mentoring programme) is good for picking up any issues early. Before they become worse or get them in trouble ... I think having it at Year Seven is a good idea so we can sort out anything in their first year” Co-ordinator in school one.

The improvements seen over the course of the new peer mentoring programme in the autistic students perceived social competence, and levels of bullying, are supportive of research indicating that these factors as important for successful school transitions (Evangelou et al., 2003; Rudolph et al., 2001). Larger scale studies, such as the DSCF study on mentoring in English schools (2008), have also indicated the important role mentoring can have in the successful transition of students into secondary school. Though there were a range of

mentoring models employed in the DSCF study, and all of them had mentees and mentors, results indicated that peer mentoring models targeting transitions were most successful in projected aims across the schools sampled. Mentoring projects employing the transition model were also successful in reducing incidents of bullying. The need to consider peer mentoring as one of a range of approaches to support transition is something that was identified by the co-ordinators for their schools:

“We are good at putting support in early. This programme has made me think about what type of support should be in place” Co-ordinator in school four.

This makes the point that it is not only the principal of early support that is important but the content and focus of that support. It was evident across all five schools involved in the study that there was a need to provide an approach that addressed the needs of students in a holistic manner. The tensions that existed between the agendas for attainment and SEN within the schools made this more challenging for some of the co-ordinators who identified the interdependency of academic and social progress:

“I think we do value that. We do get really good results but that wouldn’t happen if students weren’t happy and included” Co-ordinator in school five.

“Yeah. We did focus on academic support in the groups and that is really important ... we also did work on friendships, social stuff, bullying, and managing stress or problems which is all part of the students managing school. Especially the ones on the spectrum” Co-ordinator in school four.

The need to have a more broad and balanced curriculum for autistic students, focusing on a range of areas such as academic, social, emotional and independence, was a key recommendation of the AET Outcomes report (Wittemeyer et al., 2011). The report suggested

that *“The Department for Education should provide written guidance on how teachers, particularly in mainstream settings, can find the right balance between teaching pupils with autism key academic skills and teaching skills that fall outside of the National Curriculum (e.g. independent living skills, social and emotional understanding)”* (p.9 of Executive Summary).

Since the publication of the report there has been increased recognition, by both the Department of Education and Ofsted, for schools to consider the wider range of needs of all students including those with SEN. Recent reference to increased flexibility, regarding what is taught and assessed as part of the curriculum, would allow schools to address the specific needs of young people with SEN to help them with areas that may fall outside the national curriculum and to prepare them for life beyond school. This is perhaps reflected most explicitly in the change of an Ofsted inspection category to ‘Personal Development, Behaviour and Welfare’ which states in Section 31 that *“Inspectors will make a judgement on the personal development, behaviour and welfare of children and learners by evaluating the extent to which the provision is successfully promoting and supporting children’s and other learners’: pride in achievement and commitment to learning, supported by a positive culture across the whole provider, self-confidence, self-awareness and understanding of how to be a successful learner”* (OFSTED, 2014). This recognises that fully inclusive approach to assessment in all mainstream and specialist settings is one where policy and practice are designed to promote the outcomes of all students. The removal of national curriculum levels as the means of reporting attainment and progress, announced by the government in May 2013, meant that *“Schools should have the freedom to decide how to teach their curriculum and how to track the progress that pupils make”* (DfE, 2014, p.4). In theory allowing schools to articulate the progress of all students, including low attaining and those with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities, in a more individual way. This point was reinforced

In the Final Report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels (DfE, 2015, p.6), stating that *“For pupils with recognised SEN and disabilities, assessment should consider long-term wider outcomes such as higher education, employment and independent living. Schools should consider meaningful ways of measuring all aspects of progress including communication, social skills, physical development, resilience and independence.”*

Whether this policy shift will be translated into practice within schools, given the continued focus on academic attainment and standards, will be an interesting area of research over the next few years. As is the extent to which mainstream secondary schools choose to deliver a broader and more individualised curriculum to meet the range of needs of autistic students in their population. This range of needs includes a recognition of the potential impact of gender, both on the profile and presentation of autism and provision within schools. Table 6.17 shows the data for the autistic students’ outcome measures based on gender.

Table 6.17: Pre-and Post-programme scores by gender on perceived social competence, academic competence, and levels of social satisfaction

Gender	Measure	T1 Score	T2 Score	% Change
Male n = 8	Social Competence	2.36	3.21	36.01
Female n = 4	Social Competence	2.37	3.24	36.70
Male n = 8	Academic Competence	2.26	2.82	24.77
Female n = 4	Academic Competence	2.04	3.10	51.96
Male n = 8	Social Satisfaction	29.87	46.25	54.83
Female n = 4	Social Satisfaction	28.25	51.00	80.53

They indicate that on all measures the girls scores were higher at T2 than the boys, both in overall score and percentage change. This contrasts with the results at T1 where girls scored below the boys on perceived academic competence and social satisfaction and only marginally higher on their perceived level of social competence. Suggesting that overall, being a peer mentor for the autistic girls in this study had a more positive impact on social and academic self-measures than it did for autistic boys. The results need to be interpreted cautiously given the small numbers of participants and the difference in numbers between male and female students involved in the study. However, they do point to the need for further research into the factors that may influence the impact of gender on educational approaches and outcomes in this area. This includes not only the gender of the students but that of the staff supporting them:

“I think it would be good for a male member of staff to be involved with the boys” Co-ordinator in school three.

Previous studies suggest that children on the autistic spectrum, like non-autistic peers, prefer and primarily socialise with same-gender friends (Bauminger et al., 2003). This finding was supported in the five case study schools where single sex peer mentoring groups were set up in all twelve programmes and deemed to be more appropriate than mixed gender groups:

“I’m not sure mixed groups would have worked. They were mostly interested in the same things and I think it’s better having role models of boys for boys” Co-ordinator in school four.

The need for further knowledge and training on the way autism affects girls was evident across the three schools where girls were involved in the mentoring programme. This is perhaps reflective of a reduced general awareness and understanding of autistic girls amongst

school staff due to the differences in diagnosis, presentation and prevalence (Gould and Ashton-Smith, 2012).

6.6 SUMMARY

This chapter has sought to understand the impact and outcomes of a new peer mentoring programme in five mainstream secondary schools in the South-East of England. Findings from the five settings have been compared, using quantitative and qualitative data, to assess key factors that support or challenge the implementation, effectiveness and sustainability of this approach for autistic students. Results suggest, within the framework of the new peer mentoring model, that involvement in the programme has been a positive experience for mentors, staff and schools. This showed that factors influencing outcomes were related to the type of processes employed by schools implementing the new model and the systems subsequently established by the programme co-ordinators for organising and running sessions. The findings support previous research (DSCF, 2008) suggesting that the formalisation of peer mentoring programmes is more likely to achieve intended outcomes than those which are unstructured. The definition of formalisation in the present study covers several interrelated factors that are all significant when considering recommendations for the use of peer mentoring for autistic students.

Firstly, the programme needs to have clear aims and objectives with a strong organisational and management structure to support it. Importantly, and in contrast to much of the research literature, aims were established by both staff and students in the case study schools and outcomes were most effective when these matched. This recognises the need for schools to support the wider non-academic needs of autistic students, including their social and

emotional development, as part of their curriculum offer. The involvement of Deputy Heads in the implementation of the new programme meant it had a higher profile amongst school staff and factors impeding delivery, such as workload and time management, were lessened. Suggesting that senior leadership involvement is an important factor for the sustainability of new educational approaches within schools. The consistency of length, frequency, time and place of mentoring sessions were supportive for both the programme co-ordinators and students and allowed this to become part of their established timetable. Flexibility within the programme sessions was generally seen as being positive and allowed more relevant and meaningful issues to be raised and discussed by students. The role of the programme co-ordinator was essential to the effective organisation, management and communication of the sessions and this was most effective when staff had an existing co-ordination role for autistic students within schools and/or supported the autistic mentors in the classroom.

Secondly, having an established process for the identification and recruitment of mentoring groups was an important aspect of formalisation of the new programme. This was most effective when done collaboratively with the deputy Heads, SENCOs and programme co-ordinators liaising with form tutors and Heads of Year. Establishing mentoring groups from students within the same class enabled sessions to build on shared experiences and meant students also knew each other prior to the programme starting. Same sex groupings were identified as being more appropriate by staff and it was recognised that more knowledge and training was needed on the impact of autism on girls in their schools. Induction and training for the mentors in preparation for their role was important for all students and most successful when the autistic mentors had an individual session before joining the group induction. The need to understand autistic students, their range of abilities and how autism

affects them, was a consistent theme throughout the programme. For both the programme co-ordinators in considering how to adapt or differentiate their approach to fully include autistic students in mentoring groups and the non-autistic mentors in developing their understanding and awareness of their autistic peers. This process was further enabled in those groups where the autistic students decided to disclose and discuss their diagnosis.

Thirdly, formalisation of the programme means that there are systems in place for measuring its effectiveness for both students and staff. This should include a range of measures that capture progress in several areas, both curriculum and non-curriculum, and relate to the aims of the programme. Importantly, the voice of the students should be sought to enable a more holistic and robust measure of impact to be made. It was evident that this is an area for development, with most of the case study schools relying on the measures used by the researcher.

The next chapter will review the academic and practical contribution of the research findings, discuss the limitations of the research design, and suggest areas for future research.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter I first summarise the findings from the quantitative and qualitative data from Chapters Five and Six in relation to the research questions selected for the study. It will then be followed by a summary of the two main areas of contributions that this study has provided to the existing research literature in this area. The first will deal with new knowledge derived from the findings. The second will deal with contributions with regards to methodological issues; particularly, the study of educational approaches within school settings and the importance of enabling the voice of autistic children and young people. The last two sections present the limitations of the study and suggest areas for future research.

7.2 SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the impact and outcomes of a new peer mentoring model for autistic students, their peers, and staff, in five contextually different mainstream secondary schools in the South East of England. The main conclusions of the findings on the five research questions adopted for this study are summarised below:

RQ1-RQ3. Does being a peer mentor improve levels of social satisfaction, social competence and reduce levels of bullying for autistic students?

Autistic children and young people are more likely to be at risk of bullying and poor social relationships than their peers and this can have a significant impact on their mental and emotional health across their lifespan (Humphrey and Lewis, 2010). As such, the new peer mentoring programme was partly developed as a school based approach to reduce these risks for autistic students in early adolescence. The findings suggest that involvement in the

programme as a peer mentor led to a reduction in bullying and improvements on levels of social satisfaction for all the autistic students in the study. Levels of social satisfaction were significantly higher ($\% = 52.63$, $t = -5.83$, $p < 0.01$) post-programme ($M = 45.41$; $SD = 7.05$) compared to pre-programme ($M = 29.75$; $SD = 6.07$) indicating that the autistic mentors felt more satisfied with their social interactions by the end of the peer mentoring programme. The number of autistic mentors being bullied had reduced from ten before the programme to one post-programme. Significantly, the student who had experienced bullying during the mentoring programme had told both the programme co-ordinator and another mentor about the bullying and it had stopped. Reflecting an increased awareness of others as a source of support and help, and the importance of having a member of staff who can act on information about bullying. Providing support for previous studies showing that social support can reduce the risk of bullying and build the resilience needed to manage the negative effects of being bullied for autistic students (Hebron et al., 2016). Successful approaches for building resilience in schools tend to increase protective factors against poorer outcomes for individuals and decrease risk factors (Marmot Review, 2010). There is limited research into building resilience in autistic children in schools with studies often focusing on developing resilience in their parents and families. The Public Health England report '*Building children and young people's resilience in school*' (2014) identified several factors that supported the development of resilience in all children and young people in educational settings. These included improving achievement, ensuring successful transitions, developing good relationships with peers and having supportive school staff. All of which were promoted as part of the new peer mentoring programme and point to the need for further research in this area to identify the extent to which resilience building factors overlap across different school populations.

The matching of mentors was important to the development of positive peer relationships within the mentoring groups and similar processes were employed in all five schools in the study. Matching mentors by interests, personality and gender were seen to be most effective, supporting research into good practice in this area (Carter et al., 2011). Since our understanding of the social differences associated with autism is based predominantly on males, there is an inherent risk that educational approaches targeting social functioning may be more focused toward boys. For girls, this may mean overlooking specific gender-related social challenges. The use of same sex mentoring groups across all school may have reduced the risk of this occurring though it is an area that needs further investigation.

Social competence is the effective development and use of social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills, motivational and expectancy sets needed for successful social adaptation. This enables children and young people to demonstrate 'interactive sociability' and determine when and how to apply skills that they know in real-life situations. The challenges in this area for autistic children and young people meant that a focus of the new peer mentoring programme had been on the development of social competence as opposed to only discrete social skills. The findings from the study showed that the perceived social competence scores were significantly higher ($\% = 21.45$, $t = -2.79$, $p < 0.01$) post-programme ($M = 2.47$; $SD = 0.45$) compared to pre-programme ($M = 3.00$; $SD = 0.47$) indicating the autistic students felt more socially competent at the end of the peer mentoring programme. It was evident from the interviews with students and staff that discussing real life scenarios in the mentoring sessions had supported this process, as had collaborative problem-solving with peers. The co-ordinators promoted the generalisation of strategies to classroom activities and could monitor the impact of this through their support of students in lessons. The role of the

programme co-ordinator in structuring the mentoring groups and facilitating the sessions was fundamental to the effectiveness of the programme. The use of staff familiar with the autistic mentors was a strength and enabled their inclusion in the programme through effective induction and ongoing support in sessions and the classroom.

Though not an original focus of the study, the autistic mentors' academic competence saw a similar improvement to their levels of social competence. Results were significantly higher ($t = 25.79$, $t = -2.95$, $p < 0.01$) post-programme ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 0.57$) compared to pre-programme ($M = 2.21$; $SD = 0.34$) across all five schools, indicating that the autistic mentors felt more academically competent by the end of the peer mentoring programme. This supports research linking social competence to improved academic outcomes (Diamond and Lee, 2011) and highlights the importance of staff and student aims for educational programmes being aligned. In four out of the five case study schools there was a strong correlation between a staff focus on academic progress and a student focus on homework and school work. For the autistic students, this was particularly important given the potential challenges around being involved in activities or lessons which they did not find relevant, meaningful or motivating.

RQ4. Did the peer mentoring programme promote participation and inclusion for the autistic students?

Ainscow's (2007) definition of inclusive education as participation, presence, achievement and acceptance for all was the ethos that underpinned the study and provided strong links to Agency Theory for the development of the new peer mentoring programme. By providing autistic students with the opportunity to be peer mentors, rather than mentees, they were

given equal status in the programme from the start. Through individual induction they were given clear guidance on the role of peer mentors and opportunities to discuss and question the staff co-ordinators about the programme. Information was given in both verbal and written forms and students were given additional time to process this. With this initial support in place, all the autistic students approached to take part agreed to be a peer mentor on a voluntary basis. Importantly, they were also included in the whole group induction sessions with the non-autistic mentors, reinforcing their status and presence within their peer mentoring group. Participation was further promoted through the facilitation of their views on the aims and content for the mentoring sessions and the continued opportunities to share their ideas and experiences as part of their mentoring group. These practical considerations, based on good autism practice and the principles of Agency Theory, meant that the autistic mentors could fully participate in the new peer mentoring programme alongside their peers. It also meant that the programme co-ordinators had a framework that allowed the voices of all students to be heard and promoted a positive change in two key indicators of inclusion for the autistic students, namely bullying and social support (Humphrey and Symes, 2010). Furthermore, the mentoring programme promoted a joint understanding and acceptance of individual difference that enabled autistic and non-autistic students to be more understanding and supportive of each other. This was particularly powerful in the programmes where the autistic students had disclosed their diagnosis.

RQ5. What factors are key to the sustainability of the peer mentoring programme as an educational approach to support autistic students in mainstream secondary schools?

The current study offers support to the notion of ‘formalisation’ of peer mentoring programmes within schools to support the needs of autistic students. The results of the semi-

structured interviews and questionnaires with students and staff attest to this. Several key factors to support the sustainability of the programme were identified through the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. Firstly, the involvement of a member of the senior leadership team in the programme meant that it had a higher profile within the school, there was greater staff awareness of the programme and it was felt by the programme co-ordinators that it was more likely to be continued. Secondly, elements of the organisation and management of the programme were important and influenced more positive outcomes. These included identifying programme co-ordinators who were experienced autism practitioners, and who knew the autistic mentors; giving programme co-ordinators dedicated planning and preparation time to run the sessions; pre-arranged meetings at the same time and place; well matched mentors in same gender mentor groups; and support systems in place that are strong and meant mentors felt well supported. Thirdly, that students and staff have input into the aims, content and structure of the programme so they develop an increased sense of ownership, collaboration and agency through their involvement. Fourthly, having a robust monitoring and assessment system in place to track student progress in academic and non-academic areas related to the aims of the programme is necessary to show impact. Finally, the programme needs to be embedded within existing school structures and systems and important information shared between relevant staff regarding strategies, challenges and positives that have arisen from the sessions. The effective induction, training and support of the programme co-ordinator is fundamental to this, as is the support of senior leadership within the school.

7.3 CONTRIBUTIONS

As the above summary of findings shows, this study has contributed new knowledge about the impact and outcomes of a peer mentoring programme for autistic students, their peers and staff across five different mainstream secondary schools. It has also provided methodological contributions through a mixed methods and case study approach to the implementation of an educational programme within school settings.

7.3.1 NEW KNOWLEDGE

This study has contributed new knowledge to the research base on educational approaches for secondary aged autistic students in mainstream schools (Fredrickson et al., 2010) and provides recommendations for the use of peer mentoring approaches for this group. It is the first study in the literature to address the impact on of being a peer mentor, rather than a mentee, for autistic students (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015) and to explore the use of Agency Theory as a framework for the development and implementation of a new peer mentoring programme. The results indicate that the peer mentoring role can impact positively on levels of social satisfaction and bullying for autistic students and support them to become more socially and academically competent through the development of self-regulated learning. Collaborative problem-solving indicated that autistic students could support, and be supported by, their non-autistic peers to address real life issues within the school environment. Peer mentoring can enable students to develop a greater sense of personal agency and, through the generalisation of strategies, evidence how their behaviour and approach to learning can positively impact on social and academic functioning. Increased mutual understanding and awareness of autistic and non-autistic peers, fostered through exchanging views and experiences within the peer mentoring groups, furthered the students

understanding of the way in which their own agency may impact on other learners within school. Helping to develop an awareness that there are consequences for the decisions and actions they take and that this will impact on the thinking, behaviour and decisions of others, and vice versa. Supporting the need for a wider based curriculum offer for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. As Jordan (2015, p.5) states, *“Understanding autism should also lead to the recognition that the educational curriculum cannot just be about accessing the same curriculum as others but also needs to include ‘therapeutic’ content, addressing the missing social and emotional understanding that others (including those with severe learning difficulty) just develop naturally. Individuals with autism will benefit from some of the same approaches that are used for other groups, but the way they are used may need to differ.”*

The use of Agency Theory as a framework for the mentoring programme has shown that it is critical to consider the pedagogical approaches that are adopted by practitioners and schools, and to question and challenge those that are overtly adult-centric, with an emphasis on delivery and curriculum coverage. Involving and engaging autistic learners in the choices about the ‘what’ as well as the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of what is being learned promotes learner agency and means greater inclusion in the whole learning process, including decisions about the curriculum itself. Student voice is critical to this process and practitioners need to consider how that is reflected in the day to day processes, practice and decisions that are made within schools. The peer mentoring programme enabled autistic students to voice their successes, challenges, views and ideas in a more engaged and authentic way that related to their interests and learning. As such, the study adds to the limited research literature on the input of autistic children and young people on the design and delivery of educational approaches in schools.

The frequency and length of the programme afforded co-ordinators the opportunity to develop their understanding of individual students and meant they could offer more appropriate support, guidance and scaffolding for their learning.

In contrast to prescriptive or scripted approaches, the flexibility and personalisation of the mentoring programme meant practitioners had increased agency and could adapt, add and change sessions to focus on current issues that were meaningful to the students. The importance of agency is highlighted by Guldberg (2016, p.13) in her review of evidence based practice in autism educational research. She states that *“The issue of agency is a crucial one in that it highlights the need to introduce methodologies that position not only teachers, but also individuals with autism and their families at the centre of inquiry and knowledge. This can enable research to be both practical in terms of day-to-day practice and modifiable to meet diverse pupil needs.”*

The extent to which the current study achieved this is discussed in the next section.

7.32 METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The lack of involvement from teachers and practitioners in research on educational approaches (Parsons et al., 2011) and the gap between research and practice in real-life settings (Reichow et al., 2008) has meant there is limited knowledge of how laboratory-based studies would work in a school setting, or whether studies that are tested first in schools are sustainable. The current study sought to address this issue through researching the peer mentoring programme in the context in which it would be used i.e. mainstream secondary schools (Weisz, 2000). Building on evidence that knowledge transfer from researchers to the classroom has shown little impact in improving educational outcomes for children and

providing support for greater engagement and involvement of practitioners in research (BERA-RSA, 2014). As such, this study contributes to the evidence base for participatory research methodologies (e.g., Leibowitz, Ndebele and Winberg, 2014) that seek to empower practitioners to co-create knowledge and recognises the fundamental importance of their perspective and skills, gained through experience in real-life contexts (Hammersley, 2005; Nind, 2006). Highlighting that research is unlikely to be fully meaningful, or have any real impact on practice, without the knowledge, understanding and experience of practitioners (Guldberg, 2016). The current study also extends the findings on practitioner and researcher collaboration from a research project on '*Knowledge co-construction in technology enhanced learning for children with autism*' (Parsons et al., 2015). Indicating that practitioners were more likely to engage with knowledge co-construction if they were confident in their role, had support from senior management and had agency with respect to driving new initiatives.

7.4 LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

Thomas (2016), in his paper evaluating the use and status of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in educational research, argues strongly about the epistemic benefits of methodological diversity and the inherent danger of viewing RCTs as a 'gold standard' to the detriment of other approaches. Postulating that cause can be, and is, inferred in a variety of ways in scientific exploration of various kinds and making a strong case for "*a restoration of respect for the heterogeneity of education inquiry*" (Thomas, 2016, p.390). Within this context, the use of an identical approach of mixed methods data gathering (Howe, 2009) in five contextually and institutionally different schools provided a robust methodological approach for undertaking comparative case studies of the educational experience of autistic students and a more complete understanding of the process and outcomes from the new

peer mentoring programme. Supporting Shaffer's view that *"Rather than eulogizing one particular method, energies could more fruitfully be directed toward selecting the 'optimal mix' of research methods which address the key research questions in hand"* (Shaffer, 2011, p.1631). As such I feel that the findings can be approached with confidence in the context in which they were undertaken: five local authority mainstream secondary schools within Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. As with any study, this does not mean that limitations or limiting factors exist within the research and these are outlined next.

Firstly, external generalisability cannot be claimed, due to the many factors that impact on the experiences, views and progress of autistic students, their peers and staff within schools. These include the type of provision and practice that is in place and the multitude of social and academic interactions that occur every day outside of the peer mentoring programme sessions. Though the five schools offered contrasting elements adequate for theory development, as well as a degree of similarity, they were effectively self-selecting and as such it could be argued that they were inherently more interested in taking on the programme and making it work.

Secondly, though the study provided an element of research over time it did not add to the paucity of literature looking at longitudinal effects of an approach or intervention in this field. The original plan to do a two year follow up study was made problematic by the academisation programme leading to structural and staff changes within all the case study schools. This meant that a follow up study was not possible and the long-term effects of being involved in the peer mentoring programme for the autistic students could not be researched.

Thirdly, the lack of data from the key people in each school who had the responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the programme is acknowledged as a gap in the findings. Gaining the views of the SENCOs and Deputy Heads through semi-structured interviews would have enabled me to gain a richer understanding of factors impacting on the implementation of the peer mentoring programme.

Fourthly, the lack of school based data on the academic progress of the autistic students meant that their perceived levels of academic competence could not be cross-referenced with actual academic progress. This must be acknowledged as a gap in the understanding of the impact of the programme for those students, though it is recognised that this was not an original focus of the study.

Further limitations came from the logistical challenges of undertaking of a comparative study between five schools as a single researcher. Though I did not work directly in any of the case study schools as a practitioner it is acknowledged that this may lead to unintentional biases in analysis. Furthermore, the scale and scope of the study was limited due to working full-time whilst undertaking the research on a part-time basis. This meant the parameters for the numbers of schools, participants, interviews and surveys were set due to the time constraints of both work and undertaking the research on my own. This was particularly relevant to the data collected on the non-autistic mentors and possible further recommendations that could have been made on the relevance of the programme to meeting the needs of all students in mainstream secondary schools. It was evident from the semi-structured interviews and mentoring questionnaires that there was a good level of engagement, understanding and enjoyments of the mentoring role by the non-autistic mentors. This suggests that the

programme and approach would potentially be of benefit to other non-autistic students and supportive of a more 'integrative approach' to inclusion, as proposed by Ravet (2011). The author presents a strong argument for establishing a national programme of continuing professional development in autism for all teachers and support staff in mainstream schools. Firstly, to ensure that all learning environments and pedagogies in mainstream schools are adapted to enable learners on the autism spectrum to participate and succeed in both academic and non-academic areas. Secondly, that good autism practice could also benefit other mainstream students without lessening the importance, or impact, of strategies for autistic students. However, there was no data collected on the pre-programme and post-programme levels of social satisfaction, academic competence, social competence and bullying experienced by non-autistic students in the study. This meant it was not possible to compare similar measures with the autistic students and analyse the outcomes for non-autistic students in the same way.

Logistical constraints also meant that a control group or groups were not established where I could have compared autistic students on the new peer mentoring programme with similar individuals who receive a different approach (or no approach) and follow both sets of individuals over time. Thus, while it was possible to begin to identify moderators and mediators for the peer mentoring programme (i.e. through replications across different conditions) it was not possible to systematically test this by involving larger numbers of participants and long-term evaluations of outcome (Smith et al., 2007).

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While there has been a significant increase in the number of studies over the past decade into autism (Pellicano, Dinsmore, and Charman, 2014) there is still much work to be done on developing better methodological frameworks to examine the effectiveness of various approaches and interventions within schools (Parsons et al., 2013). This thesis has developed a robust methodology to analyse the implementation and outcomes of a new peer mentoring programme through a case study research design. Recommendations based on the study are given followed by the identification of possible future directions for research in this area.

In evaluating the new peer mentoring programme, findings suggest that schools had engaged positively and productively with the project. The strong qualitative evidence provided by the autistic mentor 'voice' and the quantitative evidence gathered from peers and programme co-ordinators highlighted the benefits experienced by those involved. This provides an enhanced basis for the engagement of further schools and the opportunity to look at updating, enhancing and extending the existing programme to become more embedded within internal school structures. Looking ahead, the following are highlighted as relevant issues, worthy of consideration: extending the peer mentoring programme to other groups e.g., non-autistic students, older students and other SEN groups; programme co-ordinators, who often have busy workloads in addition to mentoring duties, would benefit from more training in developing effective processes and systems; continued training for mentors that enables them to identify both the content and outcomes they want; a continued model of all children mentoring each other, as opposed to a mentor-mentee model; involvement by members of the school leadership team in the implementation of the programme; identifying and using methods to capture and measure the effectiveness and impact of the peer

mentoring scheme, including standardised school measures and tools such as the AET progression framework; and finally, ensuring that the peer mentoring programme is seen as one strategy amongst several used to support autistic students. This supports the view that mixing approaches and strategies or 'informed eclecticism' can provide an effective and individualised programme of support for autistic students within schools (Weisz et al., 2012).

Further research would ideally focus on the longitudinal effects of involvement in the peer mentoring programme and focus on different populations to see if the model was effective for them or not. Comparative studies could include research into the impact of different mentoring models across several schools. This would include an element of fine-tuning and improvements of survey instruments and methodology to ensure that the experiences and outcomes of students and staff were most effectively captured. Involving further analysis of the mediators and moderators for peer mentoring programmes and investigation into factors supporting or challenging implementation and sustainability. Research into the most effective ways of disseminating research outcomes to schools is needed to ensure that it is managed, communicated and presented in a way that is meaningful and informs practice.

Outcomes and recommendations from the current study were discussed with the programme co-ordinators and key staff in schools. However, more detailed research into this process would enable a better fit to the specific context for each school and provide better opportunities for reflecting on, and changing, practice. It is critical that this is a two-way process that enables not just knowledge transfer but knowledge exchange between the researcher and setting, making it more likely for practitioners to implement new practices (Parsons et al., 2013).

7.6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The defining feature of autism (despite the arguments about the biological basis) is that those on the autism spectrum lack instinctive social understanding and the motivation to engage socially. This postulates that they do not find social interactions as rewarding or social signals as meaningful as other people, and thus must learn cognitively (including being taught) the things others acquire naturally. As Jordan (2015, p.7) states, *“Humans are social animals, born with a very underdeveloped brain. Most of brain development occurs after birth but, unless you have autism, the learning that determines that development is socially guided. Only in autism are infants left on their own to make sense of the world and to learn how to operate within it. It is not unsurprising if their understanding and ways of reacting are idiosyncratic. In that way, individuals on the spectrum are even more different to one another and do not share many (if any) ‘autistic’ behaviours.”*

These differences are important when considering the development of any educational approach to support autistic children and young people in schools. It makes our understanding of the individual critical. Without this understanding we can make incorrect and often damaging assumptions about autistic students (Jones et al., 2008).

The new peer mentoring programme was developed within an interactionist or transactional framework that views autism and disability as being part of diversity, with interactions between individuals and the environment key to the challenges they face (Prizant and Fields-Meyer, 2015). This emphasises the importance of social competence rather than focussing exclusively on the development of social skills. In contrast, a social model of disability identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion as the means that society is the main contributory factor in disabling people. Whilst the medical model views autism and

resulting disabilities as the result of a physical condition intrinsic to the individual, seen through the lens of a flawed existence (Hwang, 2000). It is the medical model that has underpinned much of the research designs and EBP in autism education with a disproportionately high number of studies focussing on behavioural interventions that seek to 'normalise' autistic individuals (Howlin, 2010; Milton, 2014). These studies often fail to capture the key features of teaching and learning that occur in real-life contexts, and as such may not offer solutions to the practical challenges that are found in schools (Guldborg et al., 2013). As discussed earlier in this Chapter, this thesis was aligned with more participatory research methodologies (e.g., Leibowitz, Ndebele and Winberg, 2014), that value and incorporate the knowledge, skills and experiences of practitioners and students in the co-creation of knowledge (Guldborg, 2016). Ecological validity was sought by conducting research in school settings from the outset (Calder et al., 2013) and focussing on improving meaningful outcomes for autistic children and young people. Furthermore, it sought to change the understanding and awareness of autism by peers and staff within schools, rather than singularly focussing on the abilities of autistic students (Kasari and Smith, 2013).

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Search Terms for Empirical Strand of the Literature Review

Peer relationships and approaches in mainstream schools

Subject Area	Specific Terms	
Terms for Autism	Autistic spectrum condition or disorder (ASC/Ds) (Classic) Autism Autistic Atypical autism Asperger(s) syndrome (AS) High functioning autism (HFA)	
Terms for children and young people	Pupils Youth Students Adolescents Teenagers	Young people Young adults Girl(s) Boy(s) Individuals
Terms for educational approaches and provision	Pedagogy Teaching/classroom methods /approaches Educational practices or strategies Curriculum Classroom or learning environment Mainstream	Inclusive education Teacher/staff/classroom assistant training Comprehensive Programme
Terms for Friendships	Friendships Peers Relationships Exclusion	Inclusion Social Skills Social Competence Social Interactions Social Understanding
Terms for Bullying	Bullying Bullying policy Anti-bullying Protective factors	Victimisation Peer support Risk factors

Search Terms for Peer Mentoring in Mainstream Schools

Subject Area	Specific Terms	
Terms for peer mentoring	Peer mentoring Peer mediation Peer relationships Peer education Peer tutor Buddying Buddy Systems	Peer feedback Peer learning Peer support Mentorship Youth mentoring

Appendix 2: Different strands of the Mixed Methods Research Paradigm

Mixed Method Research Strands	Epistemology - Philosophical assumptions on what constitutes knowledge -	Research and Researcher Approach	Strategy of Inquiry	Strategy of Researcher	Method of Data Collection
Flexible Mixed Method	Knowledge is: A combination of inductive and deductive thinking, measuring, observing, and developing new meanings.	Mixed Methods. “Meaning maker”	Sequential design, where each may be based on different paradigms.	Researcher as neutral knowledge gatherer. Uses many methods to seek convergence or divergence of analysis outcomes and obtain new knowledge and understanding.	Triangulation. Sequential procedures. May use both positivist & interpretivist methods, interviews, surveys, text analysis
Pragmatism Evaluative or Experimental Mixed Methods	Knowledge is: A combination of facts and words/meanings to solve problems.	“Mixed Methods. External Evaluator/ problem-solver”.	Parallel design, Concurrent design to use triangulation to verify solution to problems.	Researcher as outsider, pragmatic, uses different methods to evaluate a process or community and find objectively what works.	Triangulation. Sequential procedures. May use both positivist & constructivist methods, interviews, surveys, text analysis
Pragmatism Mixed Methods Interpretivism	Knowledge is: A combination of facts and words/meanings to solve problems.	“Mixed methods. Democratically inclined, “bottom up” inquirer and inspirer”.	Parallel design, Concurrent design to use triangulation to verify solution to problems.	Researcher trying to see the issue more as an insider, through democratic involvement and obtaining all relevant voices in the study. Uses different methods, and through inclusion and dialogues seeks mutual benefit of research.	Triangulation. Sequential or parallel procedures. May use both positivist & interpretivist methods, interviews, surveys, text analysis, case studies.
Transformative Social Justice Mixed Methods	Knowledge is: A combination of facts and meanings to uncover injustice and suggest actions and social empowerment. Often focused on feminist, racial, queer and disability.	Mixed Methods. “Transformer”.	Mixes quantitative and qualitative methods depending on purpose and audience to assist in transformation process.	Researcher is subjectively involved with stakeholders to achieve a good understanding of their world and assist in empowering them to change it. Participants are involved in methods decisions.	Ethnographies. Grounded theory. Case studies. Narrative Research Triangulation with quantitative methods. sequential procedures

From Grimstad (2013). Based on Creswell (2009), Greene (2008b), Mertens (2007), Denzin (2010), Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), and Howe (2004).

Appendix 3: Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (Asher and Renshaw, 1984)

Please tick only one box per question

	Always true	True most of the time	Sometimes True	Hardly ever true	Not true at all
1. It's easy for me to make new friends at school					
2. I have nobody to talk to					
3. I am good at working with other students					
4. It's hard for me to make friends					
5. I have lots of friends					
6. I feel alone					
7. I can find a friend when I need one					
8. It's hard to get other students to like me					
9. I don't have anyone to play with					
10. I get along with other students					
11. I feel left out of things					
12. There is nobody to go to when I need help					
13. I do not get along with other students					
14. I am lonely					
15. I am well liked by students on my class					
16. I do not have any friends					

Appendix 4: Questionnaire on level of Bullying (adapted from *Anti-Bullying Alliance Audit Questionnaire for KS3/4, 2007*)

1. Have you been bullied in school in the last 12 months?

No ☐

Yes ☐

2. When did the bullying last happen?
(Please tick one box)

Today ☐

In the last week ☐

In the last month ☐

In the last term ☐

In the last year ☐

3. What form/s did the bullying take?
(You can tick more than one box)

Physical ☐

Verbal ☐

Internet ☐

Mobile phone ☐

Indirect ☐

(Excluding you,
Spreading rumours about you)

4. Who did you tell?
(You can tick more than one box)

☐

No one

School staff

A friend

My parent or carer

My brother or sister

Another adult

A helpline

☐☐☐☐☐☐

5. What Happened?

(You can tick more than one box)

Something was done that stopped the bullying

☐

Something was done but it didn't stop the bullying

☐

Something was done but it made the bullying worse

☐

Nothing was done but the bullying stopped anyway

☐

Nothing was done and the bullying carried on

☐

Appendix 5: Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985)

Please tick only one box per question							
	Really True For me	Sort of True For me				Sort of True For me	Really True For me
1.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children feel they are very good at their school work	But	Other children worry about whether they can do their school work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children find it hard to make friends	But	Other children find it easy to make friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children do very well at all kinds of sports	But	Other children don't feel they are good when it comes to sport	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are happy with the way they look	But	Other children are not happy with the way they look	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children often do not like the way they behave	But	Other children usually like the way they behave	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are often unhappy with themselves	But	Other children are pretty pleased with themselves	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children feel they are just as clever as other students	But	Other children feel they are not as clever as other students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children have a lot of friends	But	Other children don't have very many friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children wish they could be a lot better at sports	But	Other children feel they are good enough at sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are happy with their height or weight	But	Other children wish their height	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

					or weight was different		
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11.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children usually do the right thing	But	Other children often don't do the right thing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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12.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children don't like the way they are leading their life	But	Other children do like the way they are leading their life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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13.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are slow at finishing their school work	But	Other children can do their school work quickly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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14.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children would like to have a lot more friends	But	Other children have as many friends as they want	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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15.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children think they could do well at any new sport	But	Other children are afraid they do not do well at new sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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16.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children wish their body was different	But	Other children like their body the way it is	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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17.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children usually behave the way they are supposed to	But	Other children usually don't behave the way they are supposed to	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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



18.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are happy with themselves as a person	But	Other children are usually not happy with themselves	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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



19.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children often forget what they learn	But	Other children remember things easily	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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



20.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are always doing things with a lot of other children	But	Other children usually do things by themselves	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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



21.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children feel they are better at sports than other children	But	Other children don't feel they can play as well	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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22.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children wished they looked different	But	Other children like the way they look	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children usually get in trouble because of things they do	But	Other children don't do things that get them into trouble	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children like the kind of person they are	But	Other children often wish they were someone else	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children do very well at their classwork	But	Other children don't do very well at their classwork	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children wish more people their own age liked them	But	Other children feel that most people their own age do like them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children usually watch games and sports instead of playing	But	Other children usually play instead of watching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children wish something about their face or hair was different	But	Other children like their face and hair the way they are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children do things they know they shouldn't do	But	Other children hardly ever do things they know they shouldn't do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are very happy being the way they are	But	Other children wish they were different	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children have trouble working out the answers in school	But	Other children can usually work out the answers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some children are popular with other people their own age	But	Other children are not very popular	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

33.			Some children don't do well at new outdoor games and sports	But	Other children are good at new games and sports right away		
-----	---	---	---	-----	--	---	---

34.			Some children think that they are good looking	But	Other children think that they are not very good looking		
-----	---	---	--	-----	--	---	---

35.			Some children behave themselves very well	But	Other children often find it hard to behave themselves		
-----	---	---	---	-----	--	---	---

36.			Some children are not happy with the way they do a lot of things	But	Other children think the way they do things is fine		
-----	---	---	--	-----	---	---	---

Appendix 6: Pre-and post-programme questionnaire for peer mentors

pre-programme questionnaire	Agree	Disagree
I am pleased to be a mentor		
I feel well prepared by my school to be a mentor		
I think I can be helpful to the person I am mentoring		
I think I have a lot to offer in mentoring		
I think being a mentor will be good for me		
I feel confident that there is someone I can go to if I have a problem with my mentoring role		
I think the mentoring scheme will be very helpful to the students being mentored		
I think the mentoring scheme in this school is very well organised		

post-programme questionnaire	Agree	Disagree
I was pleased to be a mentor		
I did feel prepared by my school to be a mentor		
I was helpful to the person I was mentoring		
I do have a lot to offer in mentoring		
I think being a mentor was good for me		
I was confident that there is someone I could go to if I had a problem with my mentoring role		
I think the mentoring scheme was very helpful to the students being mentored		
I think the mentoring scheme in this school was very well organised		

Appendix 7: Pre-programme Questionnaire for programme co-ordinators

What is this evaluation about?

Thank you very much for helping with this evaluation of the peer mentoring programme in your school. I am asking the programme co-ordinators within every school taking part in this study to complete a questionnaire providing me with information about their programme, its aims, structure, and management. Your responses are very important to help me develop an understanding of the implementation and delivery of the peer mentoring programme.

The questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. **All information will be treated as confidential.** If you have any queries about this research or about the questionnaire please do not hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED], or alternatively email: [REDACTED]

How to answer the questions

There are four parts to the questionnaire; please complete each of these.

There are two types of question. You can answer most questions by writing in your answers.

Other questions require putting a cross against the answer you choose.

MANAGEMENT

A1. To whom will you report to on developments/progress with the peer mentoring programme in your school and how frequently will this occur?

A2. Who will line manage you as the programme co-ordinator?

Position:

A3. Number of other staff involved in the programme: (*please choose one*)

None 1-3 4-6 7 staff or more

A4. How aware are other staff within the school of the peer mentoring programme?
(*please choose one*)

Not aware

Few are aware

Some are aware

Majority are aware

All are aware

A5. What will be the involvement of other staff within the school?

A6. Is this level of involvement adequate?

YES NO

A7. Will there be any external agencies involved in the scheme? If so, who are these and what will be their role?

TRAINING

B1. Have you run a peer mentoring programme before?

YES NO

B2. Have you attended any other form of training that will aid you in facilitating the peer mentoring programme?

YES NO

B2a. If YES please provide details of the name and content of this training below:

Name:

Content:

B3. How confident are you in training peer mentors? (*please choose one*)

1 = not confident

2 = have slight concerns

3 = confident

4 = highly confident

1 2 3 4

B4. What further support or information would be of use in helping you to run the peer mentoring programme?

THE PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

C1. What is the anticipated number of male and female mentors:

a. Male mentors

b. Female mentors

C2. On what basis will mentors be matched? *(please tick all that apply)*

- a. Ethnicity
- b. Sex
- c. Age
- d. Perceived strengths of mentors
- e. Personality of mentor
- f. Hobbies/interests of mentors
- g. Other *(please describe below)*

C3. What will be the frequency of programme sessions? *(please choose one)*

- More than once a week
- Once a week
- Once every two weeks
- Once every three weeks
- Once every four weeks
- Ad-hoc

C4. What will be the duration of programme sessions? *(please choose one)*

- Up to 15 minutes
- 15-30 minutes
- 30-60 minutes
- Over an hour

C5. Please describe what training/preparation will be provided to mentors (e.g. what will be covered, length/intensity of induction)

C6. What do you hope the peer mentoring programme will achieve?
(please tick all that apply)

- a. Reducing incidents of bullying
- b. Increasing student attainment
- c. Improving student transitions
- d. Improving student friendships/relationships
- d. Other *(please detail below)*

C7. How do you plan to measure whether the scheme has been successful in achieving the above?

C8. What difficulties do you anticipate in implementing the scheme?

(in the following question, please mark; 1 = anticipate major problem, 2 = anticipate a problem, 3 = anticipate small problem, 4 = anticipate no problem)

- a. Managing time
- b. Lack of staff support
- c. Engaging young people in the scheme
- d. Sustaining peer mentor involvement
- e. Identifying benefits for mentors
- f. Other *(please describe below)*

OTHER

D1. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the peer mentoring programme within your school?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

All data gathered is held in confidence and no school or individual will be named.

Appendix 8: Post-Programme Questionnaire for Programme Co-ordinators

NAME OF SCHOOL:

YOUR NAME:

POSITION:

DATE:

What is this evaluation about?

Thank you very much for helping with this evaluation of the peer mentoring programme in your school. I am asking the programme co-ordinators within every school taking part in this study to complete a questionnaire providing me with information about their programme, its aims, structure, and management. Your responses are very important to help me develop an understanding of the effectiveness of the peer mentoring programme.

The questionnaire should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. **All information will be treated as confidential.** If you have any queries about this research or about the questionnaire please do not hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED] or alternatively email: [REDACTED]

How to answer the questions

There are four parts to the questionnaire; please complete each of these.

There are two types of question. You can answer most questions by writing in your answers. Other questions require putting a cross against the answer you choose.

MANAGEMENT

A1. Who did you report to on developments/progress with the peer mentoring programme in your school and how frequently did this occur?

A2. Who did line manages you as the programme co-ordinator?

Position:

A3. Number of other staff involved in the programme: (*please choose one*)

None 1-3 4-6 7 staff or more

A4. How aware were other staff within the school of the peer mentoring programme? (*please choose one*)

Not aware

Few are aware

Some are aware

Majority are aware

All are aware

A5. What was the involvement of other staff within the school?

A6. Was this level of involvement adequate?

YES NO

A7. Were there any external agencies involved in the scheme? If so, who were these and what was their role?

TRAINING

B3. How confident are you now in training peer mentors? (*please choose one*)

1 = not confident

2 = have slight concerns

3 = confident

4 = highly confident

1 2 3 4

B4. What further support or information would be of use in helping you to run the peer mentoring programme?

THE PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

C1. What was the number of male and female mentors:

a. Male mentors

b. Female mentors

C2. On what basis were the mentors and mentees matched? (*please tick all that apply*)

a. Ethnicity

b. Sex

c. Age

d. Perceived strengths of mentors

e. Personality of mentor

f. Hobbies/interests of mentors

g. Other (*please describe below*)

C3. What was the frequency of programme sessions? *(please choose one)*

More than once a week
Once a week
Once every two weeks
Once every three weeks
Once every four weeks
Ad-hoc

C4. What was the duration of programme sessions? *(please choose one)*

Up to 15 minutes
15-30 minutes
30-60 minutes
Over an hour

C5. Please describe what training/preparation was provided to mentors (e.g. what was covered, length/intensity of induction)

C6. What do you feel the peer mentoring programme achieved?

(please tick all that apply)

- a. Reducing incidents of bullying**
- b. Increasing student attainment**
- c. Improving student transitions**
- d. Improving student friendships/relationships**
- d. Other** *(please detail below)*

C7. How did you measure whether the scheme has been successful in achieving the above?

C8. What difficulties did you have in implementing the scheme?

(in the following question, please mark; 1 = anticipate major problem, 2 = anticipate a problem, 3 = anticipate small problem, 4 = anticipate no problem)

- a. Managing time
- b. Lack of staff support
- c. Engaging young people in the scheme
- d. Sustaining peer mentor involvement
- e. Identifying benefits for mentors
- f. Other *(please describe below)*

OTHER

D1. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the peer mentoring programme within your school?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

All data gathered is held in confidence and no school or individual will be named.

Appendix 9: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Autistic Students

Introduction

Explain my role and the aims of the interview and how long it should last. Refer to information sheet sent to students prior to interviews. Refer to list of topics covered in the mentoring sessions for reference. Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers.

Aims of the interview

Explain that the questions will focus on their experience of being a peer mentor.

Confidentiality

Explain that what they say is treated as confidential but anything that is said which is of concern about their safety or that of someone else will be reported to the staff co-ordinator. I am interested in hearing about anything that you think is important. You do not have to tell us anything that you do not want to and if at any time, you do not want to answer a question, you can say so and we'll go on to the next question. You are free to end the interview at any point.

When the research is written up, no one is identified and all data remains confidential. (Even when I write up the research, you will not be named. Everything will stay private and no one will ever know that it was you).

Seek permission to tape the interview (I would like to use quotes within our report so if you say it is okay I would like to tape our talk.)

General information

Name of school:

Student number:

Date:

Warm-up Questions

Start interview by talking about their interests (discussed with co-ordinator and student previously).

Interview Questions

1. Experience of Year Seven

What has year seven been like for you (*what do you like about it, what don't you like about, what would you change*)

2. Role of a Peer Mentor

- a. Tell me what a peer mentor is? (*what peer mentors do, who can be a peer mentor, who do they work with and why*)

- b. What was it like being a peer mentor at this school? (*probe whether they liked/disliked the role and why, would they do it again, do they think it's an important role?*)
- c. What things helped you to be a peer mentor? (*probe about co-ordinator, induction and training, information, and resources, organisational factors e.g. place, time, frequency, familiarity/friendships with other peer mentors in the group*)
- d. Which things didn't help you? (*probe as above*)

3. Peer Mentoring Sessions

Tell me what you talked about in the peer mentoring sessions?

- a. Which of these things were the most helpful for you?
(*probe topic areas, was it relevant/meaningful/interesting for them, did they feel they had an equal say/were listened to, did it help in school*)
- b. Which of these things were helpful for other students?
(*build on previous answers and extend view to get a perspective on impact for other students, probe about relationships with other mentors, can they give examples of things they helped with*)
- c. What did (name of co-ordinator) help with the most?
(*probe views on role of co-ordinator, support with organisation, managing the group, giving students opportunities to talk and listen to each other, support outside of group*)

4. Autism Awareness (only asked where a diagnosis had been disclosed)

- a. Tell me what you learnt about autism?
- b. Did this help you understand more about autism and how it affects you or other people?

Appendix 10: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Non-Autistic Students

Introduction

Explain role and aims of the interview and how long it should last. Refer to information sheet sent to students prior to interviews. Refer to list of topics covered in the mentoring sessions for reference. Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers.

Aims of the interview

Explain that the questions will focus on their experience of being a peer mentor.

Confidentiality

Explain that what they say is treated as confidential but anything that is said which is of concern about their safety or that of someone else will be reported to the staff co-ordinator. I am interested in hearing about anything that you think is important. You do not have to tell us anything that you do not want to and if at any time, you do not want to answer a question, you can say so and we'll go on to the next question. You are free to end the interview at any point.

When the research is written up, no one is identified and all data remains confidential.
(Even when I write up the research, you will not be named. Everything will stay private and no one will ever know that it was you).

Seek permission to tape the interview

(I would like to use quotes within our report so if you say it is okay I would like to tape our talk.)

General information

Name of school:

Student number:

Date:

Warm-up Questions

Start interview by talking about their plans for the summer holidays.

What has year 7 been like for you? What do you like about it? What don't you like about?

Interview Questions

1. Experience of Year Seven

What has year seven been like for you *(what do you like about it, what don't you like about, what would you change)*

2. Role of a Peer Mentor

- a. Tell me what a peer mentor is? (*what peer mentors do, who can be a peer mentor, who do they work with and why*)
- b. What was it like being a peer mentor at this school? (*probe whether they liked/disliked the role and why, would they do it again, do they think it's an important role?*)
- c. What things helped you to be a peer mentor? (*probe about co-ordinator, induction and training, information, and resources, organisational factors e.g. place, time, frequency, familiarity/friendships with other peer mentors in the group*)
- d. Which things didn't help you? (*probe as above*)

3. Peer Mentoring Sessions

Tell me what you talked about in the peer mentoring sessions?

- a. Which of these things were the most helpful for you?
(*probe topic areas, was it relevant/meaningful/interesting for them, did they feel they had an equal say/were listened to, did it help in school*)
- b. Which of these things were helpful for other students?
(*build on previous answers and extend view to get a perspective on impact for other students, probe about relationships with other mentors, can they give examples of things they helped with*)
- c. What did (name of co-ordinator) help with the most?
(*probe views on role of co-ordinator, support with organisation, managing the group, giving students opportunities to talk and listen to each other, support outside of group*)

4. Autism Awareness (only asked where a diagnosis had been disclosed)

- a. Tell me what you learnt about autism?
- b. Did this help you understand more about (name of autistic mentor) and how autism affects them or other people in school?

Appendix 11: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for Programme Co-ordinators

Introduction

Explain:

- How long the interview should last
- Explain role and aims of the interview and that there are no right or wrong answers.

Aims of the interview

To gain an understanding of (i) how the programme was managed, (ii) how the programme was implemented, and (iii) what outcomes resulted from the programme. I want to explore scheme co-ordinators previous experiences with peer mentoring, their training and experience, perceived benefits of the scheme, and any difficulties.

Confidentiality

Explain that what they say is treated as confidential (*I am interested in hearing about anything that you think is important. You do not have to tell me anything that you do not want to and if at any time, you do not want to answer a question, you must say so and we'll go on to the next question. You can also stop the interview at any point*).

When the research is written up, no one is identified and all data remains confidential. (*Even when I write up the research, you will not be named. Everything will stay private and no one will ever know that it was you*).

Seek permission to tape the interview (*I would like to use quotes within thesis so if you say it is okay I would like to tape our talk*.)

General information

Name of school:

Date:

Name of staff member:

Position:

Warm-up Question

Start interview by talking about their plans for the summer holidays.

Interview Questions

Aims and Objectives of PM Programme

1) What would you say was the aim of your PM programme?

Probe understanding of issues around the intended aim and whether they felt they achieved this.

2) How do you feel the PM programme 'fits' within the school?

e.g. is peer mentoring something that fits with the school ethos, its practices and activities or is it something quite new

3) What benefits do you think mentors received over the course of the PM programme?

Probe for tangible benefits, short term/long term, how realistic these are and how this will be measured

7) Did you see any wider benefits for the school in running a PM programme?

8) At this stage, are there any plans to continue the PM programme?

Peer Mentors

1) Can you describe how mentors were selected for the PM programme.

probe whether selected / volunteered; what characteristics looking for / what attributes were important; how approached; responses / take-up

2) Describe how mentors were matched with one another and who was involved in this process?

probe whether based on:

- *Demographics (ethnicity/religion/age/sex)*
- *Personalities*
- *Hobbies*
- *Mentor strengths/weaknesses*

3) Was induction for mentors given as part of the programme?

If yes

- *Were you involved in delivering the induction? Explore how involved (what guidance/support received)*
- *Probe where / when / how this took place. What did the induction involve? (what covered, length and intensity of training)*
- *Explore whether anyone else was involved (i.e. supporting agencies/other teachers)*

4) How do you feel the induction process went?

Management

1) Are you the only member of staff involved in delivering the PM scheme?

If no

Probe

- *Who, what their roles are and how they became involved in the scheme;*
- *How and when they liaise with one another*
- *How helpful has the involvement of other staff been and why (e.g. on establishment, management, and potential impact of PM scheme)*

If yes

Probe

- *What was the impact of this*
- *Would you change this next time?*

2) How aware are other members of staff (those not involved in delivery) of the PM programme?

Probe

- *How staff made aware e.g. presentations, INSET days, etc.*
- *If awareness varies then why*
- *What impact increased awareness has upon management and delivery of the programme*

3) Are there any external agencies (e.g. the C&I Advisory team) that are involved in the programme?

Probe

- *Who*
- *What their involvement is*
- *Perceived usefulness*

4) What difficulties did you have in co-ordinating and overseeing the development of the PM programme? *e.g. managing time, engaging/sustaining engagement of mentors, determining outcomes*

5) Did you overcome these difficulties?

If yes

- *How and what helped*

If no

- *What were the barriers*

6) How did you measure the impact of the PM programme upon the students participating?

- *Explore what outcomes were considered*
- *What methods/instruments were used and when*

7) Can you describe how the peer mentoring sessions were organised?

- *Where*
- *When*
- *How often*
- *For how long*

8) Did you offer any incentives to peer mentors or mentees to participate in the scheme e.g. accreditation, badges, certificates, trips, refreshments?

If yes

- *Explore what, and how they were decided upon and what impact had*

If no

- *Explore why, and how decision not to offer incentives was reached*

Training

1) Have you had any prior experience around peer mentoring?

If yes

- *When/where*
- *Whether experience within school/s or external*

2) How useful did you find the induction for programme co-ordinators?

- *What was covered/not covered*
- *What was found useful / not useful*

3) Do you feel adequately trained to undertake the co-ordination of the PM programme?

- *Probe whether comfortable training peer mentors, overseeing them, supporting them, identifying outcomes, troubleshooting.*

- *Any other training, support, or experiences that they feel would help.*

Autism

1) What experience did you have working with autistic students before the PM programme?

Probe

- *What their role is and how they support them?*
- *Whether they supported autistic students on the programme?*
- *Was the way they supported them on the programme different to normal practice?*

2) Have you had training in autism or autism education?

If yes

- *What level of training e.g. INSET, external, certificate, undergrad, postgrad*

3) Did being a co-ordinator on the PM programme help you to understand the needs of the autistic mentors?

If yes

- *How it helped*
- *Did it change their view of autism?*
- *Did it change their view of the students?*

4) Do you think you feel that the programme would benefit other autistic students in your school?

If yes

- *In what ways?*
- *All autistic students or are there some it would benefit more/some it is not suitable for?*

5) Do you feel more empowered to support your colleagues in school in meeting the needs of autistic students?

If yes

- *Why is this?*
- *How will you do this.*

If no

- *Why not?*

- *What are the barriers?*

Other

Is there anything that we haven't covered about the peer mentoring programme that you would like to mention before we finish?

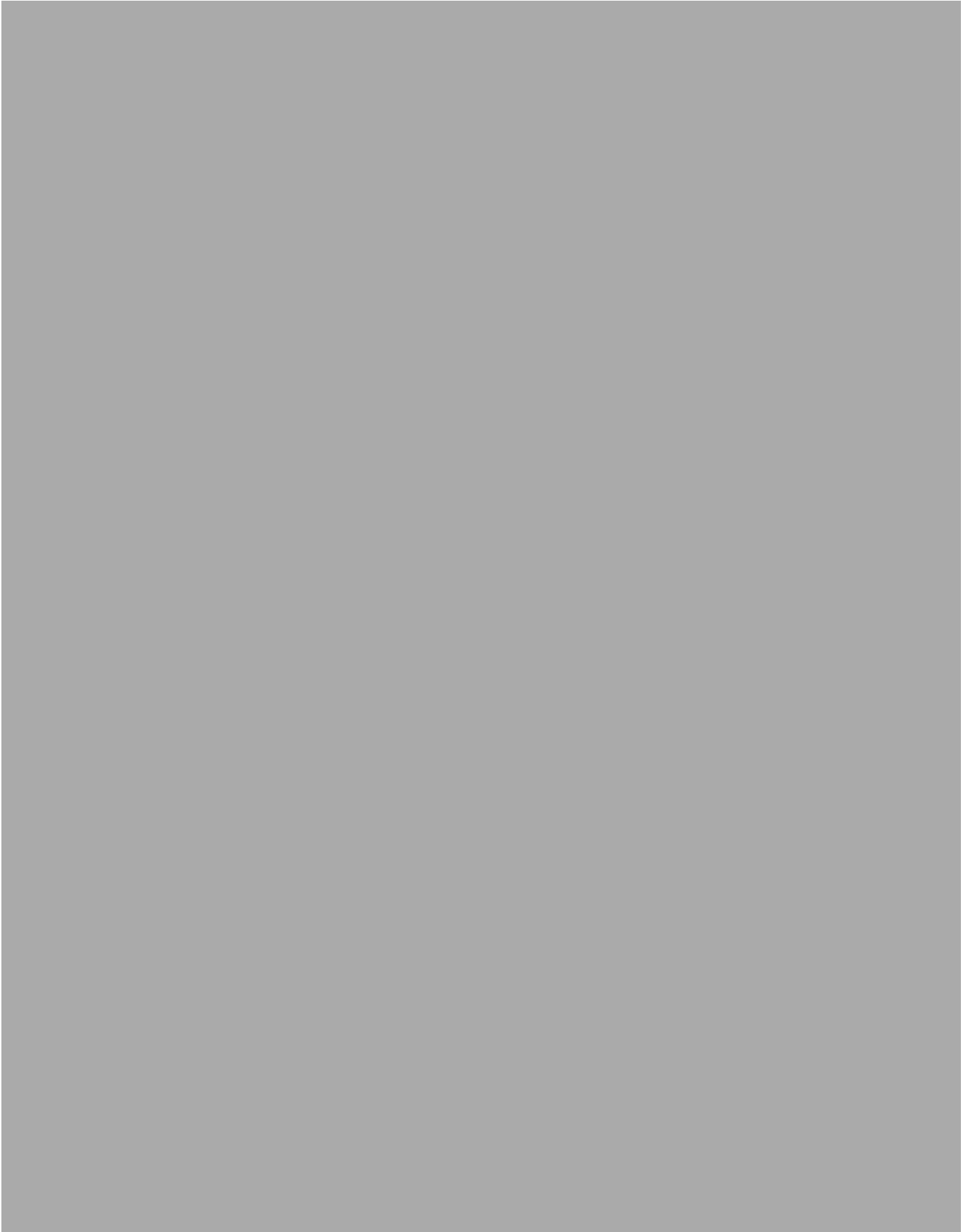
Appendix 12: Extract of the analysis grid with details of initial codes
(from semi-structured Interviews with co-ordinators: Questions on Induction)

Coded data is highlighted and the corresponding codes are listed in the next column.

Co-ordinator	Data Item	Initial Codes
Two	<i>I felt the induction sessions went well. Generally, we have very little time to spend on things like this. We're often expected to get on with it without always knowing what to do or why we're doing it. That's a bit unfair but it does happen. It was great the SENCo gave me enough time to do it and supported the process. I realised I should have done it a bit differently though. I'm not sure (students with autism) got what mentoring was when we did the training maybe it was a bit of overload next time I'd have a chat with them before the group (session). I do think it was a good process though and I enjoyed the chance to get their views. It's something that's difficult to find time for amongst getting all the work completed.</i>	Induction Time pressure Fairness Knowledge Skills SENCo Support Self-reflection Mentors understanding Overload Process Opportunity Time Student views
Four	<i>I did it (induction) in two sessions. One for the two autistic students and another one for all mentors, including them. I would recommend doing this. It did help (autistic students) but they weren't entirely sure what the programme was. We did talk about practical stuff and tried to make it as concrete It did help once we'd started. Helped all of them really. Would have been good to have someone else to help. Another TA or even a teacher would be good. Usual thing about having time to do it.</i>	Induction Sessions Autistic students Mentors Inclusion Recommendations Help Uncertainty Practical Support TA Teacher Time
Five	<i>Induction was good. I've done similar things for groups running here. I'm glad I separated it out and did sessions with the autistic mentors first. I mean individually. I think it was much easier for them to process and understand the information. We did it in a calm space when they weren't missing anything important and had time to talk through it with them. A couple get twitchy if they think they should be somewhere and they're not. The group ones went well. Seeing how they all interacted with each other was great and gave me an idea about things I might need to think about. Like who might dominate the group or who might need a bit of encouragement.</i>	Induction Good Experience Group Separate Sessions Autistic students Mentors Individual Process Understanding Environment Time Talk Planning Interactions Approach

Appendix 13: Email Record of Ethics Approval

[The Ethics Approvals letters are removed for confidentiality protection.]





Appendix 14: Peer Mentoring Information for Parents of Autistic Students

(NB. The original, was on paper with both Oxfordshire local authority and the University of Birmingham headings)

Dear Parents/Carers

Peer Mentoring Programme

I am a Lead Area Manager for the Autism Service in Oxfordshire and have recently secured funding from Birmingham University for a PhD research project. The project aims to introduce and study the impact of a new peer mentoring programme in mainstream Local Authority Secondary Schools. I am particularly interested in supporting the needs of autistic students through the mentoring programme.

Peer mentoring involves:

- Four students from the same class discussing and problem-solving issues that are important to them
- Regular mentoring group meetings managed by a trained staff co-ordinator supervising the programme and supporting the students

Peer mentoring aims to:

- Support the individualised needs of your child
- Promote the inclusion of your child in school

The research project will:

- Study outcomes for the peer mentors on levels of social satisfaction, bullying and self-esteem
- Involve your child completing four short questionnaires (before and after the programme)

Why is your child being asked?

Your child is in Year 7 at a mainstream Local Authority Secondary School and has a diagnosis of autism.

Do you or your child have to give your consent?

Contributing to this programme is entirely voluntary; In addition, if both you and your child have agreed to take part, but you or they decide they do not want to participate or continue; we will stop the process and any data involving them will be deleted or destroyed.

What will happen to the materials in the project?

The students, schools or staff members will not be named in any part of the research or any subsequent use of it for publication.

Timescale

Terms one and two 2012

Students approached to participate in the programme and given appropriate guidance and training on peer mentoring by the school co-ordinator.

Term three 2013

Peer Support Programme starts. Students asked to fill in questionnaires.

Term Six 2013

Programme ends. Students asked to fill in questionnaires again.

Contact

If you have any other questions or queries, please don't hesitate to contact me. My details are below.

Yours Sincerely

Ryan Bradley

Lead Area Manager

The Service for Autism
SENS
The Wheatley Centre
Littleworth Road
Wheatley
Oxon, OX33 1PH



Further information on the PhD project can be obtained from:

Dr Karen Guldberg
Director of ACER
School of Education
University of Birmingham
B15 2TT



Appendix 15: Peer Mentoring Programme Consent Form

(NB. The original, was on paper with both Oxfordshire local authority and the University of Birmingham headings)

Dear Parents/Carers

Your child has been asked to participate in a peer mentoring programme.

If you are happy for your child to take part in the programme then either;

- 1. Complete and return this form to school and/or**
- 2. E-mail me**

I do/do not want to take part in the peer mentoring programme

Name of child

Signed.....

I do/do not want to take part in the peer mentoring programme

Name of Parent/Guardian.....

Signed.....

Please Tick

- a. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- b. I understand my child's participation is voluntary and they are free to withdraw at any time.
- c. I understand that the students, school, or staff members will not be named in any part of the research or any subsequent use for publication.

☐☐☐

Appendix 16: Peer Mentoring Programme Guidelines

Contents

Section A: Overview of Autism

Section B: Overview of the Programme

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- Setting up the programme

Section C: Co-ordinator Information

- Role Description
- Checklist
- Induction

Section D: Peer Mentors Information

- Guidelines
- Role Description
- Practical Information
- Consent Form (see appendix 15)
- Pre-Programme Questionnaire (see appendix 6)
- Post-Programme Questionnaire (see appendix 6)

Section A: Overview of Autism

Autism is a term used to describe a neurological difference in brain development that has a marked effect on how a person develops. Different terminology (including the triad of impairments) is used in medical contexts which look at things a child cannot do to arrive at a diagnosis. The peer mentoring programme focuses instead on recognising differences and working with them in a positive way which is more helpful in an educational context for autistic students and staff. There are four key areas of difference that are particularly important for staff in schools and educational settings to understand and pay attention to because most autistic students will have individual educational needs to be met in these areas.

Key areas of difference are:

1. Interacting – the way autistic students interact, play and develop relationships
2. Processing Information – their attention, interest and how they learn
3. Sensory Processing - taking in and perceiving sensory information. This may include hyper (high) or hypo (low) sensitivity to the 5 senses, as well as balance and body awareness.
4. Communication – the way they communicate, understand and use language

Section B: Overview of the Programme

Programme Ethos

The Peer Mentoring Programme is aimed to be an autism friendly approach that supports both autistic and non-autistic students within mainstream secondary schools. All students act as mentors for each other (there are no mentees) and the programme aims to promote student voice, agency and autonomy through their involvement in the planning and content of the programme. The following principles and practice (taken from Agency Theory) should be promoted in the programme induction and mentoring sessions.

Principles	Practice
Engages mentors in meaningful and productive experiences.	Staff handing over position of authority to students to discuss what is relevant to them.
Addresses authentic and complex problems identified by the mentors.	Staff acting as facilitators for the students to promote collaboration and joint problem-solving.
Value mentor's views, decision making and input to the programme.	Students negotiating ground rules for participation and content of the sessions.
Removes boundaries between formal and informal learning contexts.	Students taking on different roles and visiting past experiences as a learner.
Promotes schools as collaborative learning communities.	Students sharing experiences and ideas through discussion.

The programme aims to promote both social skills and social competence and encourage the generalisation of learning to real-life contexts in school.

Social skills are the skills we use to communicate and interact with each other, both verbally and non-verbally, through gestures, body language and our personal appearance.

These include turn taking, joining in conversations, and selecting appropriate topics for conversation. They enable people to communicate, learn, ask for help, get their needs met in appropriate ways, get along with others, make friends and develop social competence.

Social competence can be characterised by the effective use of social skills to result in positive social outcomes.

This means having an ability to take another's perspective concerning a situation, learn from past experiences and apply that learning to the changes in social interactions. It enables individuals to initiate social interactions, sustain those interactions for longer periods and manage new and different social situations with more confidence.

Setting up the Programme

The following guidelines can be used to set up a programme in your school. They are designed to be used flexibly and adapted to enable you to meet the needs of your students.

Programme Co-ordinator: The peer mentoring programme will require the support of one member of staff, whose role will be to facilitate the mentoring sessions, assist with discussions, and support the students in their activities. This person should have experience of working with autistic students and ideally work with the autistic mentors in school. They should feel confident and able to take an active role in the programme

Peer Mentoring Groups: Suggested participants are four students from the same tutor group. One of them being on the autistic spectrum. This will enable them to discuss issues which they may all be aware of and support each other in class.

Location: A space will need to be identified which can comfortably accommodate the students. This space will ideally need to be available for each session to allow the programme to run with consistency.

Session Frequency: It is suggested that sessions run every two weeks and for at least one term.

Session timings: It will be important to identify a slot on the timetable that will allow for the students to be released from an activity that will not significantly impact on their learning e.g. tutor time or assembly, for the duration of the programme. The amount of time needed for the sessions may vary between programmes but it is recommended that a minimum of 30 minutes should be allocated for each session.

Resources: Co-ordinators are encouraged to use existing school based resources to support the mentoring sessions, such as those used for PSHE. The following are a list of recommended websites which have resource and information specifically to support autistic students:

- *Ambitious About Autism:* Ambitious About Autism is a national charity for children and young people with autism. They provide services, raise awareness and understanding, and campaign for change. www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/
- *The Autism Education Trust:* The AET is a partnership of a wide range of individuals and organisations focused on improving the education of children and young people with autism from the voluntary, public and private sectors. It also actively engages with young people, parents/carers and practitioners to inform its work. www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/. The Autism Education Trust Autism Standards and Autism Competency Framework for primary and secondary schools: www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/schools/
- *The National Autistic Society:* The National Autistic Society is a national charity for autistic people and their families. They provide information, support and services, and campaign for a better world for autistic people. www.autism.org.uk/. The National Autistic Society resource pack for schools: www.autism.org.uk/teacherpack
- *Autism Toolbox:* The Autism Toolbox is an online resource for schools to support the inclusion of children and young people on the autistic spectrum in mainstream education. www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/
- *Recommended Books:* National Autistic Society reading list: www.autism.org.uk/shop/books.aspx. Autism Toolbox reading list: www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/resources/reading-list/.

Rewards: It is recommended that any existing reward systems are integrated into the peer mentoring programme so students can gain individual and/or group rewards.

Permissions: School will need to send a letter out to the parents of selected students which outlines the intentions of the programme and seeks their permission for the inclusion of their child. An example of this is enclosed. It is to be made clear that involvement in the programme is voluntary and students are free to leave at any point.

Example Session Structure: Students should be encouraged as much as possible to decide the content of sessions and how they should run. Below is an example session structure. This can be used as part of the induction session to support students to develop their own ideas.

1. Ground Rules: Go over the session rules and display visually on the wall for reference. Remind group that, if at any time someone feels uncomfortable with a discussion or activity, they may choose to sit and watch.
2. Warm up Game/ice breakers: see suggested list.
3. Mentor update: Mentors identify one positive and one challenge at school since the last session.
4. Discussion and problem-solving: discuss agreed topic e.g. friendships, bullying.
5. Reflection time: identify what has been learnt or agreed and the focus for the next session.
6. Refreshments: squash and biscuits.

Ideas for Ice breakers/ Warm-Up Games

- Stick Game

Choose the stick or scarf, or both, and use actions to turn them into something else e.g. making the stick a toothbrush. (Encourages imagination, turn-taking, shared focus).

- Fruit Salad

Sit in circle with one chair short in circle – that person stands in the middle. Each person is given a fruit name (use 3 different fruits) and when the person in the middle calls your fruit; everyone who is the same fruit must swap seats. The person in the middle must try to gain a seat, and the person who is without a seat stands in the middle for the next turn. If ‘fruit salad’ is called, everyone must swap seats. (Encourages focus, spatial awareness, good listening).

- Balloon Game

Hit balloon around the circle to introduce self to the group. Extend to swap seats by calling out another person's name when you hit the balloon. (Helps to establish names in a fun way and encourages awareness of others, good looking, memory for names).

- Pass Game

Pass a bean bag or soft ball around the circle to share information e.g. likes and dislikes. (Encourages shared focus, sharing of information, turn-taking).

- Chinese Whispers

Pass a whispered message around the circle and see whether it remains accurate by the time it returns to the first person. (Encourages good listening and tolerance of close proximity).

- Who's in the Bag?

Split the group in to 2 teams – take turns to pick a card from the bag and describe the person named on the card to their team, without naming them. See how many they can do in 1 minute., After everyone has had a turn, the team with the most cards wins. (Encourages the use of good descriptive language, performance skills, focus of attention,

- Name 6

Sit in circle with one person sitting in the middle. In the time it takes to pass a soft ball around the circle, the person in the middle tries to name 6 agreed objects e.g. 6 animals, 6 countries beginning with 'a'. Swap around. (Encourages turn-taking, awareness of others, knowledge of the world, focus and speed).

- **Lid Game**

An individual is presented with a number of bottles and jars and a pile of lids. In 1 minute they must try to put as many lids as possible on the correct bottle/jar.

(Encourages fine motor skills, and gives the experience of losing).

- **Change It**

One person leaves the room. While they are out of the room one person in the group changes something about their appearance e.g. takes off a sweater, pulls up their sleeves. The person returns and attempts to identify what has changed. The game can be extended by more than one person changing their appearance. (Encourages observational skills and focus of attention).

Section C: Co-ordinator Information

Role Description

Role: Peer Mentoring Co-ordinator

Responsible to:

Main Responsibilities:

- To be responsible for the management of peer mentoring programme/s in school
- To provide induction for peer mentors on the peer mentoring programme
- To organise and facilitate peer mentoring sessions
- To provide resources to support the peer mentoring sessions
- To work with the peer mentoring group/s on strategies to support the students in school
- To liaise with other school staff regarding any relevant issues raised in the sessions
- To keep appropriate records of group meetings and student progress
- To follow school safeguarding guidelines and report any concerns regarding child protection on to their line manager

Checklist

- Mentors consent form signed
- Mentors induction completed
- Structure and content of sessions discussed/agreed with mentors
- Ground rules agreed
- Mentors pre-programme questionnaire completed
- Date, time, location and duration of session agreed and shared with mentors.

Induction

It is recommended that co-ordinators meet autistic students in a 1:1 session to discuss their involvement in the peer mentoring programme. This would allow those students more opportunity to process information and ask questions about the programme and the mentoring role. They will need practical and concrete information on where and when the programme will take place, how long it will last, how many students are involved, etc. Ideally this should be in written form and

reinforced verbally. Autistic students should be asked if they want to disclose their diagnosis in the mentoring sessions and their views respected. A joint induction session with all mentors can then be organised to discuss the aims and content of the sessions and reinforce the role of peer mentors and organisation of the programme. Each mentor should be given a mentor pack as part of the induction process.

Peer Mentor Role: Discuss the role of a peer mentor.

Session Aims: The mentors should have input into the aims and content of the peer mentoring sessions. The induction session should be used to identify individual and group aims. The mentor's practical information sheet can be used for this. Suggested areas are: school work, homework, friendships, bullying, break/lunch times and interests.

Ground Rules: For the mentoring sessions to be productive, there should be an understanding that there will be certain boundaries and expectations which both the co-ordinator and mentors will adhere to. It is recommended that ground rules are established with students as part of the induction session or in the first mentoring session. These can link directly to school rules. Some suggested rules are given below:

- Mentors and co-ordinators are expected to be on time for their meetings.
- If it is ever necessary to postpone a meeting, the co-ordinator should inform the peer mentoring group.
- The mentoring session is a place for support. It should be treated as a place to seek help and discuss issues in a calm manner.
- Whatever is discussed at the peer mentoring sessions should remain confidential.
- The co-ordinator will talk to other staff if mentors disclose something that they feel is a safeguarding issue.
- Mentors should seek the advice of the peer mentoring co-ordinator if they have any concerns.
- Mentoring is voluntary and mentors can leave a session or the programme if they want to.
- Mentors and the co-ordinator will be treated with respect and all ideas and contributions will be valued.

Section D: Peer Mentors Information

Guidelines

Peer mentoring is a way of students helping each other with school life and working together to share ideas, solve problems and learn new skills.

- **Responsibility**
Peer mentors are not responsible for each other at school but can help and support each other.
- **Sessions**
The times, dates and locations of the sessions are agreed between the peer mentoring co-ordinator and mentors. Mentors must let the co-ordinator know if you cannot attend any sessions.
- **Confidentiality**
The contents of the peer mentoring group meetings will be kept confidential except for information which the co-ordinator feels puts the personal safety of a mentor or another person at risk e.g., if they are being bullied at school.

- **Co-ordinator**

The peer mentoring co-ordinator is there to support all mentors and you can talk to them if you have any worries about the programme. The co-ordinator can also talk to other staff about things that can help you at school.

- **Participation**

If you no longer want to be a peer mentor you can discuss this with the co-ordinator and stop at any time.

Role Description

Role: Peer Mentor

Responsible to: Peer Mentoring Co-ordinator

Main Responsibilities:

- To share ideas, information and advice with other mentors
- To work together to support and encourage other mentors
- To listen to, and respect, other mentor's views
- To lead by example and be good role models

Peer mentors should be prepared to commit time and energy to their role and be prepared to attend peer mentoring sessions organised by the co-ordinator and mentoring group.

What's in it for you?

This is a great opportunity to guide and support other students in your class and get help with any issues you have at school. Peer mentoring has helped students to develop a range of skills that will help them at school and later life. These include:

Communication

Listening

Negotiation

Problem-solving

Decision making

Planning and organisation

You will also be rewarded for being a peer mentor.

You will receive

Practical Information

Name:

Tutor:

1. Peer Mentoring Programme Co-ordinator

..... will help organise and oversee the mentoring sessions.

2. Mentors

The other mentors in your group are:

3. When will the mentoring sessions happen?

- Room
- Time
- Dates

4. What would you like to talk about in the mentoring sessions?
Circle as many subjects as you want.

Homework

Friendships

Break/lunch times

Bullying

School work

Your Interests

Please write down any other subjects you would like to discuss below:

.....

5. Any other questions about the peer mentoring programme?

Please write down any questions you have below or speak to the co-ordinator.

.....

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