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## Peer to Peer Mentoring: A Multiple-Case Study Evaluating the LINKS Peer Support Program

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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## **Abstract**

This research assessed a pilot implementation of START's (STatewide Autism Resources and Training) peer-to-peer support program (LINKS) that occurred in three elementary schools ( $N = 36$  participants). The purpose of the study was to teach social skills to students who have difficulty with social interactions and to enhance their social participation in inclusive classrooms. Mentors involved in this study had problem behaviours, and mentees involved had experienced social exclusion. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews determined the progress of students and the effectiveness of the overall program. Results revealed that mentors and mentees across the three schools displayed positive changes in their social skills and behaviours. The observations and post-interviews support the use of implementing a peer-to-peer program to assist students who have social challenges. Suggestions for future implementation are made based on the findings.

*Keywords:* Inclusive Education, Peer Mentoring, Social Skills Training, Elementary Education, Special Education Needs

## **Lay Summary**

This study tested a peer program developed by the START (STatewide Autism Resources and Training) project. A peer program is when a student is accountable for providing support to another student. This program occurred in three elementary schools, and 36 people took part in this study. The purpose of this research was to aid students who have difficulty with positive social interactions with their peers and to increase their acceptance and number of friendships at school. Schools elected in this program had inclusive classrooms, meaning all students with varying academic competences are in the same class. Older students (mentors) worked with younger students (mentees) in pairs for one session a week. Each session focussed on a skill that is important for socializing with peers. Surveys and interviews determined whether the peer program was valuable in supporting peers. Based on the information, mentors and mentees progressed in their social skills and behaviours. The observations and end of program interviews support implementing a peer program to assist students who socially struggle.

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## Chapter 1

### Peer to Peer Mentoring: A Multiple-Case Study Evaluating the LINKS Peer Support Program

Inclusive education is widespread in schools today (Koster et al., 2010). Over the past couple of decades, schools have been undergoing a radical transformation in their educational environments to achieve inclusive classrooms, and it has become an essential mission in many countries (De Boer et al., 2011; Szumski et al., 2017). There has been immense debate in the literature and amongst stakeholders about what inclusive education is supposed to look like in schools, but it broadly refers to any student who is marginalized because of ability, ethnicity, religion, income, and is at risk for school failure (Adams et al., 2016; Chamiliar, 2009; Jordan, 2018). Inclusive education involves quality teaching and multiple learning opportunities for all students, especially those with special education needs (Jordan, 2018). Students with special education needs can learn with their typically developing peers, and they are provided with the necessary support to participate in the general education curriculum fully (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020; Obiakor et al., 2012).

Inclusive environments are diverse and entail a strong collaborative partnership between students, parents, and educational staff (Chamiliar, 2009). Successful inclusive classrooms can promote a sense of belonging in students with special education needs; it can improve their quality of life and lead to great success with their peers (Sagun-Ongtangco et al., 2019; Zvoleyko et al., 2016). A meta-analysis conducted by Szumski et al. (2017), found that not only students with a special education need benefit academically from inclusive education, but typically developing peers did too. While instruction may be different based on educational needs, being in the same classroom provides all students with the opportunity to interact with one another, and

it signifies to the whole school community and neighbourhood that every child is valued (Obiakor et al., 2012).

School administrators, such as principals, play a pivotal role in setting the tone of the school climate and sharing the vision of inclusive practices in their schools (Obiakor et al., 2012; Radiæ-Šestic et al., 2013; Waldron et al., 2011). Principals must take a leadership stance in supporting teachers, encouraging them and ensuring that they feel prepared and competent enough to facilitate such classrooms (Moreno et al., 2015; Obiakor et al., 2012). They can assist teachers by making changes in the classrooms and throughout the school, removing barriers in providing high-quality instruction (Waldron et al., 2011). Also, principals that are opened to new opportunities will enhance the success and inclusion of all students. Highlighting values and school's goals are also crucial as it will help teachers maximize their potential in the classroom (Obiakor et al., 2012). Additionally, being very efficient with their school resources is imperative (Waldron et al., 2011). Ultimately, principals have a critical responsibility in guiding their progressive teachers in their redesigning of classrooms (Chamiliari, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012; Waldron et al., 2011).

Alongside school principals, teachers are essential for the success of inclusion for students with special education needs (Koster et al., 2010). Current research supports that teachers, overall, have a positive outlook towards inclusivity, but they feel they do not have sufficient resources, time, or training to adequately deliver the material (Chamiliari, 2009; De Boer et al., 2011; Jordan, 2018). Their attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, experience with students with special education needs, teaching styles, years of teaching, and level of education influence their inclusive practice (De Boer et al., 2011; Jordan, 2018; Koster et al., 2010; Sagun-Ongtangco et al., 2019; Unianu, 2012; Waldron et al., 2011). What also influences their

instruction is their attitude towards the type of special education need a student may have, the degree of difficulty the student exhibits and their own perceived competence in delivering successful inclusive activities (De Boer et al., 2011; Unianu, 2012).

In the literature, teachers have a differing understanding of the nature of special education needs and who they think would be responsible for instructing these individuals. Some teachers may view students with special education needs from a deficit perspective, meaning students have fixed challenges, and it would be unlikely for them to make progress in their classrooms (Jordan, 2018). These teachers may also believe that the needs of students with special education needs are beyond their professional knowledge and skills. On the contrary, some educators have a perspective where they perceive students with special education needs as having barriers to communication and that it is their duty as teachers to eliminate these educational challenges (Jordan, 2018). These types of teachers are more willing to engage in different instructional styles and to provide accommodations.

Moreover, past studies illustrate that teachers who have more experience in elementary school and who hold positive views on inclusion were more secure in their ability to instruct in inclusive settings (Sagun-Ongtangco et al., 2019; Unianu, 2012). Those who have experience working with students with different ethnic backgrounds were more open to the idea of inclusion than those who lack that type of exposure (Unianu, 2012). Consequently, it is essential to consider a teacher's beliefs and experiences when it comes to inclusive education.

Although studies have found that the practice of including students with special education needs in the classrooms has expanded educators' perspectives, it is apparent that there are still some prejudices against their educational needs (De Boer et al., 2011; Unianu, 2012). De Boer et al. (2011) have highlighted that there are educators who are uncertain or negative about inclusive

education. Some teachers are still not confident in teaching students with special education needs, and they feel their knowledge in the area is very limited. Teachers generally hold the most negative attitudes toward the inclusion of students with behavioural problems and learning disabilities (De Boer et al., 2011). In an observation at a rural school, the educators displayed a willingness to learn about inclusive education; however, they lacked initiation (Moreno et al., 2015). Some teachers may promote inclusion, but they become hesitant or may oppose it when it comes to their practice. Perhaps some teachers who have been instructing for many years may become reluctant when it comes to a drastic change in their profession (De Boer et al., 2011). However, inclusive education calls for a revamp in attitudes and a shift from the previous norm. Adopting a social justice perspective and being open to additional teacher training on inclusion, different teaching approaches and strategies can lead to more positive attitudes towards implementation (De Boer et al., 2011; Obiakor et al., 2011).

In terms of implementation, educators must be prepared to diversify their assessments, goals, strategies and instructional approaches. They have to be willing to provide accommodations to a range of students rather than sticking to the one size fits all method (Adams et al., 2016; Chamiliar, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012). Findings illustrate that teachers will need to make adaptations to assignments, testing, grading, group work and homework. Also, they must control the difficulty of a task, do more smaller group instructions, provide constant feedback, scribe and provide motivational support when needed (Chamiliar, 2009; Jordan, 2018). For adaptations to be successful and efficient, teachers need to collaborate with parents, students and other educators such as learning support teachers (Adams et al., 2016; Obiakor et al., 2012; Radiæ-Šestic et al., 2013). Unitedly, they can discuss; pupils' strengths and needs; problem solve; strategize; share networks, ideas and resources; and develop individualize educational

plans (Adams et al., 2016; Chamiliar, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012). Collaboration can enrich inclusive practice by exchanging new knowledge with other parties and allowing moments for reflection and re-evaluation (Adams et al., 2016; Chamiliar, 2009). How effective team collaboration is could depend on how those involved value teamwork as well as feel competent enough to contribute (Radiæ-Šestic et al., 2013; Unianu, 2012).

Adams et al. (2016) advocate that collaboration could demonstrate what inclusion is all about. Each educator and parent can bring a new diverse perspective to the forefront, and the differences among each other is a strength in this situation. Innovative ideas and techniques emerge when there are different opinions and suggestions in the mix. All those involved are working collectively towards a common goal, which is the success of a student with special educational needs (Adams et al., 2016). Collaboration is the heart and driving force of inclusion. Successful inclusion involves many counterparts.

Collaboration can be favourable and beneficial to everyone involved; however, as indicated earlier, stakeholders may have different thoughts and ideas, resulting in disconnection in communication (Adams et al., 2016). Therefore, it is vital that school leaders, such as the school principal, foster an environment where collaboration is not only promoted but highly encouraged (Chamiliar, 2009). Unfortunately, past studies have acknowledged that funding situations in schools make it challenging for leaders to have adequate time and professional support for collaboration. There is a need in the inclusion literature to find an inexpensive program that allows schools to engage in collaboration. Also, there needs to be a system where students' perceptions can be better captivated in the program planning and decision-making process (Chamiliar, 2009).

## 1.1 Social Participation

Social participation is when students with a special education need are socially interacting with typically developing peers (Koster et al., 2009). It involves four parts: positive social contact with peers, being accepted by classmates, gaining friendships with other pupils and having the impression that peers approve them. There is a considerable amount of social interaction opportunities in inclusive classrooms for both students with and without special education needs (Adams et al., 2016). The school's atmosphere and format should assist students with special education needs in formulating friendships and obtaining acceptance from their peers. It is a recurring theme in the literature that parents' primary objective for sending their child to general education schools is to bolster their child's social contact as well as develop positive relations with their typically developing peers (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2010). However, many studies report that placing students with special education needs in general education does not necessarily guarantee an increase of friendships, acceptance, feelings of being included or valued (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012; De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012; Koster et al., 2010; Sagun-Ongtangco et al., 2019). It is the hope of parents who have children with special education needs that inclusive education will result in a change of attitude towards their child (Bossaert et al., 2013; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011).

Research suggests that students with special education needs often have difficulty with social participation in the regular classroom (De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and those who exhibit challenging behaviours (e.g. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD]) are the most vulnerable to experiencing isolation and segregation in the educational environment (Bossaert et al., 2012; De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012; Koster et al., 2010; Schwab, 2015). Past studies highlight that there is a

relationship between peer acceptance of students with special education needs and the attitudes of their classmates (De Boer et al., 2013). Many studies indicated that the typically developing peers held neutral beliefs and feelings towards students with special education needs (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). What can influence attitudes of pupils are personal and environmental circumstances such as gender, age, experience with inclusion and knowledge about special education needs. General education students become accepting when their understanding of special education needs increases. They also develop a more positive attitude when they befriend someone with a special education need (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012; De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012). Studies report that positive attitudes of typically developing peers will lead to rewarding social results for students with special education needs; unfortunately, it is not the dominant outcome in social participation literature.

Students with special education needs experience fewer friendships, less social interactions, loneliness and rejection (Koster et al., 2010; Schwab, 2015). Their prospect of having no friends at all was 3-4 times greater than typically developing peers, and they are perceived more negatively when compared to other classmates (Koster et al., 2010). Bossaert, De Boer et al. (2015) explains that the severity and complexity of students' needs may account for the lower acceptance of peers. Findings found more negative attitudes towards students with behavioural problems, and this could be due to students having difficulty regulating their behaviour and having poor social relations (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012; De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012). The exclusion is most prominent on the playground, and this could be due to students who have challenges managing their behaviours, lack the skills to engage, interact appropriately, and so prompts peers to exclude (De Leeuw et al., 2018).

Research shows that girls with ASD have a higher amount of loneliness than boys with ASD (Bossaert et al., 2012). Similarly, when girls who are identified as exceptional displayed social conflict in class, they became less socially accepted by their same-sex classmates (De Boer et al., 2013). This result was not the case for boys with special education needs with their same-sex classmates. Boys with special education needs may be more driven for the need for social inclusion and approval. De Boer et al. (2013) explains that these outcomes may be because girls and boys have varying requirements for peer acceptance. Females are more influenced by personal and intrinsic elements, whereas males are more affected by their peer group's thoughts and attitudes. As a result, studies note that it is crucial to consider different gender perspectives when developing new interventions (Chamiliar, 2009; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012).

Although there are still significant issues when it comes social participation of students with special education needs, not all findings are unsettling. Some students with special education needs have expressed positive thoughts and experiences when it comes to being in a regular classroom. They have indicated that they do like having friends in the classroom, even though their number of friends may be fewer than the typically developing peer (Chamiliar, 2009; Koster et al., 2010). It appears that these individuals value their friendships as much as students without special education needs (Bossaert, Colpin et al., 2015). Chamiliar (2009) reported that students who attend another classroom and the regular classroom enjoy being in the learning assistant room as they receive the necessary extra help. However, if they had to decide which classroom to remain in full-time, they chose the inclusive classroom (Chamiliar, 2009). This outcome confirms that although students appreciate receiving extra and intensive help, they would prefer learning alongside their peers.



Poor social skills and lack of social tools can lead to adverse environmental responses from students who have a difficult time with inclusion (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Students who have been socially excluded resort to external reactions such as being physically aggressive, verbal or have the desire to retaliate (De Leeuw et al., 2018). As it is widely known, resorting to externalizing behaviours to resolve social problems will not produce amicable results. When students react externally, they become less acceptable to their peers, and their classmates' attitudes turn negative towards them (De Leeuw et al., 2018). On the contrary, when students demonstrate practical problem-solving approaches to social disputes, they are viewed more positively. Students with special education needs tend to engage in distancing approaches (such as playing alone), or they react more externally when dealing with social issues. However, when they had to choose which strategy they would prefer using, it has been acknowledged that they would want to use more socially acceptable strategies (De Leeuw et al., 2018). This outcome implies that students who lack appropriate social skills desire to acquire more appropriate social skills. The inclusion literature is seeking interventions that address this desire because when students learn more skills, they can build more friendships and develop social competence (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011).

Teachers also play an enormous role in the social participation of students with special education needs—they are a social referent to their students (Hendrickx et al., 2016). Hendrickx, Mainhard et al. (2016) found that teacher conflict was associated with peer disliking and externalizing behaviours. The more conflict a teacher had with a student; the fewer peers reported liking the student. On the contrary, teacher support is associated with peer liking and prosocial behaviours. The more support a teacher provided towards a student with a special education need, the more peers liked the student and wanted to help. Educators demonstrating

public support towards a student and decreasing conflict in class is vital for peer interaction (Hendrickx et al., 2016). Peers judge their attitudes based on how teachers interact with a student.

Another strategy that could help increase social participation is practitioners finding ways to highlight how everyone in the class is similar. According to De Boer et al. (2013), similarity and finding common interest is necessary for forming new friendships. If typically developing students can recognize that they could be similar to a student with a special education need, they would perhaps interact and initiate more social interactions. Students with special education needs are often the ones to initiate contact with their peers, and they reported that they would like to see their classmates take more initiation (De Boer et al., 2013; De Leeuw et al., 2018). Based on these results, educators must be self-aware of how influential their behaviours are in the classroom. Also, they need to realize how much power they hold in forming a positive, welcoming and inclusive space.

Furthermore, how students with special education needs perceive their teachers is essential because they tend to have the most interactions with them (Chamiliar, 2009; Koster et al., 2010). Unfortunately, too much constant interaction can be viewed negatively by their classmates (Koster et al., 2010). Educational support and teacher assistants negatively correlate with social participation (De Boer et al., 2013; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). The more contact these practitioners had with the student of need, the less likely peers wanted to engage with them socially (De Boer et al., 2013). Also, this continual interaction makes the pupil stand out even more in the classroom. The mere presence of receiving extra assistance may hinder social opportunities for those who need them. Regrettably, students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) may experience this frequently (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Needing extra assistance

produces a challenge for these individuals because they would like to be socially accepted, but they require extra support to succeed academically. Studies advocate that there needs to be a balance between extra support and social interaction opportunities. Adequate educational support training can help these students overcome this stigma (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011).

Overall, it is transparent that inclusive education does not translate to fast peer acceptance, immediate change in attitudes and an unlimited number of friendships. There are still sizable issues when it comes to the social participation of students with special education needs (Schwab, 2015). There is an imminent need for a school intervention that can help with the participation of at-risk pupils in inclusive classrooms (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). De Leeuw et al. (2018) highlights that those with behaviours and a lack of social skills can benefit from learning how to interact with peers during free time appropriately (e.g. during outside recreation). Also, many studies mention that improving the attitudes of peers would be conducive to promoting a more inclusive atmosphere (De Boer et al., 2013; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012).

## **1.2 Peer to Peer Mentoring Theory**

In inclusive education, pupils spend a considerable amount of time with their classmates and teachers. Becoming a part of the school community and interacting with peers is vital because it forms students' identity (Pijl & Frostad, 2010). Research supports a correlation between being involved in extracurriculars and social participation with peers (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). However, as indicated, some peers struggle to communicate effectively with other peers in school, especially those who resort to externalizing behaviours. Studies have attempted to find innovative ways to help these students that would not hinder the social image

of these individuals. An increasingly popular approach to accommodate these students is utilizing their peers.

Past research has emphasized the importance of using peers as a resource to support students who have challenges with socialization (DuBois et al., 2011; Gunn et al., 2017; Willis et al., 2012). Utilizing peers as a resource is beneficial because they are readily available to educators; they help students to adapt to new social environments, and the presence of a peer assisting another peer may appear less stigmatizing to other students (Gunn et al., 2017). Placing a peer in a position to help other peers, whether it be in their classroom or another classroom at their school, this peer is known as a peer mentor. Peer mentors form supportive, caring and intentional relationships with other peers (DuBois et al., 2011; Gunn et al., 2017).

According to the literature, peer mentors benefitted from being in a mentorship role by feeling fortunate to have been able to assist others and to make new friends. They felt more socially competent and that their communication, conflict resolution, as well as their leadership skills, have significantly enhanced (Besnoy & McDaniel, 2016; Gunn et al., 2017; Knowles & Parsons, 2009; Sinclair & Larson, 2018; Willis et al., 2012). Peer mentors reported that they felt an increase in their level of confidence and self-esteem (Knowles & Parsons, 2009; Raven, 2015), and experienced a sense of achievement when they observed success and notable changes in their mentees (Willis et al., 2012).

Mentors liked having a more active role in their school community, which made them feel connected to their school (Karcher, 2008; Willis et al., 2012). They also liked being given the responsibility of a mentor and to know that they were positively contributing to their school's climate. Moreover, being in this prestigious position, mentors reported feeling a boost in their character, and a sense of empowerment to seek future leadership positions (Sinclair & Larson,

2018). Some mentors even felt that their mentoring involvement was conducive to their future goals and aspirations (Knowles & Parsons, 2009). To be chosen as a peer mentor comes with many advantages in typically developing peers' social, personal and academic domains.

Previous studies have consistently reported that students who have a peer mentorship role already have a healthy, positive social and emotional development and are the exemplars of the schools (Sinclair & Larson, 2018; Willis et al., 2012). Typically developing students illustrate leadership qualities and are usually already actively involved at their school (DuBois et al., 2011; Raven, 2015; Sinclair & Larson, 2018; Willis et al., 2012). Thus, there has not been much research examining peer mentors mentoring other students while they themselves are at-risk in specific domains. Mentors are commonly known for being sources of information, and usually, they are the ones who offer guidance and support to the other less experienced individuals. It would appear to be counterproductive to have peer mentors in positions that they may be too ill-equipped to hold (DuBois et al., 2011). However, according to a meta-analysis, if a peer mentoring program were to desire to have a more impactful and intentional role for mentors, meaning that mentors could benefit too, then it could be possible to design such a program (DuBois et al., 2011).

Moreover, there are few different forms of peer mentoring, such as the traditional one-on-one peer mentoring, group peer mentoring, or cross-age peer mentoring. Cross-age peer mentoring is a partnership between an older student who is mentoring a younger student in their school (Willis et al., 2012). The design has similar attributes to the traditional peer mentoring, in which both the mentees and mentors are active participants in the same learning environment; however, this model differs by the mentor being at least two years older than the mentee (Willis et al., 2012).

### **1.3 LINKS Peer to Peer Support Program**

A program developed by START (STatewide Autism Resources and Training) called LINKS Peer to Peer Support increases social opportunities for students with ASD and provides them with support in inclusive settings (Matthews & Ziegler, 2012). ASD is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder, and students who are on the spectrum have varying degrees of social communication (Matthews & Ziegler, 2012). There are more than 200 LINKS programs across Michigan who are supporting students with ASD (Matthews & Ziegler, 2012).

The format of the LINKS program differ across schools, but all programs strive to achieve the same social outcomes. Some schools facilitated their program as a course, meaning it was class-wide, and there were assignments to complete. Other schools ran their program as an extra-curricular activity, where anyone interested could sign up to volunteer as a LINK mentor to designated mentees with ASD. The frequency of the sessions differed as well, ranging from daily, weekly to 1-2 times a month (START project, 2018). A few schools had mentors enter the mentees' classroom and provide direct support to them during instruction time. This format allowed mentors to encourage on-task behaviour and illustrate positive social relations with peers. Also, mentors had the opportunity to eat lunch with their mentees as well as play with them during recess (START project, 2018). In every program, there was at least one adult supervision (e.g. school psychologist, teacher, special education support) who could provide support to students.

Evidently, there are many different forms of conducting this intervention. Their motto is, "Don't reinvent the wheel - hop on someone else's bike!" (START project, 2018, p.18). Thus, the START program has permitted interested implementers to individualize this program, however, desired. The intervention operates at both the elementary and secondary school levels, and there

have been testimonials that describe how substantial the LINKS program has been (Matthews & Ziegler, 2012). One school district communicated that the LINKS peer program has assisted in building friendships in all students in the classrooms. Also, peers learned how to collaborate, share ideas, and how to provide support to one another in challenging situations. Not only did the peers learn more about individuals with ASD, but their teacher's knowledge about ASD expanded as well (Matthews & Ziegler, 2012). This finding supports the literature that the more students and teachers interacted with students with ASD, the more they understood them and showed approval (De Boer et al., 2013; De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012; De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012)

The results of the LINKS peer program focuses mainly on the benefits to mentees, but there have been occurrences where peer mentors themselves reaped the benefits of the program. In the START's '*Outcomes of LINKS*' document, peer mentors' absences had slightly decreased from before they became a mentor to the first semester after becoming a mentor (START Project, 2018). There was a small improvement in their overall academic achievement. Twenty-six out of 33 (79%) of peer mentors who were identified as academically at-risk presented an increase in their academic performance during their first semester of becoming a peer mentor. Their grade average went from a C to a B- (START Project, 2018). Also, 12 peer mentors who had issues managing their behaviours, had fewer office referrals and detentions after embodying the role of a peer mentor. It is crucial to note that although the fundamental purpose of this intervention was to target students with ASD, these outcomes demonstrate that this program can assist peers who may have difficulty with socialization, behaviours and academic achievement.

## 1.4 Present Study

There need to be more school-based interventions that target low social participation in students with special education needs, and students with externalizing behaviours (Leeuw et al., 2018; Moreno et al., 2015). Past research has supported that students who have difficulty with social skills, academics and behaviour regulation can indeed experience benefits when serving as a mentor (DuBois et al., 2011). Peer mentoring is useful for peers who require support. Thus, due to the concerns in the inclusive education literature and the demands for more interventions that target social participation, this research project proposes to evaluate a pilot implementation of the LINKS peer to peer program.

This intervention was chosen because it is a program that Behavior Analysts (BAs) can implement in schools to support students who are at-risk for social exclusion and who exhibit challenging behaviours. Furthermore, the results of the LINKS' peer program is appealing, and it is representative of what inclusive schools would like to achieve in their classrooms.

Undoubtedly, the LINKS program is heading towards the right direction in improving the social participation of those who are presenting to be at-risk. The program demonstrates that it can increase social interaction, friendships, peer likability and knowledge. This result would be ideal for students who struggle with behaviours as they often have difficulties providing positive experiences to their school peers. It is intriguing to consider whether these results in previous schools could be duplicated and revealed in other settings. Also, it would be appealing to discover the advantages to peer mentors, as past studies indicate a need for more information regarding the mentor's perspective. Although the benefits of the LINKS program sound exceptional, there is not a lot of research on the program outside of the START group. This research project plans to contribute to the literature on the use of LINKS and determine its



implementation in the school board. Another advantage of utilizing the LINKS program is that there are some resources accessible on the START website. This accessibility allows for straightforward implementation into a school environment with the required modifications.

As indicated previously, students with externalizing behaviours and inadequate social skills experience social isolation among their peers (De Leeuw et al., 2018; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Thus, having a program that can target these areas using peers as the instructors would be highly advantageous. Additionally, Schwab (2015) calls for more qualitative research studies in inclusive education and comparisons of peers with different types of special education needs. Hendrickx et al. (2016) mention that future interventions should incorporate teachers more as they can be leading to their classmates. Sagun-Ongtangco et al. (2019) specified that facilitators of school programs should strive to train educators on how to continue to carry this inclusive culture to their classrooms. Lastly, some studies have suggested that future interventions should capture younger students' perceptions and strategies for resolving social problems (De Leeuw et al., 2018; Koster et al., 2010). This proposed pilot intervention plans to include all these recommendations and hopes to provide meaningful results to the inclusive education literature by addressing the following research questions:

1. Do mentors who participate in the peer program experience positive changes in their academics, social skills, and behaviours at their schools?
2. Do mentees who participate in the peer program experience positive changes in their friendships, social skills and peer acceptance?
3. What aspects of the program work well, and what needs to change according to the students, teachers, principals, and BAs?

## Chapter 2

### 2 Method

#### 2.1 Participants

Three elementary schools located within a board that practice inclusive education participated in this research. Inclusive education in this board refers to all students, regardless of their background and ability, fully participating in general education classrooms with necessary supports. Students in this board have the opportunity to learn and grow with their peers. Among the three schools, there were 36 participants. As this was a cross-age peer mentoring program, the older students were the peer mentors, and the younger students were the mentees. Inclusion criteria for peer mentors were students who had difficulties regulating their behaviours, demonstrated a lack of social skills, and experienced academic challenges as reported by teachers and BAs. The inclusion criteria for mentees were students who have experienced social exclusion with their peers, as reported by teachers and BAs. The three schools will be discussed as individual case studies and are labelled as School A, School B, and School C. School A had a total of 12 participants (6 mentors, 6 mentees); School B had 8 participants (5 mentors, 3 mentees); School C had 10 participants (5 mentors, 5 mentees). Displayed in Table 1 are the demographics of the students. Each school had at least one educational support staff to aid these individuals throughout the sessions (e.g. BAs, Teachers, Learning Support Teachers, Educational Assistants [EAs], Social Workers, and Volunteers).

Table 1

*Participants' Demographics for School A, B, C*

Variable	School A %	School B %	School C %
Mentee			
Male	67	67	40
Female	33	33	60
Mentee's Grade			
SK			10
1			
2	17		10
3	83	100	
4			30
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	50	100	20
Non-Caucasian	50		80
Mentor			
Male	67	100	60
Female	33		40
Mentor's Grade			
5	33		
6	17	20	
7	50	80	40
8			60
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	50	80	20
Non-Caucasian	50	20	80

*Note.* School A ( $n = 12$ ), School B ( $n = 8$ ), School C ( $n = 10$ ).

## 2.2 Measures and Materials

Unfortunately, due to a teacher strike action and COVID-19, some measures that are described in the materials section were not utilized. Measures that were not used are indicated in their section, and all measures are listed for future researchers to gather information and implement.

### **2.2.1 Measures**

**Demographic Questionnaire.** The demographic questionnaire asked participating students their sex, grade, school and whether they were a mentor or a mentee (Appendix A).

**Peer Mentor Pre-Program Survey.** The Peer Mentor Pre-Program Survey captured mentors' thoughts and perceptions about their social interactions before the program (e.g. "I have good social skills"). Participants responded to the 15-item survey using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = Never True to 5 = Always True). The items were adapted from the LINKS Peer Program questionnaire (Appendix B).

**Peer Mentor Post-Program Survey.** The Peer Mentor Post-Program Survey was one of the intended measures to be completed at the end of the program. It was the same questions as the pre-program survey; however, four open-ended questions were added. One example of the open-ended questions was, "How has the peer mentoring program helped students with a disability?" (Appendix C).

**Mentee Pre-Program Survey.** The Mentee Pre-Program Survey gathers mentees' thoughts and social experiences with their peers before the program (e.g. "I go places with friends after school or on the weekend"). Some mentees required a little extra assistance with answering the form, which BAs were there for support. Participants responded to the 11-item survey using 'Yes,' 'Sometimes,' or 'No'). The items were adapted from the LINKS peer program survey (Appendix D).

**Mentee Post-Program Survey.** The Mentee Pre-Program Survey was another measure scheduled to be filled out when the program was finished. It had similar questions as the pre-program survey; however, there were some additional open-ended questions. An example item of this measure was, "What was your experience like having a mentor?" (Appendix E).

**Social Skills Rating System – Teacher Form (SSRS-T).** The Elementary Level (K through 6) and the Secondary Level (grades 7 through 12) of the SSRS-T were filled out by both mentors' and mentees' teachers. It was intended to be completed before and after the program. It is a norm-referenced, standardized test with a 3-point scale (0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes, and 2 = Very Often). The purpose of the rating system was to examine teachers' perspectives of their students' social and problem behaviours and their academic ability as well as the perceived frequency. The SSRS-T is composed of three scales: Social Skills (e.g. Invites others to join in activities; Makes friends easily), Problem Behaviours (e.g. Fights with others; Has low self-esteem) and Academic Competence (e.g. Compare with other children in my classroom, the overall academic performance of this child is...). The Elementary Level of the SSRS-T had 57 items, and the coefficient alpha was .94 Total Scale for Social Skills, .88 Total Scale for Problem Behaviours and .95 of Academic Competence. The Secondary Level of the SSRS-T had 51 items, and the coefficient alpha was .93 Total Scale for Social Skills, .86 Total Scale for Problem Behaviours and .95 of Academic Competence. The SSRS-T was found to have adequate criterion-related validity (Gresham & Elliott, 1990).

**Case Conference Information Sheet.** The Case Conference Information Sheet was for follow-up meetings with mentors regarding their program experience. The facilitator had the follow-up meetings in a discussion style, and this sheet recorded the feedback from mentors. Items were obtained from the LINKS case conference form. The questions were, "What is working?" "What needs improvement?" and "What can we do?" (Appendix I).

**Modified Case Conference Information Sheet.** The facilitator created the modified information sheet after the first case conference because it was evident that the measure needed to be more specific and inclusive. The new case conference sheet was based on the original case

conference questions; however, it included more guided questions, and it created a section that elicited goal-setting for all participants. An example item of the new section was “Next Steps for the Facilitator” (Appendix J).

**Case Conference Last Meeting Form.** The Case Conference Last Meeting Form was designed to collect post-program information from the mentors. This 8-item form asked questions regarding the mentors’ successes and challenges in the program with their mentee (e.g. “The best experience with my mentee throughout this experience was...”) (Appendix K).

**Perceptions of Students’ Behaviour Form.** The Perceptions of Students’ Behaviour Form was for BAs, school principals, extra support staff and participating teachers in the program. This form asked these stakeholders their perception of mentors’ and mentees’ behaviours and social participation status before and after the program. It was modelled after the START project; however, some post-questions were added. An example of the measure was “What are some noticeable changes in your student's social skills” (Appendix L). Due to the strikes and COVID-19, this measure was moved to phone interviews, and a new measure was formed.

**Modified Perceptions of Students’ Behaviour Form.** The Modified Perceptions of Students’ Behaviour Form was created when the post-interviews were moved to phone interviews. The questions were asked in a semi-structured interviewed style, and there were more open-ended questions (Appendix M).

### **2.2.2 Session Materials**

**LINKS Lesson Plans.** Each mentoring session had a designated lesson and particular skill of focus. The instructions included pre-arranged themes and a variety of activities that coincide with the skill of the day. There were planned lessons, and some of the subjects included

“How to Get a Peer’s Attention” and “Using Appropriate Voices.” The majority of the lessons came from the LINKS curriculum; however, not all of the topics were relevant to the participating schools. Also, the number of sessions had to be shortened, from 19 sessions to 12. Thus, the researcher and the board had to re-arrange sessions, combine topics, take some sessions out and replace one session. The topic in Session 11 was replaced, and it was pulled from the ‘Ready-to-Use Social Skills Lesson and Activities for Grades 1-3’ handbook (Begun, 1985). The topic was changed to “Expressing Feelings,” and this lesson was more suitable for the students participating in this program (Appendix F).

**Modified Lesson Plans.** After the first session with the mentors and mentees, it was evident that the pre-determined lessons and activities were not sufficient, and that the lessons needed to be individualized. The modified lesson plan was made by the facilitator to accommodate the needs of the students in the program. It is very similar to the original lesson plan, but some materials were added, such as visual support, to foster the skill. Also, the lesson plans were simplified, and there were additional large group activities. Some of the new material came from ‘S.O.S. Skills in Our Schools: A Social Skills Program for Children with Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Including High-Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome, and Their Typical Peers’ manual (Dunn, 2005) (Appendix G).

**Modified Lesson Plans-Visual Supports.** These visuals accompany the new lesson plan. They include simplified steps/images, directions and games (e.g. puzzles, charade topics, and BINGO) (Appendix H).

**Session Handouts.** The Session Handouts were a brief summarization of the skill that the mentor and mentee worked on during the week. The purpose of the weekly journals was to inform teachers and parents about what was taught in mentorship sessions and to assist with the

generalization of the new social skills. Literature states that parents should be more involved in educational interventions as their attitudes have a profound impact on the outcomes of inclusion (Koster et al., 2010). The handouts were delivered at the end of each session. (Appendix N).

### **2.3 Procedure**

As previously mentioned, the teacher strike action and COVID-19 impacted the use of certain measures in this study (e.g. Post-Surveys and Case Conference Last Meeting Form). The original plan was to have assessments before, during, and after the 12 sessions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an early ending of the program, and thus, only 5 sessions were completed. What follows is what took place for the present research study.

After receiving ethics approval (Appendix O), three schools were recruited to participate in the study. BAs were assigned to recruit the schools because they were aware of some students on their caseloads who could benefit from being in this mentorship program. They were also familiar with which schools were seeking interventions that target social participation in at-risk students. The specialists working alongside teachers and school principals were the ones who selected students for the study. Once parental consent (Appendix P), educational staff consent (Appendix Q) and student assent (Appendix R) were collected, the program began. The program commenced in February and proceeded until mid-March. Peer mentors first participated in an hour-long disability awareness presentation. The disability awareness presentation was a guest speaker from a local disability awareness centre who came to speak to mentors about living with a disability. The speaker also commented on how mentorship played a significant role in their life. The researcher and the BAs were the ones who arranged for the guest speaker to come. In the following session, the mentoring sessions began.



Five sessions of approximately 1 hour in length were taught in the program. Topics taught in the sessions include ‘How to Get a Peer’s Attention,’ ‘Personal Space’ and ‘Taking-Turns.’ The collaboration of key stakeholders (e.g. participating teachers, BAs, and school principals) determined the structure of the intervention at the chosen school. Two schools elected for their program to be run as a club. Previous literature notes that social participation should not restrict to peers in the same class (Schwab, 2015). Therefore, the club approach allowed students from different grades to interact and pair with one another. The other school opted for their program to be conducted class-wide. Past studies indicate that school-based interventions that incorporate the classroom’s social dynamics and teachers’ level of support can have an influential impact on students’ views of each other and how they value one another (Hendrickx et al., 2016). Ergo, the class-wide approach allows for two different classrooms to come together and to experience this program as a class. The schools that ran their intervention as a club, their sessions took place during lunch hour and the school that ran class-wide conducted theirs during instruction time. All the programs occurred once a week at the school. For School A, their group met in a small learning support room; for School B, they met in available spaces at the school (e.g. classrooms and the gym)’ and lastly, School C met in a spacious classroom.

In the first session, mentors and mentees paired with their assigned partners. At the end of the first session, mentors and mentees filled out the demographic questionnaire and the pre-program survey. The researcher read the questions as a group. Also, at this time, the Perceptions of Students’ Behaviour Form and the SSRS-T were completed by stakeholders. Only School A and B participated in the SSRS-T because teachers at School C did not feel comfortable participating in this measure due to the job action. The researcher facilitated the sessions, and there was support staff (BAs and EAs), as well as teachers, to assist with behavioural

management and fostering of skills. At the beginning of each session, mentors met with the facilitator 10-15 minutes earlier to discuss the lesson plan and skill of focus for the week.

Although the lessons taught by the facilitator were directed towards all students, mentors were the designated leaders to coach and guide mentees in their learning and understanding of the new skill. After the first session, it was apparent that the lesson plan required adjustment to suit the students' needs in the program better. These adjustments included utilizing visual supports to accompany the lessons, breaking down broader concepts to straightforward terms, incorporating more content and adding more engaging activities.

After session three, participants were interviewed to determine the progress of the program. The case conference sheet was used as a guide for the facilitator to ask the participants some evaluation questions. Mentors and BAs provided some insights about what they would like to see moving forward and how the facilitator could better accommodate them in the sessions. At the end of the program, post-interviews were transformed to phone interviews, and only the stakeholders completed the Modified Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form. The researcher asked the stakeholders their perspective about the program and their overall experience. De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2012) noted that interventions should acquire different views of the program. Accordingly, this project attempted to collect information from all those who were involved. The researcher was able to record what had work, did not work, and what would be their suggestions for future implementation on a larger scale (if any).

## Chapter 3

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Before the Mentorship Program

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the students before the program began. The section includes results from the SSRS-T, Pre-Program Survey and conversations from stakeholders. As briefly mentioned, the SSRS-T were teacher ratings of the students' behaviours and their scores were compared to the norms based on sex and grade. The Pre-Program Survey were self-reports and took place on the first day of the program.

##### 3.1.1 *School A*

**SSRS-T results.** The SSRS-T results verified that both mentors and mentees chosen for this program met the inclusion criteria. Demonstrated in Table 2, eighty-three percent of mentees had below average overall social skills, 67% of them exhibited more problem behaviours, and 67% were rated to have below-average academic performance compared to a sample of their peers. These outcomes (fewer social skills, more behaviours and low academic performance) reveal that School A mentees indeed required extra support at school. As for mentors, Table 3 illustrated that 83% of mentors had more problematic behaviours compared to a standardized sample of their peers. This finding demonstrates that the majority of the mentors at this school were struggling in the behaviour component. Thus, both mentors and mentees fit the inclusion criteria.

Table 2

*School A Mentees' SSRS-T Percentages*

Scale and Subscales	Fewer/Below Average %	Average %	More/Above Average %
<b>Social Skills</b>			
Cooperation	67	33	
Assertion	17	83	
Self-Control	100		
Total Scale	83	17	
<b>Problem Behaviours</b>			
Externalizing		50	50
Internalizing		50	50
Hyperactivity		50	50
Total Scale		33	67
<b>Academic Competence</b>			
	67	33	

*Note.*  $n = 6$ . These scores compare to nonhandicapped, Elementary and Secondary Level boys and girls in the standardization sample rated by teachers.

Table 3

*School A Mentors' SSRS-T Percentages*

Scale and Subscales	Fewer/Below Average %	Average %	More/Above Average %
<b>Social Skills</b>			
Cooperation	17	83	
Assertion	17	67	17
Self-Control	33	67	
Total Scale	17	83	
<b>Problem Behaviours</b>			
Externalizing		83	17
Internalizing		67	33
Hyperactivity		67	33
Total Scale		17	83
<b>Academic Competence</b>			
	33	67	

*Note.*  $n = 6$ . Students in grade 7 were not rated on the hyperactivity subscale (minus 3 students). These scores compare to nonhandicapped, Elementary and Secondary Level boys and girls in the standardization sample rated by teachers.

**Pre-program results.** In Table 4, School A's Mentees' Pre-Program Survey results are found. The scoring of that measure was 'yes,' 'sometimes' and 'no.' In Table 5, the ratings of the Mentors Pre-Program survey are presented. It was scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always.

Table 4

*School A Mentees' Pre-Program Survey in Percentages*

Survey Statements	Yes %	No %	Sometimes %
I talk to other people about students with a disability.	67	33	
I like the school.	83		17
I participate in class.	100		
I have friends at school.	83		17
I eat lunch with friends.	83	17	
I walk to class with friends.	67	17	17
I go to places with friends after school or on the weekend.	50	50	
Kids at school understand me.	67		33
My teachers understand how to help me.	67	17	17
I can ask for help from other kids.	100		
I talk to my family about what happens at school.	83		17

*Note.*  $n = 6$ .

Table 5

*Mean Scores of Peer Mentors' Pre-Program Survey*

Survey Statements	School A (n = 6)		S	School B (n = 5)		School C (n = 5)	
	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD
I provide support to my peers during class time.	3.67	1.51		3.40	.55	4.25	.96
I provide support to my peers at lunch.	2.83	1.33		2.80	.84	3.75	.96
I provide support to my peers during passing time or transitions.	3.00	1.10		3.40	.89	4.00	.82
I am more likely to participate in activities outside of school hours with friends with a disability, such as sports, clubs, dances, or hanging out.	2.33	1.75		3.80	1.64	3.50	.58
I am doing better in my classes.	3.83	1.47		3.60	1.14	3.50	.58
I have useful life skills like responsibility.	4.33	.52		3.80	1.10	3.25	.50
I have useful life skills like problem-solving.	3.33	.52		3.20	1.30	4.00	.82
I have useful life skills like patience.	3.67	1.03		2.20	1.79	4.00	1.16
I have useful life skills like flexibility.	3.50	1.05		4.20	.84	4.00	.82
I feel that I have good social skills.	4.50	.55		3.40	1.14	4.00	.82
I like the school.	3.67	1.21		3.20	1.48	4.00	1.16

I have friends to hang out with at school.	4.67	.52	4.80	.45	4.25	.96
I think it is important for me to be at school to help others.	4.00	.63	4.40	.55	3.75	.96
I advocate for people with disabilities.	4.67	.52	3.80	1.10	4.00	.82
My school finds ways to help students with a disability.	4.83	.41	3.60	1.68	4.50	1.00

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*Note.* 1 = Never True to 5 = Always True. The Table is missing one survey for School C.

**Discussions with stakeholders.** The facilitator had discussions with participating stakeholders about how the students were before the program began. All participants at School A had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and demonstrated at-risk behaviours, meaning there was a behavioural concern. The ratings on the SSRS-T support these concerns (see Tables 6 and 7). All mentees had a clinical diagnosis, and only some mentors had a diagnosis. Fifty percent of mentors and 50% of mentees were involved in behavioural incidents at the school. These incidents included getting into altercations and resorting to externalizing behaviours. Fifty percent of the participants had encountered office referrals, and 33% of the mentors have experienced suspensions within the school year. Also, 50% of the mentors and all of the mentees reported having difficulty with peer acceptance. Hence, this supports the necessity of social skills intervention at this school.

Table 6

*Mentees' Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form in Percentages*

Variables	School A % ( <i>n</i> = 6)	School B % ( <i>n</i> = 3)	School C % ( <i>n</i> = 3)
IEP	100	33	20
At-Risk Behaviours	100	33	40
Diagnosis	100		---
Attendance Concerns	---		20
Behavioural Incidents	33	33	20
Office Referrals	50	33	
Suspensions			
Responsibility Concerns		33	20
Academic Concerns	100	67	60
Social Exclusion	100	33	40

*Note.* Based on phone interviews. (---) indicates the stakeholders were unsure of how many.

IEP = Individualized Education Plan. At-Risk Behaviours means a behaviour concern.

Behavioural Incidents refers to aggression, fights, altercations that occurred at the school.



Table 7

*Mentors' Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form in Percentages*

Variables	School A % ( <i>n</i> = 6)	School B % ( <i>n</i> = 5)	School C % ( <i>n</i> = 5)
IEP	100	40	---
At-Risk Behaviours	100	20	---
Diagnosis	---	40	---
Attendance Concerns	---		20
Behavioural Incidents	50		40
Office Referrals	50		20
Suspensions	33		
Responsibility Concerns	33	40	60
Academic Concerns	67	40	60
Social Exclusion	50		40

*Note.* Based on phone interviews. (---) indicates the stakeholders were unsure of how many.

IEP = Individualized Education Plan. At-Risk Behaviours means a behaviour concern.

Behavioural Incidents refers to aggression, fights, altercations that occurred at the school.

### 3.1.2 School B

**SSRS-T results.** The teacher ratings at School B affirmed that mentees at School B fit the inclusion criteria. In Table 8, it specified that 67% of mentees had fewer overall social skills, and 67% had below-average academic competence. For mentors, Table 9 indicated that only 20% of the chosen mentors had fewer than the average social skills, problem behaviours and academic performance compared to a standardized sample. Thus, at School B, some mentors had greater difficulty in the domains compared to their classmates.

Table 8

*School B Mentees' SSRS-T Percentages*

Scale and Subscales	Fewer/Below Average %	Average %	More/Above Average %
<b>Social Skills</b>			
Cooperation	67	33	
Assertion	33	67	
Self-Control	67	33	
Total Scale	67	33	
<b>Problem Behaviours</b>			
Externalizing		67	33
Internalizing			100
Hyperactivity		100	
Total Scale		67	33
<b>Academic Competence</b>	67	33	

*Note.*  $n = 3$ . These scores compare to nonhandicapped, Elementary and Secondary Level boys and girls in the standardization sample rated by teachers.

Table 9

*School B Mentors' SSRS-T Percentages*

Scale and Subscales	Fewer/Below Average %	Average %	More/Above Average %
<b>Social Skills</b>			
Cooperation		60	40
Assertion		100	
Self-Control	20	80	
Total Scale	20	80	
<b>Problem Behaviours</b>			
Externalizing		100	
Internalizing		100	
Hyperactivity		100	
Total Scale		80	20
<b>Academic Competence</b>	20	80	

*Note.*  $n = 5$ . Students in grade 7 were excluded from the hyperactivity scale (minus four students). These scores compare to nonhandicapped, Elementary and Secondary Level boys and girls in the standardization sample rated by teachers.

**Pre-program results.** School B's Mentees' Pre-Program Survey results are found in Table 10, and the scoring was yes', 'sometimes' and 'no.' Mentors' Pre-Program Survey results

are located in Table 5, and it was scored on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always.

Table 10

*School B Mentees' Pre-Program Survey in Percentages*

Survey Statements	Yes %	No %	Sometimes %
I talk to other people about students with a disability.	33	67	
I like the school.		100	
I participate in class.	33	33	33
I have friends at school.	100		
I eat lunch with friends.	100		
I walk to class with friends.	100		
I go to places with friends after school or on the weekend.	100		
Kids at school understand me.	100		
My teachers understand how to help me.	100		
I can ask for help from other kids.	33	67	
I talk to my family about what happens at school.	33		67

*Note.*  $n = 3$ .

**Discussion with stakeholders.** Based on conversations with stakeholders, 40% of mentors and 33% of mentees were on an IEP (see Table 6 and Table 7). Forty percent of the

mentors had a clinical diagnosis. As for office referrals and behavioural incidents, 33% of the mentees have experienced these situations. Thirty-three percent of the mentees and 40% of the mentors had challenges with responsibility, such as completing schoolwork on time. Lastly, 33% of the mentees had experienced social exclusion in the classroom, which supports the need for mentees requiring social intervention.

### **3.1.3 School C**

**SSRS-T results.** Teachers at School C did not feel comfortable completing the SSRS due to job action; therefore, there are no ratings to report in this section.

**Pre-program results.** School C's Mentees' Pre-Program Survey outcomes are observed in Table 11, and the scoring was 'yes,' 'sometimes' and 'no.' The ratings of the Mentors Pre-Program Survey are found in Table 5, and it was scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always.

Table 11

## School C Mentees' Pre-Program Survey in Percentages

Survey Statements	Yes %	No %	Sometimes %
I talk to other people about students with a disability.	33	67	
I like the school.	67	33	
I participate in class.	67	33	
I have friends at school.	100		
I eat lunch with friends.	67	33	
I walk to class with friends.	33	33	33
I go to places with friends after school or on the weekend.	33	33	33
Kids at school understand me.	100		
My teachers understand how to help me.	100		
I can ask for help from other kids.	67	33	
I talk to my family about what happens at school.	100		

*Note.*  $n = 3$ . The Table is missing two surveys.

**Discussion with stakeholders.** Conversations at this school revealed that 20% of the mentees were on an IEP, and 40% were showing signs of at-risk behaviours, meaning they were showing concerns of externalizing behaviours (see Table 6 and Table 7). There was a serious concern regarding attendance for 20% of the students. Twenty percent of mentees and mentors had office referrals, and 60% had academic challenges. Sixty percent of mentors reported having

concerns with being responsible, 40% of both mentors and mentees were reported to have difficulties with peer acceptance.

### **3.2 During the Mentorship program**

One of the research questions was, “what aspects of the program work well, and what needs to change according to the students, teachers, principals, and BAs?” Thus, this section will explore and examine the facilitation of the mentoring sessions to observe what are the changes needed in the program. Results are the researcher's reflections and discussions from stakeholders that were recorded after each session throughout the program.

#### **3.2.1 School A**

School A ran its mentorship program as a club, and it took place in a small learning support room. All the pairings were 1:1 and same-sex. There was a sufficient amount of additional support staff, which was highly beneficial because there appeared to be a lot of extensive needs in the program. After the first session, it was evident that the lessons needed to be simpler; thus, there were continual modifications to the successive sessions. What was helpful to this group was presenting the content step-by-step with accompanying visual supports. Consistently checking for understanding by asking questions, rephrasing, and repeating was crucial as well. This group required a lot of breaks and shorter phrases. It was transparent that both the mentors and mentees responded well to the modifications, and it assisted in their grasping of the content.

Discovered through the sessions was that there needed to be more active activities. To maintain their attention, there needed to be intermittent fast-paced games that would allow the participants to move around. Interactive attention-getters (e.g. “If you can hear me touch your head,”) and structured, easy to implement games (e.g. red light, green light) were useful. The

challenge regarding playing certain games, however, was the space. At times, the room felt congested, and it was challenging to engage in active activities when the room was limited. Another concern was frequent absences. When a mentor or mentee was absent, their buddy would have to learn with another group, which may have added more stress to the other group (e.g. mentor having to teach two mentees instead of one). Absences made it difficult for the next session because the participants would miss out on learning a new skill. Also, missing sessions were troubling for some individuals as they would feel upset not having their buddy there.

Moreover, transitioning into the learning room was hard for some mentees at the beginning of the program. It was reasonable for this to occur as there were new students, teachers, and unfamiliar faces in the room. Some individuals took longer to adjust to this new routine, and therefore, support staff had to work with the mentors in finding techniques in assisting the mentee to feel more comfortable with them. Another challenge the mentors faced was supporting their buddy when they expressed wanting to be with their peers during lunch recreation. Despite those difficulties, mentors still took on a leadership stance. It was clear that some mentors were taking this role seriously and were taking the initiative to coach and guide their mentees when possible. These mentees required a lot of prompting and redirection, and the mentors remained patient and flexible. This program appeared to be beneficial for both mentors and mentees.

**School A's Case Conference.** The case conference took place after the third session, and when participants were discussed what was working so far in the program, they expressed that the pre-meeting with just the mentors was valuable and worthwhile. When asked what was not working, mentors indicated they were having difficulty interacting with their mentees and maintaining their attention. The plan moving forward was for mentors to continue to be an

assistant to one another when needed. After implementing that support plan, it appeared to be successful. Mentors supporting other mentors with their buddies seemed to assist them in building assertion, initiation and teamwork skills.

Also, during the case conference, it was proposed that both mentors and mentees should have a group behaviour management plan. The behaviour plan was a dry erase board that was visible to the whole class, and the group had to obtain a specified number of points to receive a reward at the end of the session. To obtain points, students had to demonstrate appropriate behaviours during the session (e.g. not talking when the facilitator is talking, following instructions, using indoor voices, working with their buddy). Once the mentors and mentees displayed the desired behaviours, a public announcement would be made that they were receiving a point, and the point would be given in front of everybody to praise their desired behaviours. The support staff and facilitator were in charge of delivering points, and no points were taken away when students did not elicit desired behaviours. When the group met the set number, they chose rewards from a reward bin that was composed of engaging toys from a dollar store (e.g. bouncy balls, squishy frogs). The school board was able to get funding to sponsor the reward items in the bin. The behaviour plan appeared to be successful at the beginning of implementation for both mentors and mentees, but after a while, the mentees seemed to lose a little interest in receiving points.

### **3.2.2 School B**

School B opted for the class-wide approach, where one class of older students mentored a younger class. There were 47 students and one extra support staff alongside the two homeroom teachers who aided the students when necessary. Before the mentees joined the mentor class, the mentors seemed excited as their class was preparing for this partnership for a few weeks. Once



the merged occurred, some mentors in the study were overwhelmed and required extra support with the transition of meeting their new buddy. The space of the classroom also played a role in the anxieties of the mentors. The room was not desirable for the two large classes. The first day was relatively challenging, but as the sessions progressed, the mentors became more adjusted.

Concerning the sessions, both mentors and mentees were receptive to the lessons. It was apparent that the content was age-appropriate, and students were engaged. The use of visuals and modelling was also useful at this school. It was evident that this program was well-liked amongst the students. A challenge that was encountered was finding a consistent classroom to conduct the sessions. Every week the session occurred in a different space, and it affected the well-being of some mentors as it altered their routine, and it took time for them to adjust to the unfamiliar environment. Another challenge was that some mentors had a more difficult time connecting with their buddies than others. It could be upsetting to some peers to observe their classmates having good relations with their buddies, while they may be having difficulty with the connection. There were moments where mentors had to exercise their patience, appropriate social skills and flexibility, which was challenging for some of them, as indicated in their pre-program survey. Connections from the measures were found as well, where the mentors who were rated to have fewer social skills and more problem behaviours by their teacher seemed to have the most difficulties connecting with their buddy in the program. Constant reminders to the mentors to set a 'good example' to the mentees were important. The extra support of staff that was available was extremely beneficial to those who were struggling because they were able to assist and guide the mentor in managing their buddy.

As time progressed in the program, it was becoming more noticeable that the pairs were feeling more comfortable with each other. It was evident that the pairs were building a stronger

rapport by becoming more excited when they saw their partner during merge time and laughing together during activities. Also, they were progressing in their conversations during check-ins (e.g. moving past simple phrases such as, “hi, how are you?” to “how is your dog?” “What did you do on the weekend?” and so on). Additionally, it was visible that the students were becoming closer as an overall class as well. For example, during the BINGO review (session 5), the facilitator asked different mentors to assist in modelling the exercises to the class. At first, many hesitated; however, through time, they all stepped out of their comfort zones and performed the tasks. During that session, it was clear that the mentors were feeling more united as they were all laughing with each other and communicating. Also, it was favourable to observe that a few mentors were encouraging their mentees to come up with them as they were demonstrating the exercise. The purpose of that session was to review all the skills that were learned so far, and not only were they remembered, but students were harnessing other skills, too, such as teamwork and leadership.

All the students were participating, and it seems it was due to everyone else participating, including teachers. The active participation of the students in the program appeared to motivate the mentors to want to form even closer bonds with their buddies. It seemed the program was creating a safe space for the students to learn together and from each other. Based on the facilitator's perceptions, it looked like this program was valuable to both mentors and mentees.

**School's B Case Conference.** During the case conference that took place after the third session, mentors exclaimed that the pairings were favourable for them. They believed teamwork was occurring, and that the project curriculum had been useful. Some individuals expressed a desire for the sessions to last longer. Due to the ratio of mentors being more than the mentees, some mentors had to double up in their pairings. Those paired together commented that having a

partner made mentoring less stressful, and they enjoyed sharing responsibility with a classmate. When participants discussed what needed improvement, mentors recommended more lively games and bonding activities that will get them closer to their mentees. The mentors expressed that they would like more opportunities to interact with their mentees outside of mentorship. They suggested that both classes should arrange to eat lunch and do more school activities, such as reading buddies. It is interesting to note that it was one of the mentors struggling with their buddy that proposed having more bonding activities with buddies. It was clear that this mentor was showing signs of wanting to connect with their buddy but lacked the adequate skills to do so effectively. This point demonstrates that mentors who struggle still strive to form a connection with their peers; they just need extra support and a safe opportunity to do it. These mentors also requested for the facilitator to check in on them more during sessions; however, it was challenging instructing the class-wide program and attending to individual students simultaneously.

### **3.2.3 School C**

School C also ran its program like a club. The program took place in a large classroom, and there was a support staff available for the students. It took a few sessions for the matches to become comfortable with each other and to open up. It was apparent that the mentors were nervous, and the mentees were very shy; however, throughout the sessions, mentors became more confident in their abilities. Due to the spacious classroom, it was easier to role-play with students after each new skill as they could spread out and practice the steps. The mentees responded well to the modelling, and it seemed that the curriculum was age-appropriate. The bigger room made it possible to facilitate more games and to separate the pairs to individual tables. This separation was beneficial because it allowed the pairs to focus on each other and to

eliminate the distraction of their peers. The group as a whole was more successful with the separation, and it presented the opportunity for mentors to hone on their leadership skills.

At this school, mentors had a group behaviour plan, and it was highly instrumental in the productivity of the sessions. The point system was similar to School A, where the behaviour plan was on a dry erase board that was visible to the students, and the group had to obtain a specified number of points to receive a reward based on displaying desired behaviours. This program also gave points publicly, and only the facilitator and support staff delivered points. What differed in this behaviour plan compared to School A was that this plan was for mentors only, the specified number was unknown to the mentors, the specified number changed each session, and each mentor had a point column. All mentors having a column meant that all their names were on the board, and the points would go to individual students when they were displaying the desired behaviour. The desired behaviours included being attentive to their mentee, following instructions, staying seated, and being respectful (e.g. listening to others and using appropriate language). At the end session, column tallies were calculated and combined to determine if the students reached the specified number to obtain a reward. The reward at this school was mentors selecting their menu for their free lunches, as this school gave free lunches to the mentors in the program. After implementing this program, it was clear that mentors enjoyed competing against their peers in a friendly manner, and they became more motivated to engage in desired behaviours in sessions.

The first time that the mentors received free lunch, they willingly shared it with their mentees. Also, mentors reported that they have been socializing with their buddies outside of the program (e.g. during recess). The participants' growth and progress as the session increased was noticeable. It was transparent that the mentees looked up the mentors and that they were forming

strong bonds. In terms of challenges, one significant challenge was needing extra support for the participants; however, that was unable to occur due to the job action. Despite that challenge, the program still revealed favourable outcomes based on the facilitator reflection notes.

**School C's Case Conference.** After the third session, participants participated in a case conference. When participants discussed what worked, they indicated the pairing was well-matched and that the mentees listened well to the mentors. The students enjoyed having free lunches, and they felt the content was at a level the mentees could comprehend. They suggested that the material should be a little more challenging for the mentees. When asked what needed improvement, they suggested that they needed to improve in their behaviours, such as staying seated when the facilitator is talking and setting a better example to their mentees.

### **3.3 After the Mentoring Program**

After the program was completed, key stakeholders (BAs, teachers and school principals) participated in phone interviews to discuss mentors' and mentees' growth in the program as well as any positive changes they occurred. Also, interviewers provided suggestions for improvement in the mentoring program. Therefore, this section will assist in answering the three research questions: 1. Do mentors who participate in the peer program experience positive changes in their academics, social skills, and behaviours at their schools? 2. Do mentees who participate in the peer program experience positive changes in their friendships, social skills and peer acceptance? 3. What aspects of the program work well, and what needs to change according to the students, teachers, principals, and BAs?

### **3.3.1 School A**

The phone interviews show that throughout the program, some students had noticeable growth in their social skills. All students had shown improvements in the group session, but it was too soon to state whether it had been generalized to other settings. Additionally, students appeared to be more social as the session progressed (e.g. communicating more with their peers and those involved in the program). As for program evaluation, interviewers mentioned that this program was an optimal opportunity for the mentees to have a role model in the school environment. They state that it was excellent to observe mentors having this role when they typically do not get offered such leadership opportunities. The chosen social skills topics were sufficient, and it was necessary for these students who lacked such skills. Case conferences for support staff were beneficial as it allowed them to touch base and make program adjustments. Incorporating visual supports, structured games and giving out snacks to the participants was also well-liked. They suggested that the curriculum should have more hands-on activities and more games in general. It was requested for more debriefing at the end of sessions with the mentors, more flexibility of facilitator, and more role-playing during the sessions.

For challenges, the size of the room was very limiting, and it was difficult when mentors were struggling to manage their behaviours. When asked about recommendations for future implementation, they would appreciate if mentors came earlier to the sessions (e.g. 30 minutes earlier rather than 15 minutes). They highlighted that mentors required more instruction on how to manage their mentees and needed more time to learn the skill. Also, sessions needed to be more individualized to their group, and thus, they proposed a pre-skill assessment survey that assesses students' skill deficits before the program. As for recommendations, they would like more interaction between mentors and mentees before the teaching portion began (e.g. more

introductory sessions). Lastly, stakeholders conclude that the students enjoyed the program, and adaptations are imperative for future implementations.

### **3.3.2 School B**

During the phone interviews, interviewers mention that the younger class was very excited every week to participate in the program and spend time with their buddy. It was too soon to claim any noticeable changes in social skills. Some mentors and mentees did not have the most positive attitude going into the sessions, but their attitudes had slowly progressed as the pairs were getting more acquainted with one another. Interviewees have expressed that some students appeared more social in class and their group of friends. One stakeholder expressed that one student struggled with initiation, but since the program, they have been expressing a greater desire to work more with their peers.

For the program evaluation, the daily written agendas, multiple interactive activities, modelling, clear instructions and innovative props were useful. The stakeholders highlighted that the sessions and activities were always engaging, memorable and age-appropriate. They liked the idea of the cross-age peer mentoring in a class-wide setting. The class-wide structure was favourable, where all students could participate, and no one felt singled out. Reviewing and teaching specific social skills were also valued. Interviewers recognized that communication, collaboration, preparation, and organization among the primary stakeholders warrant improvement. Also, they mention that some modifications are needed for those who do not require small instructions (e.g. elimination some step by step content). Lastly, it was reported that there were higher ratings of approval from parents of this program when they discovered their students were not singled out to participate.

Regarding challenges, it was discussed that not having a designated ample space was very problematic. Not being able to monitor all students was another challenge presented. An additional challenge was that some mentors who partnered up with a typically-developing peer had difficulty becoming a leader. Not personally knowing the students was difficult for extra staff. As for recommendations, stakeholders proposed that mentors could pick up their mentees from the classroom, to assist with the feelings of intimidations in the mentees. Also, they requested that there should be a full session of just the mentors and then just mentees to provide more background of their role in the program. In summary, all the participants enjoyed being in the sessions, and it was disappointing not to see the whole program through.

### **3.3.3 *School C***

During these interviews, stakeholders expressed that the students who would miss a substantial number of days at a time demonstrated significant improvements in that area throughout the program. Students made more of an effort to be at school, especially on session days. There had been noticeable differences in office referrals as well, particularly on the days of sessions.

Moreover, the stakeholder explained that it appeared that the mentors were becoming more social and having a better attitude towards the sessions as the sessions progressed. Referring to what worked in the program, it was stressed that they admired how the program targeted students of concern. Stakeholders at this school claimed they were seeking opportunities for these individuals, and this program was a perfect fit. This program became a motivating factor for some students to do well, and it became more purposeful for them to attend school. Interviewees liked the separation of the tables that helped to eliminate the distraction of peers. They thought the skills were appropriate, and the weekly goals, free lunches (rewards) as well as



multiple activities were sufficient. As to what needed improvement, there needed to be more content to fill an hour session, and for the curriculum to be less ASD focused. At this school, they suggested developing a pre-skill assessment to understand students' deficits and to have a clearer pre-requisite for participation.

Some challenges that they thought occurred were the behaviour management of the students and the lack of communication amongst all primary stakeholders. Also, having the program run as a club was indicated as a challenge too. They expressed an interest in running the program as class-wide the next time around and for the teachers to try implementing the program. In terms of recommendations, they suggest more measures to analyze the generalization of the skills in other settings (e.g. classrooms). In summary, this program was well-enjoyed by all peers, who were continually excited to attend the sessions. The stakeholders consistently expressed how essential this program was to their school and appreciated that students could learn while maintaining their "social status" outside of the program. They thought the recruitment piece was critical and would participate in this program again.

Across the three schools, it is evident that some positive effects were beginning to occur in the mentors and the mentees. The findings illustrated that all the mentees in the study required extra support and could certainly benefit from learning from a mentor. The reports from the facilitator and school staff, support that the mentees indeed acquired some skills and thought highly of their mentors. The results displayed that mentors who struggled in school were starting to embrace their new leadership role that required patience, flexibility, and responsibility. Mentors were gaining confidence in their ability to guide a peer, and it appeared they were starting to adjust well to a new opportunity that usually does not come to them. Both the school staff and the facilitator can agree that both mentors and mentees were progressing in the

program. Although it had only been five sessions, and the growth so far was mostly within the program sessions, these results reveal that there is a potential of generalization. Only with time, generalization could become more observable; however, these findings do support that the students were beginning to make progress. As previously emphasized, it is not that students who experience social exclusion do not want to connect with their peers; they just have insufficient skills to do so effectively, and this mentorship program demonstrates that it could help.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Discussion

Overall, the peer mentorship program was beginning to demonstrate success in students' social participation, as evidenced by the observations of the facilitator and feedback from stakeholders. Students were learning new skills, building new friendships that were starting to grow outside of the program, and starting to feel apart of something (e.g. the school community, the classroom or with their peers). Collectively, the participating schools had one ultimate goal for their students: they facilitated their program based on their resources, students involved and the ethos of their school. There were similarities in the programs as well as differences.

The prominent similarity across the three schools was the immense need of the students. As described in the teacher ratings, most mentees had fewer than the average social skills, more problem behaviours, and lower academic performance than their peers. Some mentees had an IEP, a disability diagnosis, and were having difficulty with office referrals and attendance. As indicated in the literature review, students who have difficulty in these areas tend to have challenges obtaining peer acceptance and social inclusion (De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012; Koster et al., 2010; Schwab, 2015; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). The mentees participating in the study lacked the necessary tools to have effective communication with their peers and required extra support to thrive in their inclusive environments. Similar findings were reported for mentors across the schools as well. The common theme for mentors was that they were having a hard time regulating their behaviours and have experienced social exclusion in their school environment. As aligned with the literature, students with less acceptable approaches to solving problems and poor interaction skills with others tend to have an unfavourable evaluation from their peers and experience social isolation (De Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert,

2012; De Leeuw et al., 2018; Koster et al., 2010). Therefore, it was transparent that students involved in the program would benefit from the intervention. Mentees would benefit from the program by learning essential skills from a peer rather than a teacher, and they would make a new friend. The mentors would benefit from the program by strengthening their skills and being viewed as a leader, which is not a common perception of them.

Another common theme that was widespread in the schools was that students had similar responses to their pre-program questionnaires. In mentees, they all mostly responded 'yes' to the social statements. They all unanimously agreed that their peers understood them and that they have friends at school. Correspondingly, mentors' responses were also similar to each other. They all mostly ranged in the 'sometimes' to 'always' category when asked about their social interactions at school. All mentors agreed they provided support to their peers during class and that they regularly have friends. These findings may appear contradicting what their teachers may express about them; however, past research has proposed a few suggestions as to why this outcome. One explanation was that these students might have distorted positive self-perceptions (Koster et al., 2010). Other researchers note that these students might lessen the severity of their experiences as a way to cope with social exclusion (De Leeuw et al., 2018). Another suggestion was that these students might have a friend with similar poor social skills, and ergo feel that they do not presently experience social exclusion (Bossaert, Colpin et al., 2015). These explanations highlight potential issues of concern for students who lack appropriate social skills. Perhaps students who lack positive social skills may not seek extra assistance to improve their social competence, which may pose further challenges when they would like to make a new friend. Alternatively, it is possible that these individuals can get into an altercation with their one friend with similar poor skills. It would be very challenging for both of them to resolve this situation in

an appropriate matter. Therefore, these points highlight how essential it is for researchers to continually measure students' perceptions and those who interact with them in order to capture the fuller picture.

Another similarity in the students across the schools was their receptivity to the overall mentorship program. The modelling of tasks, utilization of visual aids, writing down the steps on the board and having the behaviour plan visible on the board were all conducive to the students' success in the program. Most students communicated that they admired the idea of mentoring and being paired with another person to engage in activities. During case conferences, observations show that all the students enjoyed having their voices heard and being able to contribute to the changes in the program. This result supports the findings in past studies that it is crucial to incorporate students' perceptions in the program adjustments (Chamiliari, 2009). Students mentioned at all three case conferences that there is a longing for more active activities. Students visibly enjoyed the role-playing tasks that allowed movements such as the BINGO review, charades, and puzzles. Thus, there need to be more active games incorporated into the program.

The last similarity across the groups was the necessity of having extra support staff in the sessions. For the skill training program to be successful, it is imperative to have extra support staff that can help with the acquisition of the new skill. Mentors benefitted from receiving extra assistance in their learning on how to communicate, guide and support their mentee. Mentors coached by the support staff is what contributed to the success of mentors helping their mentees. Mentors had to engage in much patience, and as discovered in the surveys, patience was difficult for several mentors. Positioning mentors where their patience and skills were tested continuously

was a challenge for all of them; however, most mentors could still be sufficient to their mentees with extra support. Thus, the availability of extra support staff is a must for the mentors.

Regarding the differences between the schools, the most salient difference was the resources available to each school. Some schools were able to have a lot of extra support staff to assist with the program, whereas one school only had one staff who was able to support the program. The availability of support staff makes a difference in students' success and their progression in the program. Having many students in one space who have difficulty regulating their behaviours poses a challenge to the facilitator, and it becomes difficult for classroom management. There is not a set number of extra support staff required to run the program. The number of staff would vary by the type of program conducted, students' abilities, level of independence and externalizing behaviours. It would be ideal to have one support staff for every two mentors/mentees pairings. This 1:2 ratio would allow students to obtain some independence and gives them more access to additional support when needed. For the school with one support staff, it was difficult for the other students to acquire help when the staff or the facilitator focused on another group that required more instruction. Thus, having two groups per one staff will allow more students to receive additional help, and it may decrease externalizing behaviours. Therefore, the extra staff is imperative for the success of the program.

Another difference was access to a spacious learning environment. It was apparent in the findings that some schools had no problems locating a consistent space to conduct their sessions, and having a consistent space helped establish a routine for some students in the program, especially those with ASD. Also, having a sizeable reliable space to conduct sessions made it easier to engage in role-playing activities and to run active games that the students requested. Moreover, obtaining funding for the students in the program was another difference in the

resources. Some programs were able to get funding that would cover the cost of snacks, lunches and rewards (e.g. toys) for the students. Having rewards and snacks certainly contributed to the success of programs as it was a positive motivator and strong reinforcer for students to display appropriate behaviours. It is important to note that having funding is not mandatory for this program to be successful (as observed in School B); however, it truly helps.

The amount of collaboration among stakeholders differed from school to school, as did principal involvement. Stakeholders played a significant role in the productivity of sessions. The more effort they made in collaborating about the program (before and during), the more it was reflected in the organization and preparedness of the sessions. Their involvement supports the literature that principals and teachers have a considerable impact on inclusive interventions (Szumski et al., 2017; Waldron et al., 2011). Some stakeholders were more involved than others (e.g. made appearances in the sessions, praised the mentors during sessions), and it appeared that it made a difference in the students (e.g. knowing they were being recognized from someone who is in charge of the school).

Another difference observed in the programs was the level of needs of students. Although all students in this study required extra assistance, the level of assistance varied across the schools. Based on the Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form, some schools reported that they had many or all students struggling in several areas. Other schools reported that they had a few areas of concern but only with a few students. Schools that had higher scores on the areas of needs (e.g. behaviour incidents, academics, social skills) required more support in their sessions due to the great need of the students. For example, School A had high scores on the Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form, and in the session, it was transparent the students had significant needs as well. Due to those factors, the curriculum had to be modified continuously and steps

given in increments. On the contrary, School B and C did not have as many high scores across the domains, and thus their sessions were not as modified as School A. These individuals were sufficient with straightforward steps and did not require constant prompting and rephrasing.

The last difference across the schools was the structure of the program. Two schools facilitated their program as a club, and one conducted their program class-wide. There were positives and negatives to both approaches, and both structures witnessed success in students. For the strengths in the club approach, the smaller number of students allowed more intimacy, and it was easier to monitor skill acquisition as well as observe the students. Also, having fewer students allowed for more 1:1 assistance to students who required it, and the structure allowed the school to target all the students of need simultaneously. Although targeting all the students of need at the same time was ideal, it was, at times, overwhelming for the program staff, especially when there was limited availability of extra support.

One downside to the club method was that during the sessions, many students expressed a desire to be with their friends. The timing of the club approach was during the long recess, and thus, some mentees were upset missing that time. Perhaps future research could figure out a way to conduct these sessions without students feeling they are missing out on being with their friends (e.g. after school). Another problematic situation to the club approach was that the pairs came from a range of grades. It was difficult to facilitate a group when the grades of the students varied greatly (e.g. mentees being from SK to grade 4 in one group). It is ideal to have one or two grades per category.

Furthermore, the strengths of the class-wide approach were that all students in the class could participate in the program, meaning that the chosen mentors were able to experience this program with familiar peers. As mentioned in the results, students who participated in the study



at School B got to feel special that they were chosen for the study. They felt special because they were the ones who got to do interviews, and their peers were not invited to provide feedback. Students feeling special was also crucial in the club approach, but it felt more prominent in the class-wide as their peers could visibly observe them having that opportunity. Another strength to class-wide was higher approval ratings of parents towards this program when they discover their child will be participating with their class. In the club approach, it took more convincing and explanation of the program to the parents as to why it was just their child participating and not the class.

Further, the students in the class-wide approach got the opportunity to learn with their classmates as well as form closer bonds with them, which is another strength. It was beneficial to have teachers participate in the program as it assists in the generalization of skills outside of the program (e.g. incorporating the target skills in other subjects). As it was indicated, all teachers and parents received session handouts, but teachers could comprehend more about what is occurring in the program when they were involved. Teachers participating in the program are also beneficial to peers in the class. As highlighted, teachers are social referents for peer interactions (Hendrickx et al., 2016). Accordingly, when students observe their teachers, interacting positively with students who typically struggle in the classroom, it may positively influence their perceptions of that peer (Hendrickx et al., 2016). Lastly, teachers' participation in the program was advantageous because they could observe how to conduct the program for future implementation, and they could continue to organize opportunities for the two classes to interact, for example, to do reading buddies.

The downside to the class-wide approach was that there were many students to manage, and it was challenging to attend to all the students who required extra assistance. It was

challenging to discover a pace that suited the whole class, meaning the content had to be rapid enough that students who did not struggle were not disengaged but slow enough that students who did struggle can upkeep with their peers. Another downside to class-wide was that not all students ultimately approved of the program at first, and it is possible that some students did not follow the directions. However, as time progressed, students were becoming more receptive to the program, and their participation became very high during games (e.g. BINGO). As evident, there are multiple strengths and weaknesses to both structures of the program.

In summary, there were many similarities as well as differences across the peer mentorship programs. Although this program had a limited amount of sessions, these results were very telling that this program has great potential for success in the students' social participation. The ultimate goal across the three schools was to improve the areas of needs in students who struggle. Through the peer mentorship program, there was evidence that some skills were fostered. It is unclear whether the skills acquired were able to be sustained throughout the whole program, due to the timing; however, the program appears to be a great resource to help boost the low participation in students who experience social exclusion.

#### **4.1 Limitations and Future Research**

The findings of this study are subject to a few limitations. The first limitation was the unexpected early ending of the program due to COVID-19. The abrupt ending of the program did not allow the researcher to get a complete evaluation of the 12 weeks LINKS peer program. This project could only provide a snapshot of the students' progress up to session five and could not fully comment on the post results. Due to not having quantitative post-measures of students' growth, this study relied on stakeholder's perceptions.

Another limitation involves the job action initiative that occurred during the time of the program. The job action included rotating strikes, which made it difficult to have consistent sessions with the participants. Also, the job action affected teachers' participation in the program, such as filling out the ratings and being able to discuss the program outside of sessions. The job action may have had an effect on the length of time it took for students to become acquainted with one another. Perhaps the inconsistent sessions may have hindered the students' process of becoming comfortable with each other and the program (e.g. it may have taken longer for it to occur). Also, the instability of sessions may have had an indirect effect on students' behaviours, such as inconsistency in their routine, and thus they would 'act out' more during sessions. Nonetheless, there was promising progress made in a few sessions. It is just difficult to know how much the job action interfered.

Considering that this is a younger population, there runs a risk of whether students fully understood the asked questions. The current researcher strongly advises that future researchers revise the Pre-Program Survey. A suggestion would be adding replacement questions for certain statements such as eating lunch with peers and walking with peers in the hallways. Peers typically had arranged seating during lunch from their teachers, and they usually walk in lines in the hallways with their classmates. Thus, more relevant statements need to be placed instead of those statements. Additionally, being more specific on the survey items may be more useful to future researchers evaluating their program. For example, "I participate in class" and "kids at school understand me" could use more details as these statements were vague.

Experimenter bias and a lack of a comparison group may pose additional limitations to the study. Indeed, having a control group and having somebody other than the researcher evaluating the implementation of the program would have been vital if the primary goal of the project was

to determine whether the program works or not. However, the intended purpose of this research was to observe and document how to best implement the program in schools based on the structure of the program and access to resources (e.g. space, funding, extra support staff, etc.). Thus, the absence of a comparison group and full participation of the researcher is not as concerning. Nonetheless, future research may want to include an unbiased third party for additional input.

In summary, future researchers should be mindful of these limitations when taking account, the findings and the purpose of this project.

#### **4.2 Mentoring Program Recommendations**

The following recommendations hope to aid practitioners in their implementation of a cross-age peer mentoring program:

- Have rigid prerequisites for the students involved in the program
- Decide whether to run the program class-wide or club-like
- Consider access to school resources, such as availability of support staff and program space
- Collaborate with all stakeholders (e.g. Teachers, Principals, Parents, BAs)
- Develop a pre-skill assessment to determine the skill deficits of students
- Implement a Group Behaviour System (can be solely for mentors/mentees or whole group)
- Provide more training/disability awareness to both mentors and mentees before the program begins
- Extend the introductory sessions to 2-3 weeks for more icebreaker activities
- Have mentors pick up their mentees before each session

### **4.3 Potential Implications for Education**

It was anticipated that when students increase in their social skills, their problem behaviours will decrease and that they would feel more socially competent to make new friends. Findings in this program revealed that some meaningful changes occurred in both the mentors and mentees. This program had started to reveal that it can assist in changing attitudes of students as well as allow them to obtain the necessary exposure to learn about diversity in inclusive environments. However, researchers should be cautious of these results as the program needs to be replicated more. Nevertheless, the results presented are still promising.

As mentioned, social participation in students with special education needs is low, but this program has hinted in its potential of eliminating barriers and creating a safe space to learn and grow with a peer. Past research has reported that educational assistance can hinder the inclusion of peers, and thus peers learning from other peers is the path to follow (De Boer et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2010). These positive results align with Ontario's ministry of education goals in striving for more positive school climates where all students can feel accepted, make new friends and enhance their character development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The findings in this study hope to assist other schools who would like to implement a peer program at their school.

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**Appendices (A-R)****Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire**

**Please fill out the questions below:**

**School:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant ID:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Peer Mentor Pre-Program Survey

Participant ID:

Date:

Answer the questions below, ranging from never true to always true.

**1 = Never True 2 = Rarely True 3 = Sometimes True 4 = Often True 5 = Always True**

- 1. I provide support to my peers during class time.
- 2. I provide support to my peers at lunch.
- 3. I provide support to my peers during passing time or transitions.
- 4. I am more likely to participate in activities outside of school hours with friends with a disability, such as sports, clubs, dances, or hanging out.
- 5. I am doing well in my classes.
- 6. I have useful life skills like responsibility.
- 7. I have useful life skills like problem-solving.
- 8. I have useful life skills like patience.
- 9. I have useful life skills like flexibility.
- 10. I feel that I have good social skills.
- 11. I like the school.
- 12. I have friends to hang out with at school.
- 13. I think it is important for me to be at school to help others.
- 14. I advocate for people with disabilities.
- 15. My school finds ways to help students with a disability.

## Appendix C: Peer Mentor Post-Program Survey

Participant ID:

Date:

Answer the questions below, ranging from never true to always true.

**1 = Never True 2 = Rarely True 3 = Sometimes True 4 = Often True 5 = Always True**

- 1. I provide support to my peers during class time.
- 2. I provide support to my peers at lunch.
- 3. I provide support to my peers during passing time or transitions.
- 4. I am more likely to participate in activities outside of school hours with friends with a disability, such as sports, clubs, dances, or hanging out.
- 5. I am doing well in my classes.
- 6. I have useful life skills like responsibility.
- 7. I have useful life skills like problem-solving.
- 8. I have useful life skills like patience.
- 9. I have useful life skills like flexibility.
- 10. I feel that I have good social skills.
- 11. I like the school.
- 12. I have friends to hang out with at school.
- 13. I think it is important for me to be at school to help others.
- 14. I advocate for people with disabilities.
- 15. My school finds ways to help students with a disability.

16. How has the peer mentoring program helped students with a disability?

17. How has the peer mentoring program helped you?

18. Is there anything else you would like to share? Any suggestions to improve the program?

19. Would you participate again?

**Appendix D: Mentee Pre-Program Survey**

Participant ID:

Date:

Answer the questions by marking yes or no for each question:

**1 = Yes 2 = Sometimes 3 = No**

- 1. I talk to other people about students with a disability.
- 2. I like the school.
- 3. I participate in class.
- 4. I have friends at school.
- 5. I eat lunch with friends.
- 6. I walk to class with friends.
- 7. I go places with friends after school or on the weekend.
- 8. Kids at school understand me.
- 9. My teachers understand how to help me.
- 10. I can ask for help from other kids.
- 11. I talk to my family about what happens at school.



## Appendix E: Mentee's Post-Program Survey

Participant ID:

Date:

Answer the questions by marking yes or no for each question:

**1 = Yes 2 = No**

- 1. I talk to other people about students with a disability.
- 2. I like the school.
- 3. I participate in class.
- 4. I have friends at school.
- 5. I eat lunch with friends.
- 6. I walk to class with friends.
- 7. I go places with friends after school or on the weekend.
- 8. Kids at school understand me.
- 9. My teachers understand how to help me.
- 10. I can ask for help from other kids.
- 11. I talk to my family about what happens at school.

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Open-ended questions

- 12. What was your experience like having a mentor?
- 13. Would you change anything about the program? If yes, what would you change?
- 14. What did you learn in the peer to peer program?
- 15. What are your overall thoughts about the program?

## **Appendix F: LINKS Lesson Plans**

### **Week 1 – Introductions**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To explain the peer program*
- *To help the mentors and mentees learn about each other*

Week one is about introductions and providing an overview of the peer to peer program. This will be a time where the researcher will re-introduce herself and explain her role in the implementation process, such as helping out with case conferences and collecting data by observations. Also, the researcher will discuss the layout of the sessions, the agenda and address any concerns before the mentees join the group.

Next, the mentees will join the group, and they will pair up with a mentor. The pairs will have some time to introduce themselves and share their names, grade, and so on. It would be ideal if the researcher could brainstorm some questions/topics ahead time with the mentors before the mentees arrive. After the introductions, the researcher will discuss the purpose of peer mentoring, the goals, objectives and desired outcomes. If there are any questions, this will be the time to address them. Mentioning of upcoming topics and activities will also occur at this time. Then, once all the mentors and mentees had some time to converse, the group will engage in icebreaker activities that will help with finding commonalities and learning new things about one another.

### **Week 2 – Attention and Personal Space**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To model how to get a peer's attention*
- *To teach about personal space*
- *To engage in role-playing*

*Materials needed:*

- *Gym Equipment (e.g. balls, parachute or chalk) or Board Games*

#### ***1. How to get a peer's attention***

The pairs will discuss how to get someone's attention. They will talk about how it feels when they attempt to get someone's attention and then get ignored, or if someone is trying to get their attention and will not stop asking them questions. Collectively, they will discuss ways to get a peer's attention: stand close (remind about personal space), tap on the shoulder if appropriate (remind how sometimes it is not appropriate to tap someone on the shoulder and how some people do not like to be touched), say the person's name and when the peer/person looks or responds, ask them to play/if they would like to join the activity.

## **2. Personal Space**

Next, the pairs will focus on personal space and how space helps to get and maintain a person's attention. Students will then do a personal space activity.

The activity:

- They will face each other and stand about four to five meters apart.
- Next, one person walks towards the other.
- When the walking friend comes into the standing peer's personal space, have the standing peer put his/her arm out.
- Then, the students will switch roles and try the activity again.

After both students have had turns, students will discuss personal space again, but with new knowledge/understanding from the activity. They should discuss how everyone's perception of personal space is different, and they should talk about what it feels like when someone gets too close to them and how they behave/react.

## **3. Role-Playing**

Students will now have the opportunity to role-play everything that they have learned thus far. E.g. getting a peer's attention, asking him/her to play, and then play a simple activity with each other. We can try switching the partners for this activity.

## **Week 3 – Wait-Time, Appropriate Voice and Choices**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To teach how to be patient in communication*
- *To demonstrate appropriate voices in communication*
- *To teach how to provide choices*

### **1. Providing Wait-Time**

Students will discuss how and why wait-time in social interaction is important between listener and speaker. Then, there will be an activity to support this new learning.

The activity:

- One peer asks questions in rapid succession, without waiting for the other peer to respond.
- The peer who did not have time to respond to the questions should look overwhelmed and eventually walk away
- Then a discussion between the pairs should take place.

The pair should talk about how some peers may need more "wait-time" than others when it comes to responding to a question. They should also talk about responding with patience and

understanding rather than immediate frustration. An example: when you ask someone to play with you, you should wait for the response before giving up and walking away from them.

### ***2. Talking to peers in an appropriate voice***

The peer mentor will model what it is like to talk in a high pitch or “baby” voice, and then in other voice levels that are not appropriate to talk to peers. Then they will transition into a discussion about communicating to all peers in the same voice and with respect. They can highlight that even those who are different from us need that type of communication as well (i.e. a person with a disability). Lastly, the pairs will provide examples to one another and engage in role-playing about using appropriate voices.

### ***3. Providing Choices***

The peer mentor will model how to give choices when asking a peer to join them in an activity. They can also explain that sometimes it can be easier for people to make decisions when choices are given to them. For example: “do you want to play soccer or tag with me?”

## **Week 4 – Communication**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To help develop new conversation topics*
- *To demonstrate when it is appropriate to help other peers*

### ***1. Conversational Topics***

Mentors and mentees will ask to share the topics they talk about with their friends. Then the facilitator will explain to the students that individuals with an exceptionality may have a similar interest in topics as those without an exceptionality. Next, the facilitators will encourage the pairs to discuss their similar interests in topics. After the discussion, the mentee and mentors can plan together what are good conversation starters using the topics that they have discussed.

### ***2. When is it Ok to help my peers?***

Mentors will ask their mentees how it feels when someone rushes in and helps them with something that they did not need help with or something that they wanted to try on their own first. Then, the peer mentors will talk about the importance of being/becoming independent and emphasize that permission is needed first about whether the individual needs help with a task or not before actually providing help. This lesson will end with students doing role-play asking each other, “do you need help?” or “can I help you?” After the role-playing, in pairs or a group, students can brainstorm possible responses that a peer can have when the person does not want any help but is still doing an activity/task incorrectly.

## **Week 5 – Social Language**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To model social statements*
- *To encourage social language*

### **1. Model Social Statements**

Peer mentors will ask their mentees what kind of things they say or talk to their friends about when they are doing an activity. The mentors can provide examples to help the mentee to create a list (i.e. “Thank you for sharing.” “That looks so cool.” “I like playing basketball too!”). The main goal of this lesson is for the mentor to model these statements to their mentees, and this could help them learn more phrases to use during activities.

Other phrases: Thank you very much. How are you doing? I like your hair.

### **2. Encouraging Social Language**

After the mentors feel that their mentee has mastered/ feel comfortable with using social statements, then the mentors are going to practice asking questions to their mentees such as “Did you like playing that game?” or “Do you want to colour with me?” The goal of this lesson is for mentors to model to the mentees how social language can occur in different contexts and activities.

## **Week 6 – Socialization**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To have students socialize outside a classroom environment*

*Materials needed:*

- *Gym equipment and/board games*

Peer mentors will share and discuss with their mentees activities that they like to engage in at recess with their friends. They will brainstorm other games that can be more inclusive to everyone. Then mentors and mentees can play with gym equipment or board games together. They are encouraged to put into practice the social skills that they have learned so far with other peers in the class.

## **Week 7 – Problem-Solving**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To enhance communication and problem-solving skills.*

This session can occur in one big group/class. First, the leader or researcher will define with the peers what is communication and problem-solving. Then, the students will engage in an activity

that highlights the importance of communication and problem solving, for example, the Human Knot.

The activity:

- Students will get into one big group or two small groups (approx. 6-8 people)
- Then each student will have to fold their arms across their chest and hold the hand of the person beside them - this will create the human knot.
- Next, the group will try to “untie” their knot without using words to communicate.
- After some time has passed, the group can do the activity again but using words this time to communicate.
  - *To make things more challenging, we can have it where some students are blind-folded, and some students cannot speak - it all depends on the age group.*

When the activity is completed, the leader or researcher will ask some reflection questions to the students:

- Was it easier to untie the knot the first time or the second time, and why?
- When words were not allowed, how did you guys problem-solve?
  - Did it take a longer/or shorter time to complete the activity?
  - Did anyone become frustrated?
- When words were allowed, how did you guys problem-solve?
  - What kind of words/language was used with each other?
- How does this activity relate to playing with friends on the playground? How about someone who communicates differently than us?

## **Week 8 - Team Building**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To work as a team.*

*Materials needed:*

- *Large tarp sheet.*

Activity: Tarp Sheet Activity

- Resources: Large tarp sheet
  - Students will get into one big group or two small groups (approx. 6-8 people).
  - Each group will have one large tarp, and they will have to stand on it with both feet.
  - Next, the leader will explain that when they fold their tarps, they have to try to fold their tarps in half without taking their feet off of it (all feet should be on the tarp after it is folded, and students should not step off of the tarp to fold it).
  - The game can be played with and without using words.

Reflection questions:

- What did you learn in this activity?
- What did you find challenging? Easy?

### **Week 9 - Nonverbal Communication**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To work on nonverbal communication*

*Materials needed:*

- *A few Hula Hoops*

Activity: Hula Hoop Activity

- Resources: Hula Hoop
  - Students will get into one big group or two small groups (approx. 6-8 people).
  - Next, a hula hoop will be placed between two peers (their arms are through the middle of the hoop)
  - Then the students are going to try to walk/wiggle through the hula hoop without talking or letting go of their peer's hands.

Reflection Questions:

- How did it feel to engage in this activity without talking?
- Did you become more/less frustrated because you could not talk?
- What are other ways did you communicate? Facial expressions?
- Did you engage in “wait-time” as discussed in week 3?

### **Week 10 – School community**

*Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To discuss how to be a good member of the school community*

First, peer mentors and mentees will define the ‘school community’ together. Then they will list examples of how they can be useful members of their school community. Peer mentors can share and then ask their mentees some questions regarding these questions:

- How do you show school community at your school?
- How do you show school community at home? In your neighbourhood?
- How do you show school community to your friends? Teachers?
- How do you show school community to the environment?

## **Week 11 – Expressing Feelings**

### *Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To learn how to express anger in a nonaggressive manner.*

### *Materials needed:*

- *White Board -before class*
  - *write ‘Skill Components’ and then 1. Identify the reason for anger. 2. Think about how to phrase anger non-aggressively. 3. Express verbally)*
  - *Write ‘Scenarios’ and then from 1-10:*
    1. *Someone stepped on your new shoes.*
    2. *You are interrupted when reading.*
    3. *Someone takes your pencil without asking.*
    4. *Your friend returns your new brush, but it is dirty.*
    5. *A classmate has called you goofy.*
    6. *A classmate knocks over your books.*
    7. *The person behind you pushes you.*
    8. *The person next to you keeps talking while you are working.*
    9. *Someone slams the door.*
    10. *A friend forgets to keep a promise to hang out with you.*

The facilitator will ask the students, “If you accidentally spilled someone’s juice at lunch, which of the following responses would you prefer and why? ‘Hey, you dummy, you spilled my juice,’ or ‘you have upset me because you spilled my juice.’” Then as a class, the facilitator and students will discuss reasons for preferred responses. After the facilitator will go over the skill components on the board. Next, the facilitator will model the skill by stating two different nonaggressive comments: “I am upset to hear that you were very noisy in the lunchroom,” and “I find myself getting angry when I have to ask you to pay attention when I am speaking.”

Now, the peer mentors and mentees will engage in role-playing. They will read each sentence off the board and pretend that action happened to them and then give a nonaggressive comment. Mentors will provide some nonaggressive examples to the mentees, and then mentees will try to do some on their own, or with the guidance of their mentor. If time permits, the class can talk about the advantages of expressing anger in a nonaggressive manner.

## **Week 12 – Pizza Party Celebration**

### *Weekly Goals/Objectives:*

- *To share time, reflect and socialize*

### *Materials needed:*

- *Pizza*



- *Open space to all fit and interact*
- *Games/ activities*

Mentors and mentees will have a celebratory pizza party. This will be a time for the mentors and mentees to get together and reflect on the program.

## Appendix G: Modified Lesson Plans

### Day 1 Schedule: Introductions/Match Day

*Goals/Objectives:*

- *To explain the peer program*
- *To help the mentors and mentees learn about each other*

Arrive in the class and put the bolded agenda items on the board.

Mentor Briefing:

#### **1) Introductions**

- a. The facilitator provides a background of self.
- b. Support staff and educators do a background.
- c. Mentors introduce themselves to the facilitator and present a cool fact.  
*Alternatively, if it is a class-wide, facilitator will choose a few mentors to share a cool fact. (If time permits, allow everyone to share their names).*

#### **2) Mentor Overview/Recap of Training**

- a. What did they learn from training?
- b. Any cool facts?
- c. What is a mentor?

#### **3) Program overview**

- a. How long is the program?
- b. What will the program look like? (The sessions, the mentees, meeting times, case conferences etc.)
- c. Paperwork
  - i. Pre-program survey
  - ii. Demographic questionnaire

#### **4) Discuss the agenda of the day**

- a. Mentees arrive**
- b. Match with partner**
- c. Introductions with partner**
  - i. Come up with discussion topics with mentors (write on them on board for them to see). "What can we say to get to know them?" Few examples include asking their name, favourite food/colour/activity/tv show etc.*

#### **d. Icebreaker activities**

#### **e. Wrap up**

#### **5) Debrief**

- a. Debrief with mentors before the mentees arrive
- b. Ask questions such as: "How are you feeling? How do you think your mentees may be feeling right now?"
- c. Remind them they are the "chosen" leaders, and their role is to help.
- d. Remind them that it is okay to be nervous. Comfortability comes with time.
- e. "The goal is to find commonalities with your buddies."

- f. Open to questions

Mentees arrive:

- 1) Review program/role with the mentees
  - a. Get them excited and to feel a little less nervous.
- 2) Mentor/Mentee match and begin introductions
- 3) Icebreaker activities
  - a. *Split up the group into two groups if it is class-wide.*
  - b. Example activities:
    - i. Matches will take turns introducing each other to their group and then say one cool fact about them.
    - ii. All of my friends and neighbours  
<http://www.campustalkblog.com/meeting-icebreaker-all-my-friends-and-neighbors/>
    - iii. Line games - arranging themselves by birthday date or height without talking.
    - iv. Body spellers (buddies mingle, and then facilitator calls out a word, and the group have to try and spell it [e.g. OK])
- 4) Wrap-Up
  - a. Mini summary of the session and allow mentors and mentees to say goodbye.

## **Day 2 Schedule: Getting a Peer's Attention**

*Goals/Objectives:*

- *To model how to get a peer's attention*
- *To teach about personal space*
- *To engage in role-playing*

*Materials needed:*

- *Gym Equipment (e.g. balls, parachute)*
- *Day 2 Visuals*

**Arrive in the class and put the bolded agenda items on the board.**

**Agenda**

- 1) Check-ins**
- 2) Getting a Peer's Attention**
- 3) Personal Space Activity**
- 4) Role-Playing**
- 5) Free Play**
- 6) Review**

## The Steps

- 1) **Stand Close (personal space)**
- 2) **Tap on the Shoulder or say, “excuse me.”**
  - **Getting peer to look**
- 3) **Speak a little loud (inside voice)**
- 4) **Be nice 😊**

### Mentors Briefing:

- Check-in with mentors.
- Go over the agenda;
- Remind mentors to check-in with their buddies.
- Ask, “How do you get your friends' attention?” “How do you get your peers to listen to you?”
  - o Discuss and then tell them they will be asking their mentees. Encourage them to share their experience with their buddy.
- Go over the four steps and introduce the accompanying visuals.
- Model “too close.”
  - o Explain that there will be a personal space activity.
- Model step 2 and briefly explain the look away activity
- Explain that there will be role-playing (to go over anything that was just learned) and then free play at the end.

### Mentees Arrive:

- Check-in!
- Prompt mentors to ask how to get a friend's attention & have a discussion.
- Go over four steps briefly.
- Read #1 Stand close (but not too close)
  - o Model & hold visual
  - o Ask “why?” and “how far?”
  - o Put arm out from side to side and encourage them to copy.
  - o Mention “bubble,” “keep in mind,” “do not pop the bubble,” “personal space.”
  - o Examine the visuals
- Personal Space Activity (model as explaining)
  - o In two lines, the pairs will face each other and stand about four to five meters apart (one side mentors, one side mentees).
  - o Next, the facilitator will say “go,” and then one person will walk towards the other partner who is standing still (It is suggested to start with the mentees first).
  - o Once the mentees come into their mentors' personal space, have the mentors stretch forward their arm and “too close.”
  - o Allow the partners to observe the distance between and explain that they have to be mindful of that.
  - o Then, the pairs will switch roles and try the activity again.

- In the end, have a moment of reflection of the activity – emphasize how everyone’s perception of personal space is different. Then talk about what it feels like when someone gets too close to them and how they typically behave/react.
- Read #2 Tap on the shoulder or say excuse me
  - Ask, “why do we give choices?” (because some people do not like being touched, or we do not know the person etc.)
  - Model and then tell them that they are going to try it with their buddies. Similar fashion as the personal, but this time mentors face the wall, and mentees are facing them. Once mentees get the prompt, they will walk up to the mentors and tap/ or say, “excuse me,” and the mentors will turn around.
- Read #3 Speak a little loud (being mindful of inside voice)
  - Model whisper
  - Ask, “can you hear me?”
  - Allow the partners to practice
- Read #4 Be nice
  - “Has someone ever had someone talk to you in not a very nice way before?” “How did that make you feel?” “Why should we be nice to our friends when we want their attention?”
- Next, get mentors to play with their mentees (free play)
- Go around to each group and ask the mentees to demonstrate to you the four steps. Allow mentors to guide and correct mistakes if any.
- After every mentee has shown their learning, then the group can play structured games such as octopus, conductor, parachute, or fruit salad.
- Review the skills that were learned today and allow the mentors and mentees to have a chance to say thank you and goodbye.

### **Day 3 Schedule: Waiting, Taking Turns, Voice Volume and Choices**

#### *Goals/Objectives:*

- *To teach how to be patient during communication and activities*
- *To demonstrate appropriate volumes in different settings*
- *To illustrate how to provide choices to their peers*

#### *Materials Needed:*

- *Check-in Visuals*
- *Day 3 Visuals*
- *Equipment for games (if required)*

**Arrive in the class and put the bolded agenda items on the board.**

#### **Agenda:**

##### **1) Check-ins**

- 2) **Waiting (role play)**
- 3) **Taking Turns (activity)**
- 4) **Voice Volume (discussion)**
- 5) **Choices (activity)**
- 6) **Review**

Mentors Briefing:

- Check-in with mentors.
- Go over the agenda;
- Introduce a new check-in strategy (Likert-type faces)
  - o Remind mentors to ask their mentees why they chose a whichever face. Also, encourage mentors to share their feelings with their mentees.
- Model the waiting visual
  - o Stop and listen (hand on-ear), wait (count to 5 seconds) and then resume talking
  - o “you will model and role-play this with your mentee. When they ask you a question, do not respond right away – wait 4 seconds before you respond.” The goal is to get the mentee to wait.
- Taking-Turns (go over the visual)
  - o Doing a 16-piece puzzle together – “make sure you are taking turns with your buddy.”
  - o “catch them if they try to take over, and you have to be patient too.”
- Voice volume (go over the visual)
  - o Inform the mentors that they will be coming up with scenarios with their partners about when it is appropriate to have what voice.
- Choices
  - o Explain that it is easier for some peers to agree to something when they have a choice.
  - o Then, in the end, they will be choosing between two options a group.
- Questions?

Mentees Arrive:

- Check-in begins
  - o Remind mentors of the new strategy
- Go over the agenda
- Wait-time
  - o Go over the wait visual
  - o Emphasize to the mentees that they have to silently count to 5 before responding.
- Model the wait visual with a BA
  - o “Do you want to play with me?” (BA takes a while to respond) then the facilitator responds.
- Ask, “Why do you think it is important to wait?”
- Now the mentors and mentees can role play this skill.

- Tell the mentees they have to ask their mentor a question (mentors should take a while before responding)
- Ask if any group would like to demonstrate this to the class.
- Ask the group, “why do we take turns?”
- Taking turns
  - Model taking turns and showing the visual
- Let the group know it is their turn to practise this skill by doing a puzzle.
  - Ask the mentees to initiate this activity with their partner.
- Voice volume
  - Go over the voice volume visual as a whole and then give the partners time to come up with scenarios for each column.
  - Next, read a voice column and then ask the group if anyone wants to share an example. In smaller groups, everyone can have an opportunity to share per column, but in class-wide, choose three students to provide an example each time.
- Choices
  - “Sometimes, it is easier and less overwhelming when we give our friends some choices when it comes to doing an activity. What are some examples? Discuss with your buddy.”
  - Now the group has the opportunity to make a choice together (it can be any game of choosing)—some examples: musical chairs, hot potatoes, molecules.
- Review the skills that were learned today and allow the mentors and mentees to have a chance to say thank you and goodbye.

#### **Day 4 Schedule: Communication**

##### *Goals/Objectives:*

- *To help develop new conversation topics*
- *To demonstrate how to offer help and how to cope when peers do not need help*
- *To coach peers how to ask for help during a stressful task*

##### *Materials Needed:*

- *Check-in Visuals*
- *Charades items cut out and folded*
- *Box (one or two depending on group size)*
- *Gloves or sandwich bags (used as gloves)*
- *Wrappers that are hard to open (e.g. starbursts candy)*
- *Fake mustaches on a popsicle stick*

**Arrive in the class and put the bolded agenda items on the board.**

##### **Agenda:**

##### **1) Check-ins**

- 2) **Conversation Topics**
- 3) **Offering Help**
- 4) **Asking for Help**
- 5) **Review**

**Name that Topic:**

**Example: Animals, Barn, Farmer**

**Main Topic: Farm (or you could leave it blank and ask them)**

**“Mustache you a question”: What is your favourite animal?**

Mentors Briefing:

- Check-in with mentors.
- Go over the Agenda;
- Remind mentors to check-in with their buddies.
  - o Can introduce a different check-in where mentors can choose a few of the assigned questions to ask their mentees.
- Conversation topics
  - o The activity is charades with a question at the end.
    - Explain how to play: Pick a folded paper from the box, examine the image, try best to act it out, the other person tries to guess. Once the answer is correctly guessed, each pair has to come up with a sentence based on the topic. Then switch.
    - For example, someone had the topic of biking. A sentence could be, “I love riding my bike after school.”
    - “If there are any questions about an image, ask for help.”
  - o Name that Category
    - Explain: 3-4 words will be listed and, in pairs, must figure out what the main topic could be.
    - Once the topic is decided between partners, they must take turns holding up a mustache and ask their partner a question based on the topic. Both must answer to the question.
    - Read the Name that Topic example.
- Offering Help
  - o *First, model with support staff:*
  - o The support staff will have gloves on hands and will be trying to open a candy. It should appear to be very difficult. Then the facilitator will ask to help open the problematic item. The support should say, “no, thank you.” Alternatively, “It is okay. I can do this by myself.”
  - o Freeze the scenario and ask the mentors how they could respond if someone says no. Work as a group on how to accept a no response.
  - o Inform the mentors that they will be the ones with the gloves and have to say no (politely) to their mentees when directed to ask for their help.
- Asking for Help



- Explain to the mentors that mentees will have gloves on, and they will be the ones trying to open the problematic wrapper this time. They will be prompted by the facilitator to ask for help, and mentors will intervene and help once the mentees ask politely.

#### Mentees Arrive:

- Check-ins
- Conversational topics
  - Explain to the group that when talking to friends/classmates, it is helpful to have things to talk discuss.
  - Explain charades activity – mentors will go first.
    - Pick a folded paper from the box, examine the image, try best to act it out, the other person tries to guess. Once the answer has been correctly guessed, each individual has to come up with a sentence based on the image (topic). Then switch.
    - For example, someone had the topic of biking. A sentence could be, “I love riding my bike after school.”
    - “If there are any questions about an image, ask for help.”
  - Explain the name that topic activity
    - 3-4 words will be listed, and in pairs must figure out what the main topic could be.
    - Once the topic has been decided between partners, they must take turns holding up a mustache and ask their partner a question based on the topic. Both have to answer the question.
    - Read the Name that Topic example.
    - Remind everyone that there is no correct answer, and there could be multiple topics from the word groups. Also, this is a time they can share and find commonalities between each other.
    - Strongly advised to write the topics one column at a time:
      - (1) Cookies, ice-cream, cake (2) Water slides, pool, summer, (3) Airplane, bus, car, bike, (4) Books, teachers, classroom, desks
- Offering help
  - “Some friends may look like they need help but may not want our help. We must always *ask* first. Then we have to be okay with what they decide.”
  - Act out a scenario where support staff says “no.”
    - Ask, “What do I do?” “What should I say?”
    - E.g. that is okay. I am here if you need me.
    - Ask: “why do you think they do not want our help?”
  - Role-play in pairs.
- Asking for help
  - “Sometimes, when things hard to open, we may get frustrated or sad or angry. We can always ask for help, but we have to remember to be respectful. We have to

use our manners which are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. We also have to be careful of our voice \_\_\_\_\_(volume)”

- “Should we be crying, yelling and throwing things on the floor?”
- “Why not?”
- Role-play in pairs.
- Review the skills that were learned today and allow the mentors and mentees to have a chance to say thank you and goodbye.

### **Day 5 Schedule: BINGO Skill Review pt. 1**

#### *Goals/Objectives:*

- *To review all the skills learned so far.*

#### *Materials Needed:*

- *Check-in Visuals*
- *Bingo cards*
- *Bingo Review Facilitator Sheet*
- *Large space*
- *Writing utensil*

#### Bingo Review

- Pairs share a card.
- The game is played with the whole group.
- A ‘bingo’ can be a line, two lines, the whole card or four corners.
- How to play:
  - Played similar to original Bingo, but the facilitator can pick out what to call out each time from the facilitator sheet. Rotating between previous learned skill and exercise activity is recommended.
  - Once the facilitator calls out an activity, pairs have to put an X on their square if they have that term. The facilitator should cross out each activity, too, to ensure they do not repeat terms.
  - After the pairs put an X on their card, they have to do the activity written on the facilitator sheet.
  - The whole group participates in the exercise activity. It is encouraged for the facilitator to choose different individuals to demonstrate the exercises in front of the class.
  - For the previously learned skill, the facilitator sheet will guide what to do.

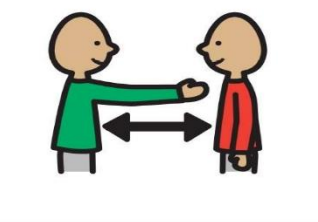
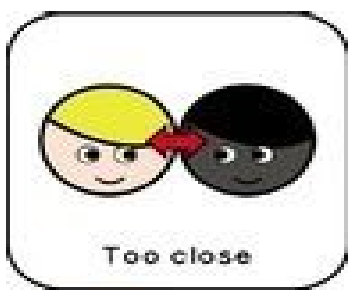
#### Bingo Review - Facilitator Sheet

- **Jumping Jacks:** 10 jumping jacks

- **Running in Spot:** 30 seconds run on the spot
- **Lunges:** 10 lunges (5 each leg)
- **Squats:** 10 squats
- **Tree Pose:** 30 seconds tree pose
- **Crisscross Jumps:** 10 crisscross jumps
- **Side Stretches:** 10 side stretches
- **High Fives:** give a high-five to 5 different people
- **Shoulder Rolls:** 10 shoulder rolls (5 each way)
- **Knee Highs:** 10 knee highs
- **Side Twists:** 10 side twist
- **Scissor Jumps:** 10 scissors jump
- **Side Crunches:** 10 side crunches (5 sides each)
- **Arm Curls:**
- **Ask a Question:** ask a question to a different mentor/mentee
- **Person Space:** what does personal space look like? Do it with your buddy.
- **Getting Attention:** what can you say to get your peer's attention? Role-play with buddy and switch.
- **Voice Volume:** what voice volume do you use when someone else is talking? Being outside? Emergency? Discuss it with your buddy.
- **Taking Turns:** Name a time you took turns with a classmate. Provide two examples to your buddy.
- **No Thank You:** What are two ways you can respond to someone when they say "no thank you" when you offer them help? Talk to your buddy. One example each.
- **Smile Face:** Give a compliment to your buddy.
- **Something cool:** If someone told you something cool, how can you respond? Two examples each.
- **Favourite Activity:** Share your favourite activity with someone who is not your partner (big friends have to find a different little friend and vice versa)
- **Weekend:** Ask your buddy what they are looking forward to for the weekend.
- **I like:** Finish the sentence. "I like..." Share with your buddy. 2 examples each.
- **Introduce Yourself:** Introduce yourself to someone new (big mentor finds little mentee and vice versa).
- **Topic:** What is the main topic? Sharing, learning, playing games
- **Wait-Time:** Roleplay with your buddy, "wait-time." Ask them a question and wait for a response.
- **Choices:** Which of the two options would you choose? Pineapple on pizza or no pineapple on pizza? Have a vote as a group.
- **Good:** Find a new buddy and tell them something that you are really good at doing.

Appendix H: Modified Lesson Plans-Visual Supports

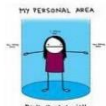
**Day 2 Visuals**



**What is personal space?**



Let me show you. Stand with your arms out.



The blue area is your personal space.



People should not stand any closer than your fingertips when they are talking, playing, or walking in a line.

**Day 3 Visuals**



I stop and listen

wait

I can talk

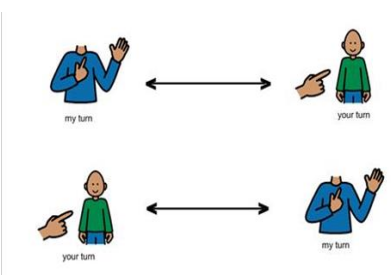
**Turn Taking**

We will take turns.

It is my turn.

Now I have to wait.

It is your turn.

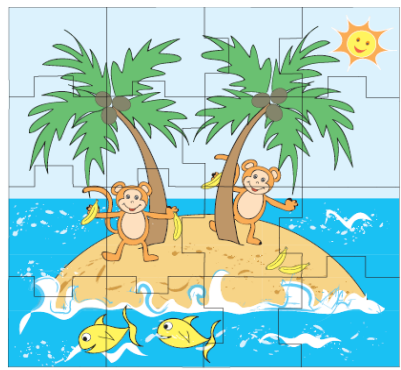


**5 POINT VOICE VOLUME SCALE**

5	YELLING	
4	TALKING LOUD	
3	TALKING IN CLASS VOICE	
2	WHISPER	
1	SILENT	

**My Voice Volume Scale**

5	Screaming/ Emergency Only	
4	Outside Voice	
3	Inside/ Classroom Voice	
2	Whisper/ Soft Voice	
1	No Talking Silent/Shh	



**Day 4 Visuals**



Game of charades. Enlarge images, print and put them into a bin.



Homemade mustache  
popsicle sticks.

**Day 5 Visuals**



Bingo cards are at this link: <https://myfreebingocards.com/bingo-card-generator/30-free-cards/t7p3rm>

### Appendix I: Case Conference Information Sheet

“This is an information-sharing sheet used to enhance the information presented during this case conference. Please answer the following questions as openly and honestly as possible. If you do not have an answer or if you have an answer, but it is hard to put into words, just try your best.”

Mentors' Participant IDs: \_\_\_\_\_

Mentee Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

What is working?

What needs improvement?

What can we do?

**Appendix J: Modified Case Conference Information Sheet**

Date:

Participants' IDs:

Sessions Completed:

What is working so far with your buddy? In the overall program?

What needs improvement with your interaction with your buddy? In the overall program? Any suggestions?

Program Next Steps

Next Steps for the Mentors/ Mentees:

Next Steps for the Support Staff (if applicable):

Next Steps for the Facilitator:

**Appendix K: Case Conference Last Meeting Form**

Mentor Participant IDs: \_\_\_\_\_

Mentee Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

1. The best experience with my mentee throughout this experience was...
2. Something I was not sure how to handle was...
3. I got frustrated in the sessions when...
4. The biggest accomplishment that my mentee made while I was supporting was...
5. The biggest accomplishment that I have made as a Peer to Peer Support was...
6. Are you interested in continuing to be a Peer Mentor (Yes or No)? Why or Why not?
7. In your opinion, is this program beneficial to you and to the student you are supporting?



### Appendix L: Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form

1. Meeting about Participant ID \_\_\_\_\_
2. Profession: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Which of the following labels best describe(s) the student? (mark all that apply)
  - General education student
  - Special education student (has an IEP)
  - Alternative education, at-risk, or student that requires multi-tiered support)
  - Honour student
4. If the student has an educational label (e.g., Learning Disability, Emotional Impairment), please list: \_\_\_\_\_

Fill in data for:	# of Days Absent	# of Absences during sessions	# of Behavioral Incidents	# of office referrals	# of Suspensions	Total grade for the semester
The semester before the student participated in the program.	_____	N/A	_____	_____	_____	_____
The semester after the student participated in the program.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

The next set of questions requires you to rate this peer support effectiveness from 1, not at all effective/successful to 5, extremely effective/successful.

	<b>Not at all Effective/Successful</b>		<b>Moderately Effective/Successful</b>		<b>Extremely Effective/Successful</b>
<b>1. Attendance</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
<b>2. Professionalism</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
<b>3. Responsibility</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
<b>4. Supporting academics</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
<b>5. Providing natural opportunities for socialization and independence</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5

#### Open-ended Questions:

- What are some noticeable changes in your student's social skills?
- In your opinion, does your student appear more social?
- Have there been any changes in your student during class time? Do they participate more?
- What were your thoughts on the overall peer mentoring program? What worked? What needs improvement?
- Any additional comments:

### Appendix M: Modified Perceptions of Students' Behaviour Form

1. Meeting about School:
2. Profession:
3. Which of the following labels best describe(s) the mentors? The mentees?  
(General education student, Special education student (has an IEP), Alternative education, at-risk, or student that requires multi-tiered support, or Honour student)
  - Mentors:
  - Mentees:
4. If the students have an educational label (e.g., Learning Disability), please list: do not have one. \_\_\_\_\_ (if known)

To your knowledge, did any of the students have difficulty with \_\_\_\_\_? Were there any improvements since the program?

1. Attendance
2. Behavioural Incidents
3. Office referrals
4. Suspensions
5. Professionalism
6. Responsibility
7. Academics
8. Peer acceptance (being social excluded)

#### Open-ended Questions:

- What are some noticeable changes in your student's social skills? Attitudes? Behaviours?
- In your opinion, does your student appear more social? Make more initiation? Interact more with their peers?
- What were your thoughts on the overall peer mentoring program?
  - What worked? What did you like?
  - What needed improvement? What did you dislike?
  - Were there any challenges?
  - Any suggestions/recommendations for future implementation? Would you change anything? (e.g. format, lesson topics, age level)
- Did you feel the students overall enjoyed the program?
- Would you rerun this program?

#### For teachers:

- Have there been any changes in your student during class time? Do they participate more?

#### For school principals:

- Do you think that this program was good for your school?

Any additional comments:

## **Appendix N: Session Handouts**

### **A Sample Session Handout from Day 3:**

#### **This week your child/student learned or taught:**

- How to be patient in communication
  - Providing “wait-time” for someone to respond to their question
- The importance of taking turns during an activity
- Using appropriate voice volume for different settings
  - We used a 5-point rating scale that ranged from yelling to being silent
- Providing options to their peers

#### **Strategies to try at home/in class to reinforce learning:**

- Taking a few seconds (3-5 seconds) before responding to the individual.
  - Allow the student/child to practice their three steps: 1. Stop and Listen. 2.Wait (“tell myself, I can wait 5 seconds”). 3. I can talk again.
- Do an interactive activity (e.g. puzzle) that allows the student/child to practice taking turns.
  - “First, it is my turn. Next, it is your turn.”
  - If they start taking over the activity, gently remind them about taking turns.
- Provide reminders to your child/student about their voice volume if it is not appropriate for the current setting.
  - It may be helpful to explain why it is not an appropriate volume for the setting.
  - Ask them to give you examples of other settings they can use their loud/quiet voices.
- Give your child/student choices when it comes to engaging in an activity. Sometimes it can be easier for people to make decisions when choices are given to them. Let them practice with you or a sibling or a peer.
  - “Do you want to play outside or play indoor games?”

## Appendix O: Ethics Approval Letter



**Date:** 28 October 2019

**To:** Dr. Jacqueline Specht

**Project ID:** 114569

**Study Title:** Evaluating the Effectiveness of START's Peer to Peer Program

**Short Title:** START'S PEER TO PEER PROGRAM

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** December 6, 2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 28/Oct/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 28/Oct/2020

Dear Dr. Jacqueline Specht

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above-mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

### Documents Approved:

<i>Document Name</i>	<i>Document Type</i>	<i>Document</i>	<i>Document</i>
		<i>Date</i>	<i>Version</i>

<i>Assent Letter Version mentee</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>16/Sep/2019</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Consent/Assent</i>		
<i>Assent Letter Version mentor</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>16/Sep/2019</i>	<i>1</i>
	<i>Consent/Assent</i>		
<i>Case Conference - Last Meeting</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>CLEAN</i>			
<i>Case Conference Information Sheet</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>CLEAN</i>			
<i>Demographic Questionnaire CLEAN</i>	<i>Paper Survey</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Letter of Information and Consent</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>16/Sep/2019</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>parent_mentee</i>	<i>Consent/Assent</i>		
<i>Letter of Information and Consent</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>16/Sep/2019</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>teacher</i>	<i>Consent/Assent</i>		
<i>Letter of Information and Consent</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>16/Sep/2019</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>parent_mentor</i>	<i>Consent/Assent</i>		
<i>Mentee's Post-Program Survey CLEAN</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Mentee's Pre-Program Survey CLEAN</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Peer Mentors Post-Program Survey</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>CLEAN</i>			
<i>Peer Mentors Pre-Program Survey</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>CLEAN</i>			
<i>Social Skills Rating System page 1</i>	<i>Paper Survey</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Social Skills Rating System page 2</i>	<i>Paper Survey</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>

<i>Social Skills Rating System page 3</i>	<i>Paper Survey</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Student Behavioural Data CLEAN</i>	<i>Interview Guide</i>	<i>19/Oct/2019</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Verbal Recruitment Script</i>	<i>Oral Script</i>	<i>16/Sep/2019</i>	<i>1</i>

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions. Sincerely,  
Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

## **Appendix P: Letter of Information and Consent Forms – Parent/Guardian**

### **LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT – Mentor’s Parent(s)/Guardian(s)**

#### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of START’s Peer to Peer Program**

##### **Principal Investigator:**

**Dr. Jacqueline Specht, Education  
Western University**

##### **Researcher:**

**Petra Owusu, Master Candidate, Education  
Western University**

#### **Introduction**

Your child is being invited to participate in this research study about the benefits of a peer to peer mentoring program for students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom. Your child has been chosen by the teacher as one who would be a good mentor to a younger child with a disability.

#### **Background/Purpose**

A peer to peer support program is where a peer mentor is given the opportunity to interact, teach skills and develop friendships with another peer in a different class. The program is designed to create new social opportunities for all students. The purpose of this study is to see how the peer to peer program is working at your child’s school. We will be interviewing all the students that participate as well as their teachers and their principal. This study will help us to understand if it is a program that is beneficial and could be continued in school. In addition, we will determine if there are changes in school reports related to academic grades, social skills, and behaviour of the students involved.

#### **Procedures**

If you agree to have your child participate, it is expected that your child will be in the study for four months. There will be 10 study visits during their participation in this study, and each visit will take approximately 30 minutes.

The first study visit will occur at the beginning of the study, and your child will be asked to answer some questions in a one-to-one interview about their social interactions, perceptions about school and views about their skills (e.g. social and problem-solving). The interview will take place at a time that works best for your child (i.e. lunchtime).

After the interview, your child will receive some training regarding how to be more inclusive and social with students who may have a disability. Once training is complete, your child will be matched with a peer with a disability in a younger grade, and they will begin weekly peer mentoring sessions for 12 weeks.

During the weekly peer mentoring session, your child will be following a lesson plan that involves teaching younger students how to interact positively with other peers as well as how to develop better social skills. The lessons will have topics such as “how to respect personal space” and “how to start conversations with other peers.” The goal of these lessons is for your child to model positive social skills and interactions with younger students. Younger students will look up to your child for guidance, and we hope through this program that younger students are able to build better communication skills by being mentored from your child. At the final session, there will be a celebratory pizza party. This will be a time for the mentors and mentees to get together and reflect on the program.

Every two weeks, there will be case conference meetings. This is where the researcher will visit the school 8 times and conduct an interview with your child and with other mentors to take note of how the peer to peer mentoring is going. Your child will be asked what is working so far, what is not working, and how we can solve any problems that are currently occurring in the mentoring session. It is at this time your child will have the opportunity to interact with other mentors who are mentoring younger students, and it is our hope they can help each other out solving any problems that are occurring in the sessions.

The last study visit will take place during the last week of the program. This will be the final individual interview where your child will be asked again about their social interactions, perceptions about school and views about their skills. This will once again be done at a time that is convenient for your child.

Teachers and applied behavioural specialists will also be interviewed by the researchers at the beginning and at the end of the study to gather information about your child’s growth in the program, their academics and their views about your child’s social skills.

### **Withdrawal from Study**

If you decide to withdraw your child from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by email, in writing) the withdrawal of information collected about your child. If you wish to have your child’s information removed, please let the researcher know, and your child’s information will be destroyed from our records. Once the data has been analyzed, we will not be able to withdraw your child’s information.

### **Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

### **Benefits**

The possible benefits to your child are an increased connection to the school, stronger leadership skills as well as social skills. They may also make new friends.

The possible benefits to society may be a greater understanding of the effectiveness of this peer to peer program. If successful, other schools can bring this program to their classes, and other students can improve their social skills.



**Confidentiality**

During the interviews, your child will be audiotaped. The purpose of the audio-recording will be to make sure the information provided by the participants is correctly documented. If your child does not want to be audio-recorded for the first and last interview, then the researcher will write notes instead. However, due to the nature of case conferences being group interviews, all participants will be audio-recorded. The researcher will ensure that no identifying information will be transcribed.

All information collected for this study will be kept confidential. For the purpose of this study, only names, ages, and grade levels will be required from your child. The researcher will keep all personal information, interview notes and recordings in a secure password-protected computer for seven years following the end of this study. No identifying information will be transcribed. A list linking your child's study number with their name will be kept by the researcher in a secure locked filing cabinet at the university, separate from your child's study file.

Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of the data, the nature of the group interviews prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers will remind participants to respect the privacy of their fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the group interviews with others.

In the publication of our study, we may use personal quotes. All quotes will remain anonymous as we will be removing all identifying information. Please let the researcher know if you would prefer your child's quote not to be included in our publications.

**Rights as a Participant**

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to have your child be in this study. Even if you consent to have your child participate, they will have the right not to answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to have your child participate or your child chooses to leave the study at any time, it will not have any effect on their academics.

You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Jacqueline Specht.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not a part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**Consent**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to have my child audio-recorded in the individual interviews.

Yes  No

I agree to have my child audio-recorded in the group interviews.

Yes  No

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.

Yes  No

Child's First and Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian (Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian (Sign): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian (Date): \_\_\_\_\_

**My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.**

---

Print Name of  
Person Obtaining  
Consent

Signature

Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

## LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT – Mentee’s Parent(s)/Guardian(s)

### Evaluating the Effectiveness of START’s Peer to Peer Program

**Principal Investigator:**

**Dr. Jacqueline Specht, Education**

**Western University**

**Researcher:**

**Petra Owusu, Master Candidate, Education**

**Western University**

**Introduction**

Your child is being invited to participate in this research study about the benefits of a peer to peer mentoring program for students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom. Your child has been chosen by the teacher as one who would benefit from receiving support from an older peer.

**Background/Purpose**

A peer to peer support program is where a peer mentor is given the opportunity to interact, teach skills and develop friendships with another peer in a different class. The program is designed to create new social opportunities for all students. The purpose of this study is to see how the peer to peer program is working at your child’s school. We will be interviewing all the students that participate as well as their teachers and their principal. This study will help us to understand if it is a program that is beneficial and could be continued in school. In addition, we will determine if there are changes in school reports related to academic grades, social skills, and behaviour of the students involved.

**Procedures**

If you agree to have your child participate, it is expected that your child will be in the study for 4 months. There will be 2 study visits during their participation in this study, and each visit will take approximately 30 minutes.

The first study visit will occur at the beginning of the study, and your child will be asked to answer some questions in an interview about their social interactions (e.g. “I eat lunch with friends”) and views about school (e.g. “I like school”). The interview will take place at a time that works best for your child, for example, lunchtime. After the interview, your child will be matched with a peer mentor in an older grade, and they will begin weekly peer mentoring sessions for 12 weeks.

During the weekly peer mentoring session, your child’s peer mentor will be following a lesson plan that involves learning how to interact positively with peers. The lessons will have topics such as “how to respect personal space” and “how to start conversations with other peers.” The goal of these lessons is for children to learn positive social skills that they can apply in the classroom. At the final session, there will be a celebratory pizza party. This will be a time for the mentors and mentees to get together and reflect on the program.

The last study visit will take place during the last week of the program. Your child will be interviewed again and will be asked the same questions as the beginning of the study. The occurrence of this interview will once again be done at a time that is convenient for your child.

Teachers and applied behavioural specialists will also be interviewed by the researchers at the beginning and at the end of the study to gather information about your child's growth in the program, their academics and their views about your child's social skills.

### **Withdrawal from Study**

If you decide to withdraw your child from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by email, in writing) the withdrawal of information collected about your child. If you wish to have your child's information removed, please let the researcher know, and your child's information will be destroyed from our records. Once the data has been analyzed, we will not be able to withdraw your child's information.

### **Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

### **Benefits**

The possible benefits to your child are increased in social skills. They may also make new friends.

The possible benefits to society may be a greater understanding of the effectiveness of this peer to peer program. If successful, other schools can bring this program to their classes, and other students can improve their social skills.

### **Confidentiality**

During the interviews, your child will be audiotaped. The purpose of the audio-recording will be to make sure the information provided by the participants is correctly documented. If your child does not want to be audio-recorded for the interviews, then the researcher will write notes instead. The researcher will ensure that no identifying information will be transcribed.

All information collected for this study will be kept confidential. For the purpose of this study, only names, ages, and grade levels will be required from your child. The researcher will keep all personal information, interview notes and recordings in a secure password-protected computer for seven years following the end of this study. No identifying information will be transcribed. A list linking your child's study number with their name will be kept by the researcher in a secure locked filing cabinet at the university, separate from your child's study file.

Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of the data, the nature of the group interviews prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers will remind participants to respect the privacy of their fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the group interviews with others.

In the publication of our study, we may use personal quotes. All quotes will remain anonymous as we will be removing all identifying information. Please let the researcher know if you would prefer your child's quote not to be included in our publications.

**Rights as a Participant**

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to have your child be in this study. Even if you consent to have your child participate, they will have the right not to answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to have your child participate or your child chooses to leave the study at any time, it will have no effect on their academics.

You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Jacqueline Specht.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not a part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**Consent**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to have my child audio-recorded in the individual interviews.

Yes  No

I agree to have my child audio-recorded in the group interviews.

Yes  No

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.

Yes  No

Child's First and Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian (Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian (Sign): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Legal Guardian (Date): \_\_\_\_\_

**My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.**

---

Print Name of  
Person Obtaining  
Consent

Signature

Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

## **Appendix Q: Letter of Information and Consent Form – Teacher/BAs/Principal**

### **LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT – Teacher/BAs/Principal**

#### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of START's Peer to Peer Program**

##### **Principal Investigator:**

**Dr. Jacqueline Specht, Education  
Western University**

##### **Researcher:**

**Petra Owusu, Master Candidate, Education  
Western University**

##### **Introduction**

You are invited to participate in this research study about the benefits of a peer to peer mentoring program for students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom.

##### **Background/Purpose**

A peer to peer support program is where a peer mentor is given the opportunity to interact, teach skills and develop friendships with another peer in a different class. The program is designed to create new social opportunities for all students. The purpose of this study is to see how the peer to peer program is working in your classroom. You will be interviewed as well as other teachers, your principal and the students. This study will help us to understand if it is a program that is beneficial and could be continued in school. In addition, we will determine if there are changes in school reports related to academic grades, social skills, and behaviour of the students involved.

##### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a social skills rating questionnaire on the children in your class who are involved in the Peer to Peer program before the program starts and once it ends. It will take about 15 minutes to complete each time. In addition, you will be interviewed at the end of the peer mentoring program. You will be asked about your student's behavioural data, such as the number of absentees and behavioural incidents. You will also be asked about your thoughts on your student's growth in their social skills. This interview will be conducted at a time that is convenient for you, and it will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. On the last day of the peer mentoring program, there will be a celebratory pizza party to celebrate all the accomplishments of your students.

##### **Withdrawal from Study**

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by email, in writing) the withdrawal of information collected about your thoughts on your student. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know, and your information will be destroyed from our records. Once the data has been analyzed, we will not be able to withdraw your information.

**Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

**Benefits**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole, which includes having a greater understanding of the effectiveness of this peer to peer program. If successful, other schools can bring this program to their classes, and other students can improve their social skills.

**Confidentiality**

During the interview, you will be audiotaped. The purpose of the audio-recording will be to make sure the information provided by you is correctly documented. If you do not want to be audio-recorded for the interview, then the researcher will write notes instead. The researcher will ensure that no identifying information will be transcribed.

All information collected for this study will be kept confidential. For the purpose of this study, only your name will be required of you. The researcher will keep all personal information, interview notes and recordings in a secure password-protected computer for seven years following the end of this study. No identifying information will be transcribed. A list linking your study number with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure locked filing cabinet at the university, separate from your study file.

In the publication of our study, we may use personal quotes. All quotes will remain anonymous as we will be removing all identifying information. Please let the researcher know if you would prefer your quote not to be included in our publications.

**Rights as a Participant**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right not to answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time, it will not affect your employment status. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Jacqueline Specht.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not a part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference**



**Consent**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to be audio-recorded in this research.

Yes  No

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.

Yes  No

---

Print Name of Participant

Signature

Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

**My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all the questions.**

---

Print Name of  
Person Obtaining  
Consent

Signature

Date (DD-MM-YYYY)

## Appendix R: Assent Forms – Students

### MENTORS ASSENT FORM

#### Evaluating the Effectiveness of START's Peer to Peer Program

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jacqueline Specht, Faculty of Education, Western University

**Researcher:** Petra Owusu, Faculty of Education, Western University

**1. Why are you here?**

- We want to tell you about a study that will look at a new peer to peer mentorship program that is taking place at your school.
- We want to see if you would like to be in this study.

**2. Why are we doing this study?**

- We want to get your opinion about this new program. We want to know if you like it and if you think there are some things we can change about this program.
- We also want to see if there are any changes in the way you play with your friends, and we want to know if you learned more about your peers who have a disability.

**3. What will happen to you?**

- If you want to be in the study:
  - i. Petra will ask you some questions about your thoughts on school, what kind of skills you have, and what it is like talking to your friends. We will do this at a time that works best for you, and it should take about 30 minutes.
  - ii. Then you will begin some training that will teach you about hanging out with friends who have a disability.
  - iii. Once your training is done, the program will begin, and you get to mentor younger students at your school. There will be activities and lessons you get to teach.
  - iv. Every two weeks, Petra will come to your school to do group meetings with you and other mentors in your class. She will ask you questions about how the program is working out so far. It will take about 30 minutes.
  - v. Near the end of the program, Petra will come back to your school to ask the same questions about your thoughts on school and your skills. She will ask about your experience in the program.
  - vi. The last session will be a pizza party where you get to hang out with your younger buddy and play some games.

**4. Will there be any tests?**

- There will not be any tests or marks on the report card for this study.

**5. Will the study help you?**

- This study will help you build some new skills, make new friends, feel like a leader and make a difference in a younger peer's life.

**6. Do you have to be in the study?**

- You do not have to in the study. No one will be mad at you if you do not want to do this. If you do not want to be in the study, tell Petra, your teacher or your parents. Even if you say yes, you can change your mind later. It is up to you.

**7. What if you have any questions?**

- You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to your teachers, your family, or Petra.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**8. Assent**

I want to participate in this study.

Print Name of Child \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Obtaining Assent \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent \_\_\_\_\_

## **MENTEES ASSENT FORM**

### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of START's Peer to Peer Program**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jacqueline Specht, Faculty of Education, Western University

**Researcher:** Petra Owusu, Faculty of Education, Western University

#### **1. Why are you here?**

- We want to tell you about a study that will look at a new peer to peer mentorship program that is taking place at your school.
- We want to see if you would like to be in this study.

#### **2. Why are we doing this study?**

- We want to know more about you and the way you play with your friends.
- We also want to know more about your social skills and to see if your mentor taught you new skills that you can use with your classmates.

#### **3. What will happen to you?**

- If you want to be in the study:
  - i. Petra will ask you some questions about your thoughts on school and when do you get to hang out with your friends. We will do this at a time that works best for you, and it should take about 30 minutes.
  - ii. Then you will be paired up with an older student from your school. This will be your mentor.
  - iii. You will get to see your mentor every week, and you will get to do activities with them. Also, they will teach you new things.
  - iv. Near the end of the program, Petra will come back to your school to ask the same questions about your thoughts on school, and when do you get to see your friends. She will also ask about your experience in the program.
  - v. The last session will be a pizza party where you get to hang out with your bigger buddy and play some games.

#### **4. Will there be any tests?**

- There will not be any tests or marks on the report card for this study.

#### **5. Will the study help you?**

- This study will help you build some new skills and make some new friends.

#### **6. Do you have to be in the study?**

- You do not have to in the study. No one will be mad at you if you do not want to do this. If you do not want to be in the study, tell Petra, your teacher or your parents. Even if you say yes, you can change your mind later. It is up to you.

#### **7. What if you have any questions?**

- You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to your teachers, your family, or Petra.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**8. Assent**

I want to participate in this study.

Print Name of Child \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Obtaining Assent \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent \_\_\_\_\_

If applicable:

*The consent form was read to the participant. The person signing below attests that the study, as set out in this form, was accurately explained to the participant and has had any questions answered.*

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*Print Name of Witness*

*Signature*

*Date (DD-MM- YYYY)*

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*Relationship to Participant*

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Petra Owusu

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Windsor  
Windsor, Ontario, Canada  
2013-2018 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2018-2020 M.A.

**Honours and Awards:** Centre for Inclusive Education Research Awards  
2020

**Related Work Experience**

Teaching Assistant  
University of Windsor  
2016

Research Assistant  
University of Windsor  
2017-2018

Graduate Student Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2018-2020