

**Peer relationships and friendships:  
Perspectives from Pupils and Staff at a  
Secondary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)**

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## **Declaration and Word Count**

'I, **Jade Fiona Jak Kee LEE**, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'

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## **Abstract**

There has been much research suggesting that peer relationships and friendships become increasingly important in adolescence and that they usually play a beneficial role in young people's lives. Although there has been some exploration of the views of excluded young people in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), little research has focused on their experiences with their peers during their time at the PRU, including whether they maintain friendships with their friends in mainstream school. The current study aimed to explore these experiences from the views of young people excluded from mainstream school and attending a secondary PRU in an inner London borough. Underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model, this study also aimed to gain the perspectives of staff at the PRU to explore their views regarding the peer relationships of pupils at the PRU, thereby attempting to gather a broader understanding of the microsystem of the PRU setting. The study employed the qualitative method of interviewing and semi-structured interview schedules were used. Participants included twelve pupils (four female and eight male participants) ranging from Year 9-11 who had been permanently excluded from mainstream secondary school. Eleven members of staff at the PRU were also interviewed and this sample consisted of six teachers and five learning assistants.

A thematic analysis was carried out and various main themes and sub-themes emerged for both group of participants. Drawing from the pupils' results, themes included facilitators and barriers to peer acceptance and factors that contributed to friendships. Themes that emerged from staff interviews included the features of peer relationships amongst pupils and what factors staff perceived to affect the peer relationships of these pupils. Results are discussed in light of the existing literature, with the limitations of the current study considered. Future research and implications for Educational Psychologists and other professionals are consequently reflected upon.

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Overview of chapter**

This chapter provides a brief introduction into the rationale for the study and outlines the various reasons that led the researcher to carrying out this research study.

## **1.2 Background and rationale for the study**

Research has acknowledged that peer relationships and friendships have an important role to play in the development of children and young people (please note that the term 'young people, 'adolescents' and 'pupils' will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis) (eg: Hartup, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1987) and the importance of this role increases even more so when these young people enter adolescence and become more independent from their parents (Scholte & Van Aken, 2008).

It has been reported that every year, there are about 135,000 pupils who spend some of their time in alternative provision. Alternative provision refers to settings that cater for pupils who are unable to be provided for in mainstream or in special schools (DCSF, 2008). Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) are the most common form of alternative provision and are said to provide about one third of placements for children and young people (DCSF, 2008). These settings are the main form of provision for children and young people with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs in the UK; a vulnerable group who are more likely than other young people to be excluded or drop out of education (Cooper, 2004; Jull 2008; Visser, Daniels & MacNab, 2005). These children and young people with SEMH needs have been reported to have a higher tendency to disturb classrooms and playgrounds (Cooper, 2001). Maintaining the inclusion of these children and young people has remained a problem for mainstream schooling (McCluskey, Riddell & Weedon, 2015).

In general, children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) were found to be over seven times more likely to receive exclusion in comparison to their peers who did not have SEN (DfE, 2016).

In a review report by the DfE (2012:4), in which recommendations are made to improve alternative provision, it acknowledges that this sector is an "important, but often ignored, sector". According to the DfE (2017), the overall rate of permanent exclusions has increased from 0.07 per cent of pupil enrolments in 2014/15 to 0.08 per cent in 2015/16. The number of permanent exclusions across all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools has increased from 5,795 in 2014/15 to 6,685 in 2015/16, that is 35.2 exclusions per day in 2015/6, up from an average of 30.5 per day in 2014/5. This group of young people is therefore important to study, particularly because exclusion continues to remain a problem in England (DfES,

2007). They are also reported to experience some of the worst outcomes (DCSF, 2008).

Many young people referred to PRUs and alternative provision often come from the most deprived backgrounds with complex family environments with a varied range of problems such as drinking, mental health issues, domestic violence, and drug-taking. PRUs are important settings because they provide education for some of the most vulnerable young people in the country (DfE, 2012).

Young people in PRUs are often the most vulnerable group and being excluded from mainstream school can have repercussions on these young people's well-being and how well they are able to reintegrate back into mainstream. Their ability to reintegrate can also be considered as a reflection and predictor of how well they may be able to socially integrate within the wider community as the school is essentially a small community where pupils learn to develop social relationships amongst peers as well as with authority figures. Being excluded from school is a problem that concerns society as research indicates that the effects from exclusion have been negative, including isolation and social exclusion. For example, Wright, Weekes & McGlaughlin (2000:119) reflect on the risk of 'social exclusion' that these young people face and alert of the formation of "ghettos of unemployed, unemployable, unqualified, socially excluded". There has also been further research to indicate that some of the effects of underachievement can lead to reduced employment prospects (Hayden, 1997) as well as getting involved in petty crime (Parsons et.al., 2001)

The PRU can be an important context to study peer relationships and friendships for various reasons. Exploring the experiences of excluded young people on their peer relationships and friendships can be helpful as it gives an indication as to whether they benefit from any forms of support from their relationships following exclusion. Furthermore, it can help identify how schools and PRUs can further support these young people with their social development as research has indicated that peer relationships can have an impact on later adjustment. Additionally, in a study by Hart (2013) who set out to explore the potential protective factors for young people who were attending a PRU, these pupils perceived that one of the factors that could support them to go and achieve positive social and academic outcomes was their relationships with others, including those with their peers. Furthermore, whilst most of the excluded young people have reported negative experiences with their mainstream schooling, studies have shown that some pupils have reflected positively on their experiences with alternative provision, citing strong relationships with staff and peers and preferring the curriculum and methods of teaching (eg: O'Connor et al., 2011).

Research in the field of peer relationships in childhood and adolescence has indicated that there is a wealth of benefits on psychological well-being, academic achievement, school adjustment and later adjustment in life for young people who have developed friendships and have good relationships with their peers (eg: Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006)

Giving excluded young people a chance to express their views can also provide them with a platform to reflect on their experiences and some researchers have pointed out that this can help give them insight and empower them to take more control and responsibility for their own behaviour and change (eg: Hapner & Imel, 2002; Kroeger et al., 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2006). This also links into one of the main roles of the Educational Psychologist (EP) when working with schools: to gain the views of children and young people. While undertaking a placement as a trainee EP and carrying out individual assessments with pupils, the researcher noticed friends were often cited as one of the aspects that contributes to the extent to which pupils like school and engage with it. One of the reasons children and young people are unhappy at school is a result of being isolated and having few close friends. Given that children and young people who have been excluded from mainstream are likely to experience some form of social exclusion from their mainstream peers and represent one of the most vulnerable groups, there is an important role for the EP in regard to considering the views and experiences of friendships these young people have had evaluating how these views can contribute towards supporting positive outcomes for this group. For example, in a study by Jalali & Morgan (2017) that aimed to examine whether pupils' perceptions from primary to secondary PRU changed over time, one of the findings noted that secondary pupils were more likely to feel a lack of belonging to mainstream schools because of perceived feelings of inadequacy and failure when comparing themselves to other mainstream peers. Comparatively, they felt a sense of belonging to the PRU settings that they were in.

This provided further rationale for the current study's aim to find out what were the experiences of peer relationships of excluded young people at the PRU.

PRUs usually accommodate children and young people with challenging behaviour, and as pointed out by Cullen & Monroe (2010, p. 64): "every pupil attending a PRU is, by definition, disengaged from the mainstream educational setting they would be expected to attend, nearly always as a result of relational challenges with adults and/or other pupils within these settings." Furthermore, one of the most frequently cited reasons for being permanently excluded from school was an assault on other pupils (Daniels et al. 2003). Other reasons included for exclusion from school are bullying, persistent disruptive behavior, physical assault against adults (DfE, 2015). This highlights some of the difficulties that most excluded pupils are inclined to have with regards to their relationships with peers. Within the same study, it was also



found that one of the factors that helped positively contribute towards excluded pupils' re-engagement in education later on in life, was the presence of supportive family and friends.

Another reason which gave rise to the context of the current study is that pupils placed into PRUs are usually meant to be there for a temporary period of time (short-stay schools) until they are reintegrated to mainstream school or are placed in a more suitable educational setting (Ofsted, 2007). For some of these pupils, it may be that they are placed for a fixed period of time to attend the PRUs for intervention before returning back to their mainstream school as they are at risk of exclusion. Exploring whether these pupils make friends during their time there and whether they maintain any friendships from mainstream school, also has implications with regards to how this group of pupils are affected socially when they have been excluded from mainstream settings. This is an important area to study because an essential aspect of the Educational Psychologist's (EP) role is to advocate for the inclusion of children and young people and to make their views known. For pupils who have been permanently excluded from mainstream school, PRUs are meant to act as an intermediate setting before they are either reintegrated into another mainstream school or sent to another more suitable setting (for example, school for children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties). However, it is often the case that pupils stay at the PRU for a significantly longer period of time either because mainstream schools are not keen on taking on pupils who have been permanently excluded before, or because these pupils may have difficulty coping with full-time education (eg: Kinder et al. 2000). Therefore, studying peer relationships and friendships in this context is of particular significance because staying at the PRU permanently can also impact on the type of peer relationships and friendships they develop.

There were also personal reasons that triggered the researcher's interest in the current study. Prior to this doctorate course, the researcher worked for a period of time in a PRU as a Teaching Assistant and during her time there, observed that in several instances, pupils who had close friendships with other pupils at the PRU were sent back to the PRU within a matter of weeks of being sent into mainstream school to attempt reintegration. Although there were probably other factors to be taken into account as to why they did not reintegrate well into mainstream, there was speculation at the time amongst staff as to whether they missed their friendship group at the PRU and therefore did not feel motivated to be on their best behaviour in mainstream school, consequently resulting in them being placed back into the PRU again. For example, in a study by Lawrence (2011), one of the factors that was perceived to affect the success of reintegration was whether pupils were able to

develop relationships with their peers in mainstream school once they left the PRU. This therefore raised the researcher's initial interest into the current study.

In light of the current study, it was important not only to gain the views of the pupils themselves, but also the views of the staff. The researcher's training as an EP is largely based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory where the child is placed within a context of relationships that contribute to his or her development, and therefore seeking the views of staff would also help gain a broader understanding of the peer relationships and friendships at the PRU. It also places less emphasis on within-child characteristics, but on environmental factors such as the network of relationships surrounding the child that might contribute to our understanding of peers and friendships.

This again fits well into the EP's role when working systemically with schools because the role also includes working with staff to examine the factors contributing to the child or young person's difficulties. Moreover, research has tended to point towards differences between pupils' and teachers' views on different elements of the learning experience and hence gaining the views of both staff and pupils will help give a broader picture of the friendships and peer relationships at the PRU (Garner 1995; Spera & Wentzel 2003; Wood 2003). Aside from contributing to another dimension of understanding the peer relationships at the PRU, peer relationships are important for staff to reflect upon because peer relationships can have an impact on learning and therefore exploring what staff's views are regarding the experiences of these young people's peer relationships can be purposeful. An updated literature search carried out in May 2018 on a range of databases (such as ERIC, British Education Index, PsycInfo) did not find any more recent relevant studies additional to those reported here that had focused specifically on the peer relations of excluded pupils within PRUs.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Overview of chapter**

The literature review will first give definitions of peer acceptance and friendship, then devote a section on theories of friendship. The chapter also gives a highlight of the features of friendships, followed by a review of why peers are important in adolescence by giving an overview of the positive and negative impact of these on the young person. Next, the review will give a description of the PRU context and include a discussion on young people who have been excluded as well as a discussion on the peer relationships of the pupils who have been excluded with SEMH needs. This is followed by a section that looks at some of the school-based interventions for pupils with SEMH, that is, earlier interventions that can take place before pupils end up being placed in PRUs. Finally, the review also looks at the peer relationships within the context of the PRU and the research questions of the current study are outlined.

### **2.2. Definitions of peer acceptance and friendship**

Research into the world of peer relationships has been particularly complex because young people establish a range of different types of relationships with their peers, ranging from general peer group level (peer acceptance/popularity) to more intimate dyadic relationships such as that of friendships (George & Harman, 1996; Howe, 2010). Although, researchers have focused on at least three different levels of peer relationships (eg: crowd, group and dyad) (Brown, 1999; Furman & Simon, 1998; Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 1998), two particular types of peer relationships are looked at in the current study: that of peer acceptance at group level and that of friendships at dyadic level. In early research, peer acceptance and friendship used to be studied as similar aspects of peer relationships, however over time, these two aspects have come to be viewed distinctively (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Parker & Asher, 1993) and are described below.

Peer acceptance has been defined as the extent to which a child or young person is well liked (accepted) or disliked (rejected) by his or her peers (members of his or her group) (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996).

Whilst friendship is similar to peer acceptance in that it also requires being liked, friendship is usually considered to be a special relationship between two individuals where there is an element of mutual liking (the feeling may not be mutual in peer acceptance) and commitment (Hartup, 1993). Friendship usually involves positive egalitarian close interactions between individuals and is intended to facilitate the

accomplishment of socioemotional goals (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Hinde, 1987). Within the construct of friendship, there are distinctions within levels of closeness, for example friends can be described in terms of 'best friends', 'good friends' and close friends (Hartup, 1993).

Friendships and peer relationships are important for the healthy development of children and young people as research (eg: Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006) has come to the view that friendships serve children and adolescents in many positive ways, including companionship, sharing of interests and activities, notions of intimacy, advice, and the promoting of emotional security, self-worth, self-validation and social competence (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999).

### **2.3. Theories of peer relationships**

There have been several theories that have helped explain the development of children and young people's friendships. Most of the theories have in common the view that relationships with peers can have significant impact on the development of young people. Some of these theories are looked at in more detail below.

#### Sullivan's theory of interpersonal development

One of the most well-known theories of friendship is Sullivan's (1953) theory of interpersonal development. He speculated that individuals form mental representations of themselves and others based on their interactions and experiences from their relationships.

Sullivan (1953) suggested that people have different social needs at different stages of life ranging from infancy to adolescence. Five of these basic social needs include tenderness, companionship, acceptance, intimacy and sexuality and Sullivan noted that friendships serve to fulfil these needs.

For example, in childhood there is the need for companionship while in adolescence the need for intimacy emerges. He argued that the relationships that children have with their peers are their first true interpersonal experience because they are distinct from the relationships with their parents, which tend to be more unequal in power. The experience of reciprocity and exchange in friendships provides young people with a sense of well-being and validation and this consequently has an impact on a young person's development of self-concept. The theory argues that friendships offer the opportunity to experience intimacy and collaboration and that without these, children will be unable to learn the social skills required for successful relationships with others during their adult lives.

### Selman's theory of social-perspective taking

Another theory that helps explain children's friendship development is the one proposed by Selman's (1980) theory of social perspective-taking. Social perspective-taking is a social-cognitive process that is essential to understanding others as it implies the process of making inferences about what another person may be thinking or/and feeling to understand their point of view. This theory explains how children and young people move onto adulthood through five different developmental stages at which they can perceive the relationship between the self and others. Selman's research from his interviews demonstrated that there was an age-related progression in regards to social perspective-taking, although the age range should only be used as an approximate guide. There can sometimes be some overlapping in terms of age at the stage levels as individual differences must also be taken into account. For example, adolescents should be better at establishing and maintaining more intimate relationships with their friends because of their ability to have more complex thinking such as the cognitive abilities of perspective-taking as compared to younger children. As such, his five stages of development consisted of:

Stage 0: where close friendship is perceived as momentary physical interaction (ages 3-7); Stage 1: where close friendship is perceived as a one-way assistance (ages 4-9); Stage 2: where close friendship is perceived as fair-weather cooperation (ages 6-12); Stage 3: where close friendship is perceived as intimate and mutual sharing (ages 9-15) and lastly Stage 4: where close friendship is perceived as autonomous interdependence (ages 12-adulthood).

### Bowlby's Attachment theory

According to Bowlby's attachment theory (1969), the most important attachment relationship occurs between the primary giver (usually the mother) and the child. These early reciprocal interactions in childhood provide mental representations of the self and others and later influence social development. Furthermore, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) puts forth that individuals feel motivated to establish close relationships with others in order to create a sense of security and to be able to explore the world with confidence (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973). Attachment theory has been further extended (Ainsworth et al. 1978) to describe different types of attachment styles, which include secure attachments that are the result of optimal bonds between the primary caregiver (usually the mother) and the child, as opposed to other patterns of insecure attachments.

Both relationships with parents and relationships with peers are necessary for children's development (Hartup, 1989). For instance, at a younger age, infants form attachments with adults such as their parents and eventually at a later stage start forming attachment with peers, where these relationships are more egalitarian in

terms of power (Hartup, 1989). When children eventually grow and enter adolescence, peers play a much bigger part in their life because they rely more on their peers than their parents for support (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Geddes (2006) highlights that in secondary school, young people may use their peer group as a secure base to gain acceptance and affirmation. She argued that although attachment relationships were formed in infancy, they could still be moderated by the experiences of relationships later in life and these new relationships could improve the initial insecure attachments experienced earlier.

Attachment theory postulates that the attachment style that an individual has developed in childhood has implications on his or her socio-emotional development. Young people with secure attachment styles show an array of positive social and emotional traits. Some of these positive characteristics include positive self-concept and emotional regulation. Young people with secure attachments to their parents have been shown to display higher levels of identity development (Berman, Weems, Rodriguez & Zamora, 2006). This trait has been associated with the potential to achieve more significant levels of intimacy (Erikson, 1968). Securely attached young people tend to be more effective in regulating their own emotions in situations of conflict than insecurely attached young people (Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gilles, Fleming & Gamble, 1993). In the case of insecurely attached young people, possibilities such as having difficulties with emotional and social development may arise, which could impact on their relationships with others. This theory will be re-visited later in the section on children and young people with SEMH difficulties.

#### Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development

Whilst Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is not a specific theory of friendship, it is a theory of child development, which was highlighted briefly in Chapter 1 and it is the framework under which the current study lies. The ecological systems theory looks at a child's development within the context of different environment systems surrounding the child. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that there are multiple systems in the child's environment, each having an influence on his or her development. These systems include the microsystem (the closest environment around the child such as family and peers, that is, those with whom the child maintains direct contact with).

The theory assumes that the child is an active participant exerting influence on his or her environment. It is also assumed that the environment around the child influences the child. For example, the child's parents have an influence on his or her behaviour but the child can also influence the parents' beliefs and behaviour, which Bronfenbrenner called 'bidirectional influences'. He pointed out that such influences existed in levels of all environments.

Other systems in his theory consist of the mesosystem (the interactions between various microsystems, for example the relations between home and school), the exosystem (interaction between two settings, which may not necessarily involve the child directly but can have an impact, for eg: parent's workplace and home), the macrosystem (cultural context) and the chronosystem (socio-historical context). Even though these outer systems have less or no direct contact with the child, they can nevertheless have influences on the child.

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic framework is particularly useful when taking into context the current study as it provides the most useful insight for the experiences by young people who have been excluded from school and how these different systems affect the young person's relationships with his or her peers and how interventions are implemented to promote positive peer relationships. This also fits well into the Educational Psychologist's role of working systemically in schools, that is to work with the child within the context of his environment, taking into consideration the systems around him or her such as how staff at the PRU help contribute to the young person's relationships with his or her peers.

#### **2.4. Features of friendships in adolescence**

There have been several features of friendships that have been looked at, including some particular ones that emerge when young people enter adolescence.

##### Reciprocity and Mutuality

As Sullivan (1963) explained, reciprocity, intimacy and mutuality become more significant in the friendships of adolescence. Reciprocity involves the wish to keep the other individual in the relationship happy while at the same time being able to meet one's own needs (Sullivan, 1953; Bernt, 2004). Friendships in adolescence are usually marked by this new awareness of reciprocity (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 1997).

In adolescence, there is a shift towards being more autonomous and this can also be seen in friendships, where the adolescent is more responsible in maintaining the friendships since previously in earlier childhood, parents might have contributed in guiding and influencing the friendships. Therefore, in adolescence, the adolescent usually becomes more aware of the needs of others and this awareness or sensitivity to others is usually required to ensure that the relationships continue, which is highlighted in the reciprocity of friendships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Tencer, 2005).

### Intimacy

As described earlier in Sullivan's theory (1953), whilst companionship is desired during childhood friendships, intimacy becomes increasingly important in adolescence. Research has indicated that adolescent friendships have more intimacy than friendships in earlier childhood (eg: Berndt, 1982; Berndt 2004; Bowker, 2004) As with the reciprocity that occurs with friendships in adolescence, intimacy becomes important because the adolescent becomes more autonomous from the parents but still seeks the closeness of interpersonal relationships to disclose any views and worries. Friendships in adolescence consequently play a role in filling that need for intimacy. Intimacy in friendships also become desired because adolescence is also a time where identity is shaped and therefore by relying on the intimacy of close friendships, the adolescent receives feedback from friends and this serves as validating an adolescent's self-esteem (Sullivan, 1953).

### Similarity in friendship

Research has indicated that friends tend to be more similar to each other than non-friends. There has been research that shows similarity is a key feature of friendship, for example, children and adolescents have been shown to befriend others who are similar to them on certain demographics such as gender, ethnicity and age (Epstein, 1986) as well as other individual characteristics such as humour, sociability and politeness (Rubin, Hymel, Lemare, Rowden, 1989). Furthermore, other dimensions where similarity has been found between friends are prosocial and anti-social behaviours (Liu & Chen, 2003; Poulin et al.,1997), academic achievement and sociability, peer popularity and motivation (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2005). This similarity amongst individuals who are friends has been referred to as 'homophily' or is also referred to as the 'similarity hypothesis' (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001; Pijl, Frostad & Mjaavatn, 2011).

This has led research to investigate whether the similarity existed prior to the friendship and was the criteria for the attraction to become friends (selection effect) or whether the similarity was the result of the friendship (socialisation effect). Currently there is evidence for both of the selection and socialisation effect. For example, in a longitudinal study of alcohol use, friends were found to be similar to each other prior to the friendship (suggesting a selection effect) and to maintain or increase the similarity, the friendship kept on (indicating a socialisation effect) (Popp, Laursen, Kerr, Stattin & Burk, 2008).

Similarity in friendships is meant to provide functions such as ways of validating the individual's own views and beliefs because their friends also hold similar opinions. Another function that it provides is that it enables the individual to enjoy the activities that he has with others enjoying similar activities. Although friendships are formed



on perceived similarities, they nevertheless become less important once the friendship has become established and the maintenance of the friendship relies on the quality of the friendship (Scholte & Van Aken, 2008).

### Gender differences

One particularly salient selection criteria in the friendships of children and adolescents is gender. The similarity hypothesis explains why boys and girls tend to select friends of the same gender. Research has documented that gender segregation in friendships can be observed as from childhood, where children interact mostly with peers of the same gender (eg: Serbin, et al., 1994). Although some cross-gender friendships do exist (eg: Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987), this eventually decreases as children get older (Eder & Hallinan, 1978), and only tends to reappear at the beginning of early adolescence (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). One theory that has been used to explain the preference of same-gender friendships is the two cultures perspective, which proposes that girls and boys develop into two seemingly distinct cultures or social worlds; resulting in differences in the ways they perceive friendships. For example, it has been reported that girls' perceptions of friendship tend to mature faster than that of boys as they emphasize on intimacy, mutual support (Bigelow & LaGaipa, 1980) while boys tend to view friendship more as a means of companionship (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). These differences in the perceptions of friendship can consequently be observed in the style of their friendships (eg: Maccoby, 1998; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Girls' friendships are generally characterised as being more intimate (eg: Parker & Asher, 1993), caring and exclusive and tend to occur in small groups, especially dyads (Eder & Hallinan, 1978; Maccoby, 1995). In contrast, boys' friendships tend to be characterised as occurring in larger groups consisting of friends and non-friends (Baines & Blatchford, 2009) and are engaged in more activity-based time together such as playing sports and competing against each other (Thorne, 1993). Hence, it could be suggested that more emotional support is available in girls' friendships than in that of boys' friendships. Despite boys' friendships being characterised as being less intimate, there has been some research that indicates that boys did wish to have close male friendships but because of masculine stereotypes, this was sometimes difficult to attain. Nevertheless, despite this, some boys were able to form close friendships and these friendships provided support in dealing with peer pressure (eg: Chu 2005). Thus, these features will also be considered regarding how pupils at the PRU perceive their friendships.

## **2.5. Friendship Quality**

Friendship quality suggests that not all friendships are the same and implies that some friendships may be more valuable than others (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). The quality of a friendship can be described as the resources or benefits that the friendship provides to the young person, such as companionship, security, trust, intimacy, validation and support (Ladd & Kchdenderfer, 1996). Positive and negative features of the friendship determine the quality of the friendship. Some of the positive features of friendship were highlighted above such as reciprocity, mutuality and intimacy. Conversely, some of the negative qualities of friendship include: conflict, rivalry and dominance. Conflict arises when a young person's own needs are not met (Berndt, 2004). For instance, instead of the positive features of mutuality and reciprocity, conflict occurs as an attempt for the young person to try and maintain equality in the relationship. It is thought to arise to help one achieve his or her own interests instead of the interests of the friend. Whilst conflict exists in children and adolescent friendships, it has been noted that in adolescence, the friendships usually become more complex and mature. A friendship with conflict does not necessarily imply that the friendship will end; neither does the absence of conflict indicates that the relationship is considered as friendship (Berndt & Perry, 1986). Another negative quality of friendship is that of rivalry (Berndt, 2002). Rivalry suggests that competition is not necessarily conducive to the relationship, for example in instances of boasting about one's superiority or trying to perform better than his or her friend. Rivalry seems to indicate that adolescents in the friendship are competing with one another in order to meet their own needs. In essence it acts as a barrier to the mutuality and reciprocity that are important for positive friendships to flourish. That said, Hartup (1992) does argue that conflict and rivalry are not always indicative of a negative friendship and if the friends can negotiate boundaries appropriately, then the friendship can continue. Furthermore, if adolescents can negotiate these, this can help develop and improve the young person's social skills (Woodburn, Schneider, Del Toro & Udvari, 2005). Aside from conflict and rivalry, dominance is also considered a negative quality of friendship because it suggests that there is lack of equality in the relationship (Schneider, Fonzi, Tani & Tomada, 1997; Woodburn et al., 2005). Research (eg: Shibahashi, 2004) has indicated that there is a correlation between dominance and lack of satisfaction with the friendship.

## **2.6. Importance of peer relationships**

As acknowledged earlier, peer relationships and friendships play an important role in the development of children and young people (eg: Hartup, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1987), especially during adolescence. Adolescence is considered to be a crucial period in social development, which is usually distinguished by an increase in peer

groups and an increased importance being placed on friendships as young people seek social support outside of the family (Scholte & Van Aken, 2008).

Peer relationships contribute significantly to the well-being of children and adolescents for various reasons. This is because peers are considered as 'equals' in the sense that they are usually similar in terms of level of social, emotional and cognitive development (Scholte & Van Aken, 2008). They provide different opportunities for young people in contrast to the relationships they have with the adults around them (eg: parents), where there is an element of hierarchy and imbalance in the power involved. Peer relationships are more horizontal than vertical and help develop the skills required for social development (Youniss, 1980), for example, conflict resolution and emotion regulation. Therefore, because they tend to have relationships on a more equal footing than that with adults, young people learn to self-regulate and develop their social skills by interacting with their peers.

The importance of friendship lies within the social support system it nurtures among young people. The positive effects of friendship on psychological wellbeing are as follows: it helps young people to maintain and even improve self-esteem; it contributes to emotional security during new or intimidating situations, and therefore encourages children and young people to explore new surroundings and activities; it may provide advice for problem solving situations, for example when friends help each other to understand a school assignment; it also provides for physical support such as aiding each other carry heavy items or sharing food. Furthermore, friendships encourage children and young people to learn about cooperation or collaboration with their peers (Parker, 2005). Friendship may also broaden the capacity to understand and welcome the perspectives of others. More importantly, it could help to nurture a sense of empathy within the individuals in question and hence increase the chances for good personal relationships later during their adult years (DeWalt et al., 2013). It is understood that young people who experience friendships have displayed more social competency compared to those who are isolated (Hartup, 1993).

Friendships are of great importance for sustaining or developing self-esteem and self-acceptance. Self-esteem is therefore considered a variable that is open to the influence of peer relations and friendships (Harter, 1999). Studies carried out on self-esteem have proven that pupils maintaining at least one friendship have increased self-esteem in comparison to those who do not have reciprocal friends (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995). Many students experience positive relations in their peer group and hence gain close friends who provide companionship and support (Tillfors, Persson, Willen, & Burk, 2012). The experience of positive relationships with peers and friends is a key determinant for psychological health and social integration in the later years of childhood and early stages of adolescence (Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski,

2009). Young people reporting good peer relationships and social validation have shown to experience less social anxiety (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011).

Thus, it can be noted that peer relationships become increasingly important for young people when they enter adolescence and that these skills become essential for them to maintain a healthy development. Because peer relationships become so central in a young person's life, there is therefore the need to consider that for some young people, these relationships do not occur smoothly and there is a greater risk of feelings of isolation when they are not able to connect with their peers. Some young people may be unable to cooperate and form positive relationships with their peers.

Studies have determined that young people without friends tend to have lower self-esteem and struggle with loneliness (Ladd, 1990; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). Children without friends are also reported to go through heightened levels of sadness (Bukowski, Laursen, Aunola & Nurmi, 2007) or even depression. Lack of close or intimate friendship or those excluded from validating peer interactions also resulted in feelings of insecurity, anxiousness and worthlessness (Buhrmester, 1990). Young people lacking social support or going through difficult peer relationships are often candidates for depression (Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker & Borge, 2007). Additionally, youth who experience conflict and inequality in their relationships not only have low self-esteem but have been found to be less involved at school than those who have stable and intimate friendships (Berndt & Keefe, 1996). Also, worth mentioning is the feeling of loneliness. Any individual feels the need to be connected to others and the feeling of loneliness can surface when the adolescent feels excluded or has no social contact with his peers (Goswick & Jones, 1982). Children with no best friends have been noted with greater levels of loneliness than those with best friends. Hence, feelings of loneliness have been associated with social incompetence (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). Furthermore, loneliness has been shown to be correlated with depression and social withdrawal (Crick & Ladd, 1993)

Peer victimisation is defined as a pupil being harassed or abused by another peer or group in a manner that leads to fearfulness, insecurity or mistrust (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1997). Youth who are lacking in peer support may end up being victimised and peer victimisation may present itself in verbal, physical, emotional or sexual form. Again, there is a correlation between peer victimisation and low self-esteem, loneliness and depression. (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Research has also shown that peer rejection is associated with poor school results, lower vocational competence and decreased participation in the community. This leads to negative influence on psychological issues which subsequently impact academic adjustment and the emotional functioning of the victim even after the

victimisation has ended. (Ruger & Jenkins, 2013). Children with poor support including no peer support or friendship are an easy target for bullies. Indeed, studies link depression in adults to being friendless in childhood (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998). Having at least one mutual best friend during preadolescence is essential for success in adulthood.

## **2.7. Transitions and peer relationships**

Most children and young people will at some point in their life be subjected to transitions which can take several forms; for example, entrance to school, transition from home to nursery, moving from one year group level to the next (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996) and transition from primary to secondary school.

During these transitional periods, most children and young people must face the challenges of new environments and it can be quite an unsettling and stressful time (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Evangelou et al., 2008; Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Some challenges include being accepted by their peers as well as having to face increasingly difficult academic tasks (Ladd & Price, 1987).

Research on transition has indicated that although making new friendships is an anticipated aspect of moving to a new school, peer relationships were reported to be a main area of concern for young people during transition (Graham & Hill, 2003; Pratt & George, 2005).

It was also found that the stress of maintaining new peer relationships following transition was also linked to a decrease in self-worth over that time period (Fenzel, 2000). Though this research has been mostly carried out for transitions between primary and secondary mainstream schools, little is known regarding the experiences of young people who have been excluded from mainstream and placed into PRUs. Peers do not only represent an area of concern for young people having to move to a new school in terms of losing their peer group, but they are also important because they can provide support to young people regarding their adjustment and academic progress. It has been suggested that the development of positive peer relations helps contribute to successful transitions. There is also the consensus that supportive relationships with peers and adults are important in children and young people's engagement to school. Research has suggested that different types of peer relationships are linked to young people's motivation, academic achievement and behaviour at school (eg: Berndt & Keefe, 1992). Friendships have shown a positive relationship with academic motivation and achievement (e.g: Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; McNamara-Barry, & Caldwell,

2004) and have been negatively correlated with behavior problems at school (Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999). Research (eg: Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004) has also tended to indicate that children who are part of social networks have higher self-esteem, achievement, prosocial behaviour and fewer emotional difficulties.

Although there has been little research carried out specifically on the experiences of peer relationships in PRU settings, some research (eg: Michael & Frederickson, 2013) has found that pupils in PRUs did consider positive relationships with peers as being enablers of positive outcomes for them. They felt that peers helped provide feelings of reassurance and safety upon arrival at the PRU. Therefore, trying to understand the experiences of young people who have been excluded from school and exploring their peer relationships would not only help to indicate the extent of social opportunities for them (after being excluded from their mainstream school) but to also identify the nature of peer relationships they develop at the PRU.

In the context of a young person who has been excluded from mainstream school and placed in a PRU, it can be argued that the challenges that come with transition also apply to some extent to exclusion as the young person needs to adapt to a new school environment at the PRU. However, unlike transition from primary school to secondary school where a planned process may be involved, exclusion from mainstream school is often unexpected.

Some of the challenges that may be expected upon entry at the PRU for a recently excluded pupil could include making new friends, trying to form or be part of a peer group. Unlike transitions to secondary school where a new cohort of pupils start together, the excluded pupil may be the only newcomer (unless there happens to have been other excluded pupils who were placed at the PRU around the same time). Furthermore, exclusions can also take place at any time throughout the academic year, unlike the transition of primary school to secondary school that usually takes place at the start of the academic year (Yell, Meadows, Drasgow & Shriner, 2009).

There have been several studies that have shown the importance of peer relationships in helping young people make smooth transitions. For example, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that peer group acceptance helps predict children's involvement in their new school, including making academic progress (eg: Kingery, Erdley & Marshall, 2011). Additionally, young people's quality of close friendships can also forecast their involvement at and perception of their new school (Schneider et al., 2008). Although these studies have employed correlational methods, there has been more controlled intervention research that has found that supporting young people's peer relationships and providing them with social skills

learning can help them settle into their new school and in progressing academically (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012; Slater & Mckeown, 2004).

For example, in a study by Bloyce & Frederickson (2012), pupils who had higher concerns about transfer to secondary school were given the opportunity to get support from the Transfer Support team, which was led by an EP. These pupils were found to report less concerns following the intervention. However, the study did point out that due to ethical considerations, they were not able to compare the results with a similar control group because it was deemed unethical to identify pupils who were anxious about their transfer then not offer them the support. This therefore could have affected the validity of how effective the support really was.

Although these findings suggest that peer relationships play an important part in helping young people adjust to their new setting following transition, very little research seems to have been carried out to support this aspect of transition.

However, in a recent study by Keay, Lang & Frederickson (2015), they argued that there is a focus on peer relationships being supported during transition by secondary schools. An examination of the support provided by secondary schools to facilitate peer relationships following transition was carried out. In their findings, they differentiated between schools providing high and low levels of support. Various themes were found from their thematic analysis of the interviews. For example, the schools were actively involved in developing supportive relationships with pupils, such as welcoming the children from their primary schools and those schools providing high levels of support further ensured that the most vulnerable pupils (those who did not have many pupils coming from the same school) were given higher levels of support such as inviting them to a special day in the school.

The study by Keay et al. (2015) also indicated that the schools appeared to understand the challenges of transition and they had an awareness of peer groups. Importantly, the schools also explained how they helped manage the social environment by grouping the children based on information given by their primary schools. Some examples included splitting some pairs and groups of children, keeping some together, ensuring a balance of gender and personalities and those with SEN. All the schools highlighted that they tried to help facilitate friendships for children whom they perceived as being vulnerable to social isolation. It was also noted that one staff member explained that although they expected children to learn to make friends irrespective of the grouping allocated, they were also aware of the need to evaluate the risks of school refusal should the child become unhappy at school, particularly due to his or her social isolation in his or her class/year group.

In the context of a PRU, it would be expected that being aware of such relevant information regarding managing the social environment at the PRU could be even more important for pupils who have been excluded because they would require more support adapting into the PRU. However, as was highlighted by the example from the staff at the secondary school, young people are also expected to learn to make new friends irrespective of the peers in their year group, and therefore managing the social environment could be perceived as not giving them the opportunity to learn to develop and mature their social skills on their own (for example, if placed in a group of young people with different personalities, they will have to learn to negotiate, improve on understanding and evaluating others' perspectives). If their social environment is not managed for them, it can be argued that this may help them integrate into society better because schools and classrooms reflect a "major arena" (Cefai, 2007: 120) for promoting young people's social, emotional and cognitive development and offer an additional context for socialisation outside the family. Also, when they leave school and become adults, workplaces may not have their social environment managed to help facilitate the social interactions. In light of this research indicating that secondary mainstream schools from the study do actually take into consideration peer relationships as part of their transition process, the current study also interviewed members of staff at the PRU to find out how peer relationships are managed when a new pupil joins the PRU. Although this is following an exclusion rather than a transition process, it can be argued that following exclusion, a young person would need further support in adapting to his or her new environment, not in the least as well because he or she is likely to have SEMH needs and may struggle even more with peer relationships as compared to his or her counterparts in mainstream schools during their transitions to secondary school.

Considering such findings, the next two sections look at the Pupil Referral Unit as a school setting, outlines its purpose and thereafter a section is dedicated to looking at the needs of young people with SEMH needs, which consist of the majority of excluded young people.

## **2.8. Pupil Referral Units**

It was mentioned earlier that PRUs are one of the forms of Alternative Provision for children and young people who cannot attend mainstream school. Alternative Provision was introduced out of concerns that the pupils that had been excluded from mainstream school would not be able to attain their social and educational outcomes.

Ofsted (2007:4) describes Pupil Referral Units as "short stay centres for pupils who are educated other than at maintained or special schools, and they vary considerably



in size and function. They admit pupils with behavioural difficulties and others who can be identified as vulnerable because of their health or social and emotional difficulties. Some PRUs educate and support school-aged mothers”.

From this description of who PRUs cater for, it can be noted that children and young people with a range of different needs attend PRUs as a form of Alternative Provision. It has however been highlighted that the largest single category (slightly less than 50 percent) of pupils who do attend Alternative Provision appear to be those who have been either excluded from school, or who are considered at risk of exclusion. Both groups tend to consist of pupils who have SEN. Statistics also seem to show that the remaining fifty percent might be in Alternative Provision either due to medical needs (such as health and emotional needs or teenage mothers) or because they are waiting to be placed in another educational setting or are unable to manage in mainstream school (DCSF, 2008).

Alternative Provision was introduced in 1994 because of national concerns regarding young people who had been excluded from mainstream school. The behaviour of these pupils was beyond the coping capacity of the schools and they were therefore excluded for the benefit and protection of other pupils. The PRU was a setting that would act as an intervention where the pupil could learn to develop strategies to cope and as such, the PRU aimed to fight the negative impact of exclusion by providing respite with the eventual objective of reintegrating the pupils into mainstream schooling (DfE, 1989; Hill, 1997; Lloyd-Smith, 1984). Although this is meant to be the case in theory, there has been research that indicates that the outcomes for this group of young people educated outside of mainstream school tend to be worse than those of their mainstream counterparts (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009). For instance, pupils in PRUs often arrive at unplanned times throughout the academic year and are often failing academically (Yell, Meadows, Drasgow & Shriner, 2009). The rates of attendance in PRUs are also much lower than those of mainstream schools (DfE, 2012).

There are growing fears regarding the ability of PRUs to manage behaviour, along with other issues such as poor educational outcomes, low expectations, lack of or inefficiency of strategies to help these young people return to mainstream education (Ofsted, 2016).

In a report by Ofsted (2007) on PRUs titled “Establishing successful practice in pupil referral units and local authorities”, the key findings suggested that successful PRUs visited had clear purposeful objectives. These included a focus on pupils’ academic and personal development, including supporting pupils to develop the confidence to return to mainstream school or to prepare for other alternative plans. The successful PRUs also had strong relationships with a range of outside agencies that also helped

provide enriching experiences for the pupils should there be limited facilities within their own premises. The report went on to state that however, even though all the PRUs visited had good systems for tracking pupils' progress, all received very little information from the pupils' previous schools.

In light of this brief historical context of how PRUs came into the educational scene, the reasons for which it is interesting to explore the peer relations in this setting are considered. As briefly explained in the earlier introduction chapter, it is highlighted that the main aim is to eventually reintegrate the pupils into mainstream school or other more appropriate settings, and therefore the notion of a "short stay" environment may have implications for the nature of peer relationships.

Secondly, the fact that most of these pupils have been excluded also highlights that these pupils have been somewhat disengaged from school, displaying anti-social attitudes and this is an important factor to consider when attempting to understand whether there can be any positive aspects in these relationships.

## **2.9. Excluded young people and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs**

Most pupils in PRUs tend to be those who have been excluded from school due to persistent disruptive behaviour (DfE, 2015) and these pupils are likely to have had some form of disengagement from mainstream school. As highlighted in Chapter 1 earlier, these difficulties are often linked to pupils with SEN. This particular type of SEN, which is considered to act as a barrier to children and young people's learning and was previously classified under the terminology of SEBD (Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties) or BESD (Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties) has now been renamed as a category under SEN as SEMH (social, emotional and mental health) difficulties in the updated DfE's (2015) Special Educational Needs and Disability code of practice (SEND).

The new SEND code describes the need as: "Children and young people may experience a wide range of social and emotional difficulties which manifest themselves in many ways. These may include becoming withdrawn or isolated, as well as displaying challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour. These behaviours may reflect underlying mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression, self-harming, substance misuse, eating disorders or physical symptoms that are medically unexplained. Other children and young people may have disorders such as attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactive disorder or attachment disorder" (DfE, 2015: 98).

The behaviour in itself is no longer seen as falling under SEN as was previously implied. However, in spite of the fact that the definitions of behavioural difficulties have shifted to emphasise the potential underlying mental health disorders as mentioned in the definition from the SEND code of practice 2015, definitions and attempts to explain this category of need have since long been focused on the interactions between society, family and school systems. Aiming to separate behaviour from the influence of social factors and mental health needs remains a dilemma (Hackett et al., 2010).

As reiterated earlier, PRUs are the main form of Alternative Provision. Due to the externalising nature of SEMH difficulties, this often results in young people with SEMH difficulties being the group that is most likely to be excluded from mainstream schools, thereby resulting in higher chances of them attending Alternative Provision (Cooper, 2004; Jull 2008; Visser, Daniels, and MacNab 2005) and consequently being placed in PRUs. It was therefore deemed appropriate to devote a section of the literature review on this particular SEN.

This category of SEN has since long been difficult to conceptualise due to an array of terminology used, including terms such as BESD, SEBD, EBD (Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties) and now SEMH difficulties. Consequently, this has also led to the challenges of professionals in understanding the needs of these children (eg: Cooper, 1996; Thomas & Glenny, 2000). Nevertheless, most definitions share certain common characteristics and as the description in the SEND code explains, these children and young people have difficulties with their emotional and social development, which affect their learning and in the context of the school, usually require additional support (Cefai & Cooper, 2006).

Some explanations of these difficulties have also grouped them under mainly two sets of externalising difficulties. As pointed out by Cooper (2005), disaffection, conduct disorders, delinquency and oppositional defiance tend to be categorised under one set of externalising difficulties, and another subgroup consists of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) which may partly be explained by biological factors as well as social factors. Internalising behaviours that are considered to fall under the category of social emotional difficulties include truancy, school refusal, separation anxiety, withdrawn behaviour, anxiety disorders and depression (Cooper, 2005).

Furthermore, some research has claimed that children and young people with SEMH tend to be more impulsively emotional and less able to regulate their behavioural responses to stressful situations than children and young people without SEMH (Cross 2011).

Another proposed theory which combines social and cognitive factors is that of

attribution theory, which emphasises on the explanations that individuals give for their behaviour, that is, whether they feel they are in control of their behaviour or whether external circumstances explain their behaviour, thus making them feel helpless and passive (Davison & Neale, 2001).

Whilst these various theories have been put forth to explain the difficulties of these young people, the ones mentioned have been particularly focused on the medical model, that is, the within-the-child deficit model, where the difficulties are perceived as a result of personality characteristics or skills that the child possesses. Therefore, other theories that may be able to give a fuller understanding of the complexity of difficulties of these children and young people can be explored further.

Others have put forth explanations that include social factors playing a role in unravelling the difficulties that children and young people with SEMH need to face but it is believed that social factors play an important role in its development (Cooper, 2001). One such theory has provided explanations in terms of environmental factors where these behaviours are believed to have been learnt patterns of behaviour, often referred to as social learning theory (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). This theory suggests that these negative behaviours have become reinforced behaviours in which the individuals have had their needs met and that more positive pro-social behaviours have not been taught properly. It is under this theory that the socialisation effect mentioned earlier takes place in explaining how friends become more similar with time. On this basis as well, others have been concerned by the negative impacts of friendships in regard to young people who may display even more difficult behaviour after having spent time together (the controversy of placing pupils with SEMH together within PRUs).

Also, sometimes associated with social learning theory are the effects of attachment difficulties on social development (Bowlby, 1975). This attachment theory was previously discussed when explaining some of the theories of friendships. As explained previously, early attachment experiences with the primary caregiver are shown to affect later development. According to proponents of this theory, attachment formation is considered a developmental process that continues far beyond childhood, into adolescence and adulthood (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney & Marsh, 2007). It is thought that these representations of attachment relationships are continuously altered as young people develop new intimate relationships (Carlson, Sroufe & Egeland, 2004).

Crowell, Treboux, Gao, Fyffe, Pan & Waters (2002) have suggested that secure young people are able to form new relationships that are defined by autonomy and relatedness in order to provide them with the additional security from which they can go on to further evolve their social and emotional development. In the context of

young people with SEMH difficulties, it is thought that these needs may have arisen because they have struggled to form secure attachments with significant caregivers during early childhood. Several factors including the family and environment have been put forward to explain why secure attachments are not developed or maintained. For example, harsh maternal punishment and severe conflict have been strongly related to the development of less secure attachments in childhood (Lyons-Ruth, Connell, Zoll & Stahl, 1987).

Other factors that have been presumed to affect parenting include domestic violence, which can increase the risk of child neglect, decreased parenting satisfaction and child abuse (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2003). Conflict in the parents' marriage or divorce can also affect the parents' emotional availability for the child (eg: El-Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004). Furthermore, when this emotional availability is reduced on behalf of the parent, this can decrease the child's motivation to explore new relationships, to develop the autonomy and confidence to separate from the parent and develop intimate interactions with their peers. Moreover, the mental health of parents (eg: Herring & Kaslow, 2002) can also affect the attachments with the child, for example, in the case of a mother suffering from depression, this can again cause her to be less emotionally available to the child and increase the chances of developing insecure attachments. Hence, there is a wide range of negative parenting and familial causes that can affect a child's sense of security, which consequently can impact on the attachment relationship formed. This research can to some extent give an explanation as to how young people with SEMH struggle with relationships with others. Even though in adolescence the young person relies less on his or her parents than before and becomes more independent, parents are still required for some of their attachment needs (eg: Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). As peers become increasingly part of the adolescent's life, relationships with them help serve some of the young person's attachment needs more than they did earlier in childhood (eg: Furman & Buhrmester, 1992).

Research has indicated that pupils with behavioural difficulties are more likely to be disliked and rejected by others (eg: Cole & Carpentieri, 1990; Dishion, 1990, McElwain, Olson & Volling, 2002). Children and young people who have been excluded from school and have been sent to PRUs are more likely to have had low sociometric status amongst peers at their previous mainstream school.

It has been argued by some researchers (eg: Selman, 1980; Sullivan, 1953) that children progress to more meaningful stages of friendship as intimacy develops. In the case of children with behavioural difficulties, it is likely that these children and young people may not be able to reach such a stage, because they are more likely to have difficulties in resolving conflicts, and they also present a lack of ability to generate solutions and difficulty in understanding the perspectives of others (Richard

& Dodge, 1982). Rejected and aggressive children are furthermore likely to misinterpret the actions of others as being hostile and intentional even when these situations might have been objectively appraised as having an uncertain cause (eg: Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge, et al. 2003) as explained earlier by the attribution theory and these have a role in the development of their relationships with peers.

Hence, given the fact that most excluded pupils in PRUs have SEMH, it seems likely that their challenging behaviour and lack of social skills might affect the way they engage with other peers with similar behaviours at the PRU. For example, it is mentioned that pupils with SEMH tend to have difficulty with emotion regulation, which makes it difficult for them to control their behavioural responses towards peers (e.g. Cross, 2011). It has also been pointed out that there have been very few studies which have looked at the emotional responses and peer interactions of children with SEMH and this is important because the ability to form peer relationships as mentioned earlier plays a crucial role in young people's development. Difficulties in forming positive relationships along with difficulties in emotion regulation can later predict anti-social adult behaviour and result in long-term chronic mental health problems (Vitaro, Brendgen, & Wanner 2005).

#### **2.10. School-based interventions for young people with SEMH**

In light of the various explanations for understanding pupils with SEMH, some interventions have been implemented over the years in schools in the UK. Although it is not within the realm of this literature review to give an in-depth review of these, a broad brushstroke of some of the interventions adopted in schools is looked at.

There have been various school-based interventions to help support young people with their social and emotional skills, for example SEAL. Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) is a whole-school approach aimed at improving young people's social and emotional skills, behaviour and developing better mental health. Secondary SEAL was implemented following the perceived success of the SEAL intervention in primary schools (DfES, 2005). The programme was underpinned by the same theoretical model, that proposed by Goleman (1996) based on five inter and intrapersonal competencies. The SEAL guidance aimed to encourage schools to use a whole-school approach by directly teaching social and emotional skills, employing teaching and learning approaches that promote a safe learning environment, and encouraging staff training and continuing professional development.

A national evaluation study of the impact of secondary SEAL was carried out by Wigelsworth, Humphrey & Lendrum (2012) but the results showed that the SEAL programme did not have a significant impact on young people's social, emotional skills, mental health and behaviour. They report that these findings are relatively

more modest than previous findings that have shown a more positive significant impact in primary SEAL. The interventions were multi-wave and targeted groups of pupils as well as one-to-one work with the pupils, which would therefore also include those with SEMH. Wigelsworth, Humphrey & Lendrum (2012) reflected that there was the possibility that both the theory underpinning the secondary SEAL program was flawed and that the intervention itself was not implemented as intended which could explain the lack of effectiveness of the program. They also however acknowledged that their own study's limitations could have impacted on the findings, for instance they were not able to randomly allocate the SEAL schools to the comparison schools (no SEAL program) and they were unable to ascertain that the comparison schools had not had previous SEAL programs implemented. Another limitation they address is that the data collected relied upon pupil's self-report and that there was a lack of triangulation of data sources because the views of other people such as parents or teachers were not sought. Finally, another limitation the study addressed was that the duration of the study may have been too short to notice the impact that it had on the schools.

Aside from the SEAL programme, a review of the effectiveness of other school-based and out-of-school interventions to enhance social and emotional skills was undertaken by Clarke, Morreale, Field, Hussein & Barry (2015) though these are not further reviewed here.

As pointed by Bombèr (2007) however, not all pupils will have initial base to even access the whole-school approach interventions such as the SEAL programmes. Children with attachment difficulties/SEMH may need additional individual support to even start to access such interventions that help pupils become more emotionally literate.

Geddes (2006) talks about how schools can become a surrogate "secure base" for these young people with attachment difficulties by containing the anxiety experienced by these young people, which inevitably affect their learning (hence why it is considered under SEN). Attachment theory is considered useful in helping to understand how to construct the school as a secure base. Geddes (2006) reflects on several features on behalf of pupils and staff that can help constitute a safe environment. She highlights some examples of features of good practice which include modelling of good relationships amongst staff, clear and consistent rules, a regular safe and supportive space for staff to reflect on difficulties, including a clear framework for staff to understand pupils' behaviour.

The school setting can be considered as a place that can provide additional relationships as compensation to pupils whose difficulties result from adverse earlier experiences in their life. Following this line of thinking and underpinned by the

attachment theory, schools have adopted the use of a key adult to work with pupils with SEMH. The role of the key adult is to provide an additional attachment figure (in addition to the child's primary caregiver). Bombèr (2007) highlights four core aims of the relationship between the key adult and the child/young person in question. The aims of the relationship are as follows: for the young person to develop trust in the key adult (who should be consistently emotionally and physically available); for the young person to be able to manage his or her feelings because the key adult is there and is attuned to his or her emotional needs; for the young person to develop his or her self-esteem from experiencing acceptance from the key adult and lastly, for the young person to become more effective with his or her relationships with other adults and peers at school.

Another school-based intervention underpinned by the attachment theory for young people with SEMH needs is nurture groups (Bennathan & Boxall, 2000). The classic nurture group aims to replicate the home environment where the room is set out to include spaces with eating area, kitchen as well as a working space (Boxall, 2002). The nurture group is usually composed of approximately six to twelve young people with two or more members of staff who have been trained (Nurture group network four-day certificate of practice, 2009). The young people attend the nurture group regularly throughout the week but are usually expected to return to mainstream as full-time pupils after a few academic terms (Boxall, 2002). Example of activities include turn-taking games and group activities, all of which aim to develop the young person's social skills, confidence and ability to trust others.

Whilst the nurture group was initially set up for use in primary schools and there has been research evidence showing its success with younger children (e.g. O'Connor & Colwell, 2002; Gerrard, 2005), there has been an increase of nurture groups in secondary schools, although there is relatively limited evidence of its effectiveness as of yet (e.g. Colley, 2009).

Colley (2009) discusses how the nurture group can be adapted for secondary schools and suggests that nurture groups can be implemented to support young people across the key stages with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. This is of particular interest as such interventions could be implemented into PRUs if staff are given appropriate training given that these young people excluded from school may be in need of a structured nurturing environment. Whilst the PRU in itself is meant to be an intervention, it is slightly different because the circumstances in which the young person is placed in the PRU tend to be a consequence of exclusion and thereby a rather late stage of intervention. Nurture groups in contrast, if they are in place within the mainstream school itself can act as an earlier form of intervention to help avoid the exclusion of the young person in the first place. Compared to PRUs, nurture groups within mainstream settings could also avoid the difficulties of



transition that were mentioned earlier when pupils are placed within PRUs. Furthermore, implementing more nurture groups within the mainstream schools themselves would also imply that pupils with SEMH difficulties would have had earlier intervention within mainstream itself rather than being excluded off-site and placed in PRUs. That said, setting up nurture groups require trained staff to do so and this may be a practical issue for schools to implement them successfully. In a recent paper by the DfE (2017), it is mentioned that there is an increasing number of schools who are developing in-house alternative provision with the aim of supporting the needs of their pupils better so that there is less of a need for pupils to be sent off-site. This would perhaps help in reducing the difficulties that result from transition between schools to off-site alternative provision such as PRUs.

Hence, having considered the needs of pupils with SEMH and some of the interventions based on attachment theory in schools, the final section of the literature review considers the context of these pupils' peer relationships within the context of the PRU.

#### **2.11. Peer relations in the context of a PRU**

Whilst earlier, the positive aspects of friendships and peers were discussed, there has also been much controversy surrounding the existence of PRUs and any interventions grouping children with challenging behaviour together.

As it has been pointed out (Muller, 2010), there is a high chance that in educational systems, children with lower ability levels are grouped together through streaming systems in mainstream schools. Considering that pupils in lower ability groups tend to present with more behaviour problems than those in higher ability groups, it is therefore likely that pupils with behaviour difficulties are placed together (Gottfredson, 2001).

It has therefore been suggested that ability grouping can lead to alienation from school, where peer groups in low ability classes affiliate with anti-school attitudes (Hargreaves, 1967). Streaming tends to foster friendship groups, with high ability pupils accepting school's rules whereas low ability groups tend to go against school rules (Hallinan & Sorensen, 1985). However, it is argued that this alienation and pupils' attitudes towards school also depend largely on the school's culture and staff's attitudes (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). This perhaps sets the scene to the current study, where most children with behavioural difficulties who have been excluded from mainstream school end up together in PRUs.

Previous research has suggested that peers can reinforce and act as models of behaviour and concern has been raised that many of the interventions for young people with SEMH difficulties often involve placing them in settings that are with

others with SEMH needs and there is the need to consider the potential effects of these placements, in terms of what some have called 'deviancy training', which is the idea that when young people with SEMH form friendships this is likely to cause even more problem behaviours in the future (eg: Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999; Gottfredson, 1987). These findings have perhaps emphasised the controversy of the existence of PRUs. As mentioned earlier, peers can have an impact on school adjustment, and peers tend to act as reinforcers and models of behaviour and classroom settings that have a high number of pupils with low academic outcomes and poor behaviours can have the tendency to encourage these behaviours (eg: Barth et al., 2004).

From the literature on peer relations, and as already discussed, it is known that certain fundamental characteristics help form and maintain friendships (Schneider, 2000). Other characteristics that help determine friendship include proximity. Being physically situated near each other is likely to result in an increased likelihood of becoming friends and therefore putting children together in the PRU may help foster relationships amongst those with challenging behaviour. Previously, it was acknowledged that young people who are aggressive may tend to have less friends than other young people (e.g. Ray, Cohen, Secrist & Duncan, 1997); however, studies show that even aggressive children and young people also have friends, and these tend to be children who are similar to them and are also aggressive (Berndt, 1982), emphasising on another feature of friendships, that of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). Taking this into consideration, it is possible therefore that pupils at the PRU may be more likely to get along with pupils at the PRU who display similar behaviour to them. Conversely, it has been mentioned (John, 1996) that excluded young people may find friendship choices in such settings restricted. It has also been emphasised that the fact that they have been excluded and are put together does not mean that they have anything in common other than the common denominator of exclusion.

In summary, this section considered the possible negative aspects of peer relationships, although it is also important to keep open about the possibilities of the positive aspects of these relationships in the PRU setting, as highlighted earlier in the literature review.

## **2.12. Summary of chapter**

This chapter was focused on outlining and evaluating the literature review of the importance of peer relationships and friendships in adolescence. A description was given regarding what constitutes peer relationships and friendships in adolescence, whilst highlighting some of the importance of this on young people. Theories explaining friendship development such as Sullivan's theory of interpersonal

development and Selman's theory of social perspective taking were given. Other theories included Bowlby's attachment theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory to explain contextual factors and its impact on children and young people's development were explained. These theories were employed to explain some of the difficulties that young people with SEMH face and how this can impact on their relationships with their peers. The importance of supporting these young people during and after their placement to the PRU, particularly focusing on the aspect of peer relationships was also looked at in relation to the existing research on transition from primary to secondary school. The chapter also highlighted and evaluated some of the interventions that have been employed in schools to work with young people with SEMH difficulties.

In addition, although there has been some increasing research on the views of excluded young people, little research has focused on their experiences regarding their relationships with peers. Thus, in light of the paucity of research literature on the experiences of these young people and how staff within PRUs can support them, the exploratory nature of the current study seeks to pose two main research questions as outlined below:

**Research Question 1:**

**What are the experiences of peer relationships and friendships of pupils who attend a secondary PRU and who have been permanently excluded?**

**Research Question 2:**

**How do staff in a Secondary Pupil Referral Unit perceive peer relationships and friendships amongst pupils at the PRU?**

The next chapter will describe the methodology utilised to explore the two research questions above, including ethical considerations, procedures, participants and context of the secondary PRU in which the current study took place.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Overview of chapter**

This chapter will start by providing a brief explanation of the epistemological view undertaken by the researcher and thereby explain how this underpins the methods of the current study. This chapter will also explain how the interview schedules were developed and give a description of the research context of the study and the participants who volunteered to take part (staff and pupils). Lastly, a description of the procedure of data collection, including ethical considerations and how the analysis of data was carried out will be outlined.

#### **3.2. Rationale for the method used**

Mertens (2010) suggests that there are three plausible reasons for choosing qualitative methods: the researcher's view of the world (epistemological view); the nature of the research questions that the study aims to answer and finally, the benefits that qualitative methods can provide in the context of real world research. With these reasons in mind, the epistemological view that the researcher has undertaken is that of a social constructionist perspective and this contributes to the rationale chosen for the qualitative method used in the study. The social constructionist perspective assumes that knowledge is constructed through the daily interactions that occur between people instead of it existing on its own. This perspective stresses that there is not one objective reality but multiple social constructions of meaning. Subsequently, the same events can be perceived and explained and understood in different ways (Creswell, 2009) and the aim of the researcher is to try and understand these multiple realities (Burr, 2003). Throughout the current study, the researcher recognised that although the experiences and views of the participants were an outcome of their interpretation and were constructed and flexible, they were nevertheless real to the participants who experienced them (Willig, 2013).

The researcher was aware that there were other research methods such as that of a case study. Whilst a case study has been described as a method that enables a researcher to closely examine the issues within a particular context, whereby most cases select a particular geographical area or very limited participants (Yin, 2003), the main purpose of the current study was to focus and explore what excluded pupils' experiences of peer relationships were following being excluded and being placed in a PRU rather than the focus being solely on this particular PRU. Consequently, the aim was to provide an initial exploration of this topic rather than looking at the

specifics of the organisation of this PRU which would have been more relevant in a case study context.

Additionally, the study initially considered recruiting other PRUs to take part, however due to time constraints and difficulty in gaining access to participants, the study focused solely on this particular PRU which was in the borough where the researcher was working as a trainee EP at the time. Since the study employed semi-structured interviews and a certain number of participants were obtained, it was deemed sufficient in terms of a qualitative piece of research.

The researcher was also aware of other alternative research perspectives such as positivism, which assumes that there is a relationship between the world and how we perceive it. It suggests that the practice of observation, the observer and what is observed should be separated. It is based on the idea that data should be collected objectively and purports that valid knowledge should be accessed through the application of scientific methods where variables can be controlled to avoid bias. The researcher deemed that this positivism perspective (that is, using quantitative methods) would have limited the enriching responses of the participants (Camic, Rhodes, Jean and Yardley, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Therefore, rather than testing hypotheses as quantitative methods dictate, the researcher instead explored the experiences of the young people and staff through the use of semi-structured interviews. This helped elicit richer data and also enabled the clarification of what the participants meant if ever there was any lack of clarity in their response (Robson, 2002). Subsequently, the semi-structured interview method was identified to be the most suitable for capturing the essence of the participants' subjective experiences and the participants' everyday world. Interviews allow participants to convey to others how they view situations and their experience from their own perspective and using their own words (eg: Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In the context of the current study, a young person's own perceptions reflect the nature and meaning of the relationships he or she shares with his or her peers and develops his or her own interpretation of his or her friend or peer's behaviour. Therefore, the use of qualitative method is useful in such a context (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). This is also linked to the emphasis placed by the social constructionist framework on the importance of language in the construction of knowledge (Burr, 2003). The researcher aimed to understand and interpret the meanings of the participants' lived experiences.

The semi-structured interview schedule was selected because it provided flexibility to the researcher to explore any interesting areas that arose during the interview, particularly because of the exploratory nature of this study whilst at the same time

providing a guideline of the areas that the research questions aim to answer (Smith, 1995).

Another main reason for using interviewing as a method was because it provided a good way for developing face-to-face rapport and building trust with the young people at the PRU (eg: Hart, 2013; Michael & Frederickson, 2013). Using interviews is also somewhat reflective of the way EPs work with young people by eliciting their views in individual sessions (Wagner, 2008). Other methods that are often used to investigate friendships were not deemed appropriate, such as questionnaires traditionally used for investigating friendships because young people in settings such as PRUs with SEMH needs tend to be more likely to distrust adults including unfamiliar professionals and because of their tendency to disengage from their learning, they may be less likely to fill in paper work such as questionnaires. There was also the possibility of pupils having learning difficulties such as literacy or attention difficulties, who may be less inclined to want to participate if they were asked to fill in questionnaires.

In essence, the semi-structured interview technique was considered most suitable because it was deemed more personal and confidential rather than employing other techniques such as paired-interviews, which have been used in research on peer relationships. Furthermore, it would not have been appropriate to seek pupils who could be paired together since some pupils may have been at the PRU longer than others and this would likely imply excluding the newer pupils who may not have someone they felt comfortable doing the paired interview with. It would have also likely been harder to gain the views of any pupils who did not particularly have good relationships with their peers. By allowing individual interviews to take place, this allowed a greater variety of pupils to take part (including those who may have a negative view of his/her peers).

The views of both staff and pupils were sought to gain a better understanding of the contextual setting of the PRU in which these relationships take place. As previously mentioned in chapter 2, the researcher takes into consideration Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model and this links with the social constructionist approach in regards to the importance of contextual understanding when taking into account pupils' understanding of their relationships with their peers and friends. The study therefore aimed to investigate one of the 'microsystems' in the pupil's life, that of the PRU setting, which is why the views of staff were also sought. Additionally, gaining views from staff was considered important because working with staff also forms part of the consultation work of the EP. Exploring the views of staff also allowed to identify if there were any similarities or differences between staff views and that of pupils

(eg: Hart, 2013), which could help portray a more holistic picture of peer relationships at the PRU.

Saumure & Given (2012) highlights several features that can help enhance rigor in qualitative research. These include “transparency, maximal validity or credibility, maximal reliability or dependability, comparativeness and reflexivity” (Saumure & Given, 2012, p. 796).

Following these highlighted features, the researcher took some of these into consideration to help strengthen the credibility of the current study. For instance, the researcher tried to ensure transparency throughout the study by clearly describing the research process. This feature, as explained by Saumure & Given (2012) provides an audit trail to allow others to replicate the research if required.

Another consideration that the researcher took into account was to enhance reliability by discussing the analysis of results with other peer to see if similar themes were derived when coding (this is further mentioned in the analysis section of this chapter section 3.6.).

Finally, another feature that the researcher considered was that of reflexivity. The researcher reflected on how she may have influenced the study, for example in regards to her individual personal experiences and cultural background when interviewing the participants. The researcher was conscious that her own ethnic background may impact on the extent to which participants may feel comfortable in responding during the interviews and this was addressed during supervision. The researcher aimed to minimise these possible effects by including warm-up interview questions to help build rapport with the interviewee, including spending time in class prior to the interviews to allow pupils to engage and become familiar with the researcher. In addition, as a trainee EP, the researcher was equipped with the skills learnt from placement on how to build rapport and interact with this vulnerable population.

### **3.3. Development of the interview schedules**

The semi-structured interview schedules were constructed consisting of a range of questions suggested by Kvale (1996), which includes introductory, probing, follow up, direct and indirect. As advocated by Kvale (2007), the questions were also kept as simple and short as possible particularly for the pupils' interview schedules so that they were easily accessible to the young people by avoiding the use of jargon or complex language.

The semi-structured interview schedule also included visual prompts such as scaling and picture sheets (see Appendix A1 & A2) to ask pupils to reflect on other contexts

in which pupils have friends, but this was mainly to help them think about what the meaning of friendship is to them, by encouraging them to think about what is important to them. The purpose of the scaling question (Appendix A1) within the semi-structured interviews was to support the young people by providing an additional visual point of reference for them (eg: Hart, 2013) to identify how well they got along with the pupils at the PRU. These prompts (such as the use of scaling question) were thought to be useful as they are usually techniques used by EPs during consultation and have been found to work well with young people (Wagner, 2008).

#### Context of 'Silver College' (PRU) <sup>1</sup>

The research project took place in a Secondary PRU context (Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4), which is part of 'Silver College'. 'Silver College' consists of three PRUs in an inner London borough, where the researcher was working as a trainee Educational Psychologist (EP) (which will thereafter be named Borough L throughout the thesis). Silver college covers Key Stage 1 through to Key Stage 4 and the research took place on one of the sites for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 pupils. The students who attend Silver College usually exhibit a range of complex behavioural, emotional and learning needs and most have some involvement from Social Care (further details of participants given in table 1 below).

At the time of the research project being carried out, the Secondary PRU had recently moved into a newly constructed two-storey building (since September 2012) on a different site to that of the Primary PRU. Prior to moving into the new building, the secondary PRU had been temporarily co-located to the Primary PRU for one year while waiting for the construction of the current building. The researcher included this information because from some of the staff's perspective, being in a new environment had some impact on staff's ability to manage behaviour (this information was compiled from informal conversations with members of staff).

Aside from its recent move into the new building since September 2012, the Secondary PRU had also undergone organisational changes in management with a new head teacher and assistant head teacher being appointed to the Key Stage 3 and 4 site. A new SENCO was also appointed to oversee the needs of pupils in both the Primary and Secondary PRU. There is also an executive head teacher who oversees the running of the entire 'Silver College' (Primary and Secondary PRU).

In terms of the daily context at the PRU, a typical day at the PRU starts at 9am and ends at 2:30pm with the day consisting of six lessons, each lasting forty-five minutes. Break time takes place at 10:30-10:45am and Lunchtime at 12:15-12:55pm. During

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<sup>1</sup> *Pseudonym given to protect the identity of the PRU*



break and lunch times, all the pupils are able to interact with each other in the cafeteria and playgrounds. Each class consists of approximately 4-6 pupils. Pupils are usually arranged according to Year groups but there may be instances where pupils are grouped according to their SEMH needs. The classes can be reshuffled if dynamics amongst the pupils in a class are not working, especially when newcomers arrive, and this is management of class grouping is usually done by the head teacher.

The following table 1 below gives an overview of the demographics of the pupils attending the KS3 & KS4 PRU.

Table 1. Demographics of Silver College Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 PRU

Context of Silver College 2013/14		KS3		KS4	
		Number	%	Number	%
	Number of students on roll	18	100%	41	100%
	Permanently Excluded	12	67%	31	76%
	Alternative Provision	0	0%	10	24%
	Dual Registration	5	28%	1	2%
	FSM (Free School Meals)	12	67%	18	44%
	Statements of SEN	0	0	2	5%
GENDER	Female	5	28%	11	27%
	Male	13	72%	30	73%
ETHNICITY	WENG (White English)	6	33%	12	29%
	MWBC (Mixed White Black Caribbean)	6	33%	8	20%

	BCRB (Black Caribbean)	3	17%	2	5%
	BAF (Black African)	2	11%	3	7%
AGENCIES	CIN (Children In Need)	3	17%	5	12%
	CP (Child Protection)	1	6%	1	2%
	LAC (Looked After Children)	0	0	1	2%
	YOS (Youth Offending Service)	4	22%	5	12%
Attendance %		71.54%		60.19%	

### 3.4. Procedure

#### Pilot study

A pilot of the semi-structured interview schedule for the pupils and staff was administered to one female pupil in Year 10 and a member of staff (female) to ensure that the questions in the respective interview schedules were clear and that the pace of delivery was appropriate. The pupil in the pilot commented that the questions were straightforward, and the visual prompts helped her think about why she got along well with others and what were the difficulties she encountered. Using visual prompts to ask about the different settings where she had friends also helped her think about what types of friends she had and her relationship with them.

The member of staff interviewed for the pilot found the questions clear and succinct. However, she initially suggested that the scaling question (see appendix 5 for interview schedule for staff) regarding how well the pupils get on with each other, could potentially be difficult to answer due to the variety of pupils at the PRU rather than the question itself and she felt that it made her think of particular groups when answering the interview questions, therefore no changes were made to the original interview schedules of the pupils and staff.

An important consideration that took place during the pilot study was for the researcher to reflect upon the extent of familiarity that should be built with the pupils prior to interviews. As discussed by Mertens (2010), considering the issue of the

researcher as a 'friend' or that of a 'stranger' was an aspect for the researcher to reflect upon when conducting the pilot study. Reinharz (1992) for example, suggested that participants may find it easier to share information if rapport is built with participants prior to interviewing. From the perspective of a trainee EP who had worked with pupils at a PRU before and being aware of the difficulties of pupils with SEMH, it was decided that establishing some rapport would be essential to ensure that pupils felt at ease with the researcher in order to encourage participation and to elicit the relevant information from them during interviews. Consequently, in the actual study, the researcher spent half a day in each class to help build rapport with the pupils. This involved spending time in the class, observing lessons and interacting with pupils informally and helping them with work if they wanted support.

#### Data collection from pupils

Letters detailing information about the research project and request for consent were sent to the parents/guardians of all pupils enrolled at the PRU during the period that the research was being carried out (See Appendix 1). The contact addresses were obtained from the PRU head teacher and all letters were sent from the PRU. The researcher did not take the contacts list details of the participants out of the PRU. As a trainee EP working for the borough in which the PRU was in, the researcher was aware of the importance of being sensitive to data protection. The researcher also discussed with the PRU head teacher and other EP work colleagues and it was perceived that this project could potentially be considered an opportunity to reach out to this excluded group and therefore this was considered as a sufficient rationale to contact the parents/guardians.

To increase chances of response rate, the researcher included stamped envelopes with the researcher's address at the EP office in the borough. A total of forty-three permanently excluded pupils were on roll at the time; Twelve in Key Stage 3 and Thirty-one pupils in Key Stage 4. Of these forty-three letters, only one letter with signed consent was returned to the researcher. Consequently, follow-up phone calls were made to the parents/guardians to gain consent of the parents prior to the researcher going into their class. As mentioned earlier, to help establish rapport and encourage pupil participation in the study, half a day (3 lessons, 45 minutes per lesson) was spent in each class group at the PRU. At the time of the researcher's study, there was a total of eight class groups for permanently excluded pupils (3 groups for Key stage three and five Groups for Key stage 4). Building rapport and encouraging pupils to become familiar with the researcher was done through informal conversations in class, joining in any class activities and offering to help pupils with their work. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to each

class and to pupils who were willing to take part. The participants were asked to come out of class individually to a quiet classroom specifically set up for the interview within the school building. This only took place if consent had already been received from their parent/guardian. The pupil was given the information sheet (see Appendix 2) and asked to read through it. The information was also verbally explained to ensure that the participant understood it in case of any literacy difficulties. They were then asked to sign it before the interview commenced. The time taken for the interviews varied and ranged between 30-45 minutes for each participant (see Appendix 4 for Interview schedule for pupils).

#### Participants: The pupils

The table below gives a description of the demographics of the pupils who were interviewed. A total of twelve pupils took part in the study of which four were girls and eight boys (ranging from Year 9-Year 11). The length of time they had been at the PRU varied between 2 months to 2 years. There was no selection criteria in regards to the length of time the pupils had been at the PRU and both male and female participants were welcome to take part. The researcher expected there would be more male participants (which was the case), because there are more boys than girls at the PRU (as seen in Table 1 above). The reason as to why there were no criteria in selecting pupils according to the length of time they had been at the PRU was because the attendance rate was relatively low and in order to obtain a reasonable sample size, participation would have to be open to any pupils who were attending the PRU at the time. In addition to this, excluded young people can be quite difficult to access as a group because their disengagement with schooling is often one of the main reasons they are in the PRU, therefore the researcher did not impose a restriction on this criteria. Furthermore, it was also thought that not having a selection criteria for length of time at the PRU would ensure a wider range of experiences from these pupils, from those who had only been at the PRU for a few months, to those who had been there for a year or more. It was noted that all participants who took part had been permanently excluded from their mainstream schools. This was purely incidental as was the case of there being more boys than girls at the PRU; there were more permanently excluded pupils than those who had been given fixed exclusions (see Table 1). Boys are generally over three times more likely to receive permanent exclusion and almost three times more likely to receive fixed period exclusion than girls (DfE, 2017), hence explaining the demographics in Table 1 and there being twice more male participants than female participants in the study.

Lastly, all pupils who took part had good spoken English. The researcher did not exclude any pupils who did not have English as their first language because again this would restrict the range of views that this study would have been able to gather. It can also be argued that excluding participants based on their background was not perceived as ethical, especially if these pupils wanted their views to be heard (and had been given parental consent). As mentioned earlier, research has indicated that this group of pupils with SEMH have not been given enough opportunities to voice out their views (eg: Cefai & Cooper, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Pupil name	Gender	Year group	Reasons given by pupils for being placed at PRU	Length of time at PRU
1. Meryl	Female	11	One-off incident (Knife related)	1 1/2 years
2. Selena	Female	10	One-off incident with peer	2 months
3. Sofie	Female	11	Mixed reasons (ran away from previous placement)	2 months
4. Sarah	Female	9	Refusing to follow instructions	6 months
5. Carter	Male	11	Refusing to follow school rules	About 1 year
6. Jack	Male	10	Brought in knife to school	About 1 year
7. James	Male	11	Fight with another pupil	About 2 years
8. Kevin	Male	9	Fight with staff	About 3 months
9. Romy	Male	9	Knife related incident	About 1 year

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms given to protect the identity of the pupils interviewed  
 Due to the small PRU setting, the pupils' ethnicity is not mentioned in order to avoid the risk of identification (particularly for those representing a minor ethnic group). The overall demographics of the PRU are given below.

10. Larry	Male	11	Refusing to listen to instructions	About 1 year
11. Hank	Male	10	Preferred not to discuss	3 months
12. Ian	Male	9	Preferred not to discuss	5 months

#### Data collection from Staff

A letter detailing information about the research project was sent via email to the Head teacher to disseminate to members of staff (see Appendix 3). The researcher also explained the research project at one of the daily staff meetings and asked for members of staff who were interested to contact the researcher. The researcher then sought participants by asking any members of staff who were around in the staff room during break and lunch times whether they wished to participate, and a convenient time was mutually arranged to meet and carry out the interview. The interview took place in a quiet classroom within Silver College and the participant was asked to read through the information sheet before being asked to sign and give consent (Appendix 3).

#### Participants: The Staff

A total of eleven members of staff took part in the study. This included six teachers and five Learning Assistants and the length of time they had been working at Silver College ranged from 6 months to 7 years. One teacher in the sampling also had a managerial role (Deputy head). Participation was open to any member of staff who was in contact with the pupils (Learning assistant or teacher), and there were no restrictions as to how long they had been working at the PRU to ensure a range of views from staff.

<sup>3</sup> Staff	Gender	Role	Length of time working at PRU
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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms were used to protect identity of staff  
 Due to the small PRU setting, class teacher's taught subject is not mentioned in order to avoid the risk of identification (particularly if there is only one teacher for that subject area). The overall demographics of the PRU are given below.

1. Carina	Female	Teacher	7 years
2. Furla	Female	Teacher	5 years
3. Ben	Male	Teacher/Deputy Head	7 years
4. Jordan	Male	Teacher	6 months
5. Adam	Male	Teacher	10 months
6. Rayna	Female	Teacher	10 months
7. Carla	Female	Learning Assistant	7 years
8. Norman	Male	Learning Assistant	6 months
9. Paul	Male	Learning Assistant	8 months
10. Macy	Female	Learning Assistant	6 years
11. Andy	Male	Learning Assistant	6 months

Length of time staff interviewed was working at the PRU:

2 school terms (10 months) - 7 years

### **3.5. Ethical considerations**

Prior to the collection of data for the research study, the researcher completed the Student Research Ethics approval form in accordance with the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) as well as the DECP Professional Practice Guidelines (2002). The researcher completed this by providing a summary of the research study, including details of participants, methods used, data analysis and any specific ethical issues such as informed consent and confidentiality. When the approval from the Ethics Committee of the Psychology & Human Development Department at the Institute of Education (IOE) was received, the researcher then started the collection of data (See appendix 9 for Ethics approval form).

The two key issues below were given particular consideration and below is a description of how these were addressed by the researcher in the study.

#### Informed consent

Following very low response from parents in regards to the letters sent home, the researcher ensured that each parent/guardian of the young person/student was

given a phone call and explained the information about the research study and a record of the phone calls was noted (see Appendix 6 for an example). Phone calls were not initially included in the ethics form approval because the researcher had not expected to receive such low response via the letters. Consequently, the researcher discussed during supervision the decision to follow-up with phone calls to gain consent from parents/guardians.

Phone contacts were obtained from each class tutor (the class tutor first called the parent/guardian first to check if they were agreeable to being explained the study by the researcher). The phone calls were made on site and the contact details were not taken away from the PRU. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that each parent/guardian called was given her contact details should they need to contact her for any further information.

Young people whose parents/ guardians were not reachable by phone or did not agree to their participation in the study were not asked to take part in the interview and this was made clear by the researcher when explaining to each class about the research study to ensure that the pupils were aware of this in order to avoid any of them being upset should they have wished to take part. This was not a problem, as a few pupils whose parents did not give consent did not wish to take part anyway.

It was also explained to the participants that they would be recorded and that if at any point in the interview, they wished to withdraw, they were entitled to do so.

#### Confidentiality

Confidentiality was clearly explained to both the pupil and staff participants. For the pupil participants, this was clearly explained to their parents/guardians in the letters as well as further reiterated in the phone calls that the information shared by their child would remain strictly confidential unless there was an issue that could affect their own safety and that of others, in which case the researcher would have to report to a member of staff. Similarly, this was also repeated both in writing and verbally to the participants and the researcher allowed for questions to be asked prior to starting the interview. They were reassured that their names would not be used in the write up for the study and that they would remain anonymous.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

The interviews were first transcribed verbatim and were analysed using Thematic Analysis following the process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Before deciding to use Thematic Analysis as a method of analysis, the researcher also considered alternative qualitative analysis approaches such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach was dismissed because IPA is underpinned by epistemological assumptions and hermeneutics that do not fit with the aims of the



current study. The aim was to explore themes across the whole data set rather than to understand the experiences of each pupil in detail (Smith, 2004).

Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). This method of analysis was selected for the current study because of its flexibility and this seemed appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The data was analysed according to the phases outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) and a description of each phase carried out by the researcher is given below:

#### Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews with pupils and members of staff of Silver College was recorded with the use of a digital audio recorder and were transcribed verbatim onto the computer on Word Document software. Being part of the interview process and carrying out the transcription of the data allowed the researcher to come to the analysis with some prior familiarity with the data. Following transcription of the data, the researcher immersed herself in the data by reading the transcripts several times and making notes of any meaningful patterns. Initial notes were made next to the transcripts using ‘Tracking Changes’ software in the Word Document of the transcript.

#### Phase 2: Generating initial codes

In this phase, the researcher worked systematically through the data set and full attention was given to each data item. This phase started when the researcher had familiarised herself with the data and had produced a list of initial ideas about the data and what made it interesting.

The process of coding was considered part of the analysis and it consisted of organising the data into meaningful groups.

The coding was done manually by making notes using ‘Tracking Changes’ software in Word Document next to the texts. Any interesting aspects that were likely to become repeated across the data set and become potential themes were noted (see appendix 7 for an excerpt of annotated transcript of pupil interview which shows how the researcher moved from raw data to code).

#### Phase 3: Searching for themes

As described by Braun & Clarke (2006:82): “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”.

In this phase, the researcher had a list of different codes identified across the data set. This phase consisted of organising the codes identified into potential themes.

An important issue which is discussed by Braun & Clarke (2006) in regards to coding is what constitutes a theme and how prevalent the theme must be within each data item and across the entire data set but it is pointed out that more instances of the theme occurring does not necessarily imply that the theme is more important but it should instead capture something essential in regards to the overall research questions.

#### Phase 4: Reviewing themes

This phase consisted of having a look at what themes were relevant to the research questions and whether there was enough data to support them. Some themes required grouping into another overarching theme. For example, for the pupils' data, these themes were categorised under "Facilitators", "Barriers", and "Factors" (see next chapter 4 Results).

#### Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

The researcher checked for the collated data extracts for each theme to ensure that the themes were well defined and named. A brief description of each theme is given in the next chapter in the presentation of findings. It was important to make sure that the content from the data extracts was not simply being paraphrased, but it was possible to identify what was interesting about the data.

To verify the reliability of the coding and themes, the opinion of an independent checker was sought. About fifteen percent of the data (3 interview transcripts) was checked and an overall inter-rater reliability of 90% was found.

#### Phase 6: Producing the report

Phase 6 consisted of producing the report and this phase was done in the presentation of the findings, which is the content of the next chapter of this thesis. The presentation of the results is laid out in the next chapter and the frequency with which the themes come up is also given to provide an idea of how this was analysed. This has also taken into account themes that may not necessarily be most prevalent but contribute to answering the research questions that the study poses.

### **3.7. Summary of chapter**

This chapter provided a rationale for taking the social constructionist view as the epistemological position undertaken by the researcher. It described the methodology

utilised in the current study, which employed semi-structured interviews as the qualitative research method. It was highlighted that due to the exploratory nature of the study, the semi-structured interviews would be the most relevant. The chapter also outlined how the current study conformed to the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Education. Detailed steps prior and during the data collection were given and the researcher outlined how the data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. The following chapter thus gives a presentation of the results of the current study.

## 4. Presentation of Results

### 4.1. Overview of chapter

This chapter gives a summary of the main themes and their respective sub-themes that emerged from the data following the thematic analysis process outlined in the previous chapter (Chapter 3). The main themes and subthemes are summarised below with pupils' data analysed separately from staff's data. Selected quotes from the transcripts of participants are included to help illustrate each sub-theme (ST). The total frequency indicated refers to the total number of participants who gave responses that contributed to the sub-theme.

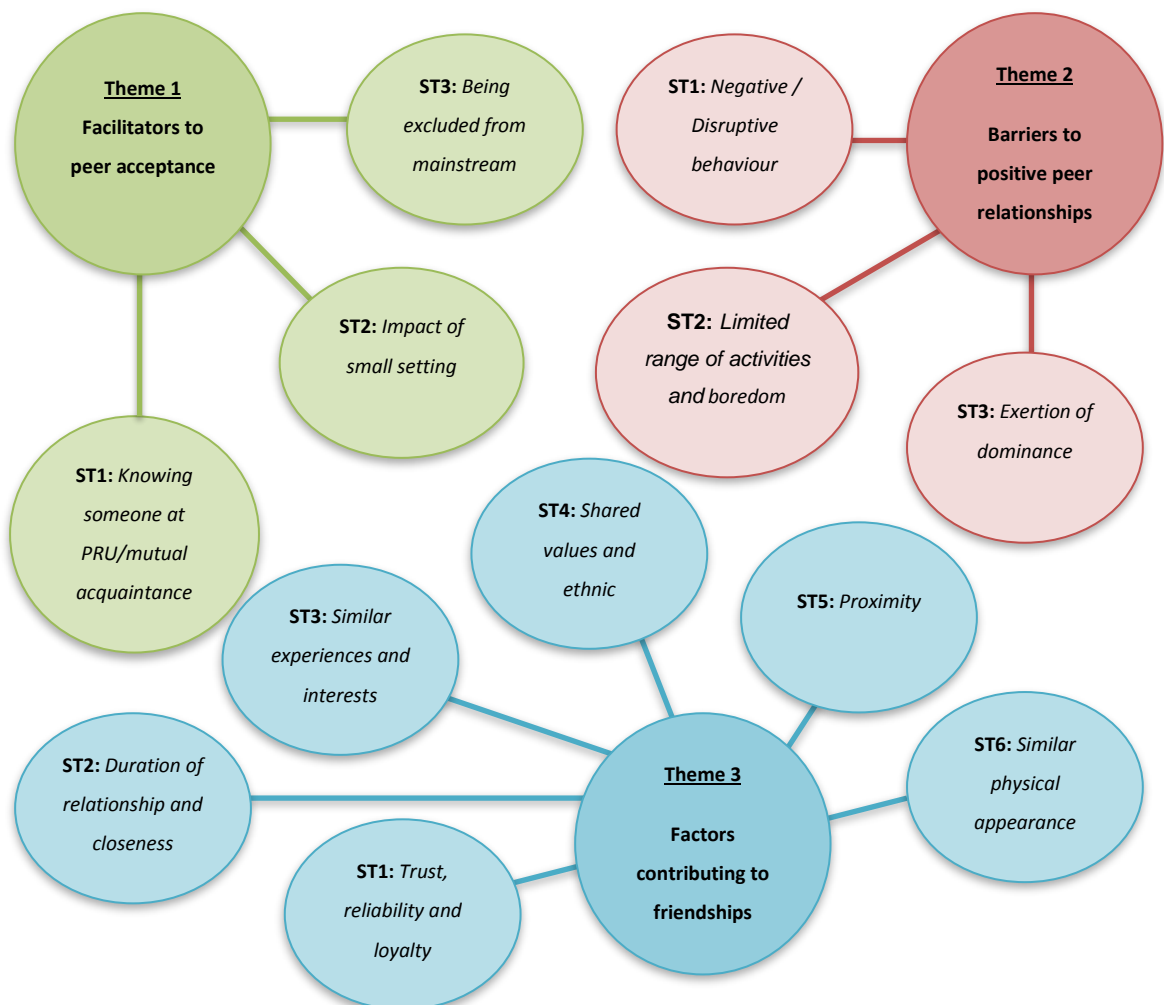


Figure 1. Overview of Thematic map from pupil interview data.

**Research question 1: What are the experiences of peer relationships and friendships of pupils who attend a secondary PRU and who have been permanently excluded?**

#### **4.2. Theme 1 (T1): Facilitators to peer acceptance**

There were several factors that pupils found supportive in helping develop peer relationships and friendships with other pupils at the PRU. Within this theme, there were three sub-themes: Knowing someone at the PRU/Mutual acquaintance, Impact of small setting and Being excluded from mainstream. These are described and illustrated below.

##### **Sub-Theme 1 (ST1): Knowing someone at the PRU/mutual acquaintance**

Knowing someone or having a mutual acquaintance at the PRU helped reassure some pupils when they initially started at the PRU. They talked about knowing someone from their previous primary school, or neighbourhood, or from the mainstream school they got excluded from. Additionally, some pupils recalled that they knew someone outside of the PRU who was related to or knew a pupil at the PRU. This particularly provided the initial common ground to initiate conversations with those pupils and develop relationships with them or to help them become part of a peer group. It was quite often the case that the pupil would know of someone at the PRU before arrival or find out upon arrival that they knew some of the pupils attending the PRU.

*ST1: Knowing someone at PRU/mutual acquaintance (Total Frequency: 6 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST1:*

“I didn’t mind coming here coz my brother’s friend was here and had told me about the place...so it was like yeah whatever, it seemed ok for me to come and getting along with others...” (Romy, Year 9).

“When I came here, I realised that there was someone who was from my old primary school that I had not seen for ages...so we kind of chatted and it was easy to just fit in and get along...” (Ian, Year 9).

“Well I knew L, years before I came here...before I started here, I was absolutely terrified...L was the one who made me come in on the first day and the second day coz otherwise I wouldn’t have come in...I don’t think I would have been happy about coming here if I hadn’t known someone...when I first came here, L supported me around...in his own little way...I know him through my sister...well not my sister but we grew up together...”

(Sarah, Year 9)

“...because I did know quite a few people who actually come here but it wasn’t actually until I got here I realised that I knew so many people from here”

(Sophie, Year 11)

“I was aware that D, my neighbour, came here and so when I was told that I would need to come here, I felt pretty relaxed about it all as I knew D and have been to his house a few times with my parents. I thought even if the other kids did not like me, I would still be able to just hang out with D. I am really glad that D is here as I hate not knowing anyone...”

(Kevin, Year 9)

“The first day I was here, I bumped into F...I haven’t seen F for ages...he used to be part of my gang at school...So I was very happy to see him on my first day here...he looks much taller and bigger now compared to the last time I saw him. F was also happy to see me and he was asking about what happened to some of the people we were with at school...I know I can count on F like old times...”

(Carter, Year 11)

### **Sub-Theme 2 (ST2): Impact of small setting**

This sub-theme highlighted how the size of the school setting could facilitate and speed up the way pupils formed peer relationships and got better acquainted. A few participants talked about how this compared to their previous mainstream setting. One pupil highlighted that she had felt welcome when she started at the PRU and said that the other girls had approached her and offered her to come spend time with them and had told her that if ever she required someone to talk to, she could come to them. She felt this was very different to the way peer groups were in mainstream school. The participants essentially seemed to highlight their appreciation for the intimacy that the small setting provided where they could get to know their peers within a short amount of time as compared to the more impersonal nature of larger settings.

*ST2: Impact of small setting (Total frequency: 5 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST2:*

“here it’s like everyone knows everyone so like before you know it, you already know who is who here and you get to know each other better than if let’s say it was in

mainstream because there's not that many people, you know, people aren't always that friendly when it's a big place."

(Kevin, Year 9)

"it's a small place here, you get like four five of us in each class and so we get to know each other as we're always doing lessons together, in a mainstream school, there was like thirty of us in a class! It's like quite cosy here yeah..."

(Jack, Year 10)

"...M and MK came to me...when I was sitting there and they came to me and said come if you ever want to talk to someone...if ever you need to chill with someone..."

*Selena* highlighted that this would not be the case if she were in mainstream: "No, no way...in mainstream yeah, everyone's got their little groups coz from year 7...we're all one big group, then when it comes to year 8 we're still getting to know everyone...year 9, you've got your group and then in year 10, yeah, you're like, you're still with your group and then in year 11, that's how it is..."

(Selena, Year 9)

"when I come to school in the morning yeah, I know everyone, and we greet each other normally, whereas in my other school I would just go to my group of friends, I wouldn't really talk to all the other people in my class, whereas here, everyone knows each other in class..."

(Sofie, year 11)

### **Sub-Theme 3 (ST3): Being excluded from mainstream**

Being excluded from mainstream school was considered by participants as a reason for sharing a connection with their peers at the PRU because they had all been rejected from mainstream and therefore being amongst pupils who had also gone through this experience highlighted a sense of belonging to the PRU and being accepted by their peers. This was perceived as an initial point to starting conversations and making them feel more comfortable when they joined the PRU.

*ST3: Being excluded from mainstream (Total frequency: 5 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST3:*

"People usually think this place is horrible, but actually I like it here...everyone is like the same...we all got kicked out of school and ended up here...I feel like people get me here...not like in mainstream...I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not..."

(Jack, Year 10)

"I really like it here, I get along well with almost everyone...there's never a dull moment here, every day there are things happening, people have interesting personalities...and we're all in here because we were sent away from mainstream school, so in way we've all been through a similar situation and we understand that"

(Sophie, Year 11)

"When someone new comes yeah, he often will get asked by others why he got kicked out of school, it's like we've been rejected by mainstream and we all share that in common, we know why we are here...it's bit like we have something similar in experience...sometimes the school has been unfair, you know and here after some chats, I found out some other kids also got unfair kicking out of school, yeah..."

(Larry, Year 11)

"I wasn't too sure about the school at first but it's not that bad, kids here, they're alright you know, they didn't feel like they belonged to mainstream, we all got excluded, for whatever reasons, but yeah I guess it's like we have that in common..."

(Carter, Year 11)

#### **4.3. Theme 2 (T2): Barriers to positive peer relationships within PRU**

The second main theme that emerged was factors identified by pupils as hindering the development of their relationship with peers at the PRU. Under this main theme, there were three sub-themes: Negative/Disruptive behaviour, Limited range of activities and boredom and Exertion of dominance.

##### **Sub-Theme 1 (ST1): Negative/Disruptive behaviour**

One of the most cited barriers to positive peer relationships within the PRU was the negative behaviour that pupils perceived certain peers would display. This was explained to be a barrier that would make some pupils avoid those with these behaviours as they perceived them to be difficult to get along with. These negative behaviours, such as getting into trouble and being argumentative were not perceived as favourable traits and one pupil expressed that he did not feel he deserved to be at the PRU and being placed with pupils displaying such behaviour, pointing out that he wanted to return to mainstream. It was noted that his perceived lack of sense of belonging to the PRU was also connected to him having the impression that he did not share any similarities with his peers.



*ST1: Negative/Disruptive behaviour (Total frequency: 5 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST1:*

““Because euh, it is easy to get along with them but, some of them just like talk like nonsense, so then obviously if they talk rubbish to you, you are going to get a bit annoyed, so obviously you can’t get along well with everybody...”

“Talk bad, like shout out, stuff like that, get rude basically.”

(Larry, Year 11)

“A couple of Year 11s, like mess about...“Like, just run around corridors, hit each other, they throw plates and stuff like food. They throw food at each other and stuff...makes it difficult for you to get along with them”.

(Carter, Year 11)

“...they’re different to me, in terms of behaviour...I don’t feel I deserve to be here...some students not all, some students they distract teachers...I want to learn, but sometimes it’s difficult because it distracts me...I want to go back to mainstream”.

(Hank, Year 10)

“I don’t like spending time with F because it seems like every single conversation that you have with her, it’s like she wants to argue with you, she tries to create an argument out of people...but then she’s hardly in school anyway...”

(Sophie, Year 11)

### **Sub-Theme 2 (ST2): Limited range of activities and boredom**

This sub-theme emerged from the interviews with female pupils who commented that the limited range of activities especially for girls could make it quite boring at the PRU. One participant highlighted that activities were sometimes perceived as an outlet to release their anger and was of the opinion that most arguments that happened amongst the pupils were due to boredom. It was expressed that boys had more activities available to them than the girls had and that the girls at the PRU tended to spend time together. This also suggested a possible prevalence of same-gender peer groups at the PRU.

*ST2: Limited range of activities and boredom (Total frequency: 4 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST2:*

"Yeah, that's all it, Table tennis. We, us girls, had to fight for that...like there's never been anything for girls... so I wrote a letter and you know we have that now...a letter so we can have the table tennis club...when we play these activities, we just get the anger out to be honest, yeah... the reason why there is a lot of argument between kids is because they are bored...We are actually bored here, it's like we are celled and it's just same routine...Yeah, a prison cell, it's the same routine all the time, very bored, that's why we are bored..."

(Meryl, Year 11)

"I like playing football and all, so I usually play with the boys because most girls don't play that...but also coz there ain't much activities for the girls around here...there's mostly boys here you know...so...you know for boys it's all easy, they just play football, join an activity and they become friends...for girls, we usually end up sitting around and chatting to each other..."

(Sarah, Year 9)

"...well to be honest, girls don't have many activities like boys do yeah...so we just pretty much stick together and chat most of the time...sometimes though I will play football with the boys..."

(Selena, Year 10)

"there's not many activities around here for girls, mostly boys at this school, I think there's always been more boys here...so I guess they are used to doing the activities for them..." (Sofie, Year 11)

### **Sub-Theme 3 (ST3): Exertion of dominance**

One of the emerging sub-themes that also posed a possible barrier to positive peer relationships was the dominance that some participants expressed they had over others at the PRU. One pupil was expressive in voicing out how she felt that most of the pupils were followers, labelling them as 'dogs'. Another pupil acknowledged that he had a reputation in the Borough L and admitted that it was not a good one and reflected that others tended to be scared of him because of this.

*ST3: Exertion of dominance (Total frequency: 3 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST3:*

Yeah, like they always follow what I do, what the others do, what everyone does and it is so really annoying and that is why, I am not trying to be rude, that's why I treat them the way I treat them...Like I tell them to shut up, walk over them, like the reason

why I was doing that, I wanted to see how they were...that's how I am with people, either I tell you to shut up or come here with me and you do it, that's where I know straight away, you are a dog, you are a dog, like you are a follower, that's what you can do. Like with all my friends, I used to be that girl, that's what I do, not to bully them but to teach them, like I will say straight up to people's face...you need to stop following because right now you are not looking like a girl, you are a dog...and I hate when people follow me, I really do..."

(Meryl, Year 11)

"I think they are probably just scared of me...I think they know about me...like fighting wise...I have got a lot of reputation in Borough L...I wouldn't say it's a good reputation."

(James, Year 11)

"shout the fuck out at them if they annoy me...I won't allow it and I will tell them to their face that they gotta stop their bullshit and stop annoying me...and when I shout, or threaten to punch them, this usually makes them walk away and scared".

(Kevin, Year 9)

#### **4.4. Theme 3 (T3): Factors contributing to friendships**

This was the third main theme that emerged from the Thematic Analysis. There were six sub-themes under the main theme: Trust, reliability, loyalty (ST1), Duration of relationship and closeness (ST2), Similar experiences and interests (ST3), Shared values and ethnic background (ST 4), Proximity (ST5) and Similar physical appearance (ST6).

##### **Sub-Theme 1(ST1): Trust, reliability and loyalty**

Pupils highlighted that the above features were essential when asked what they considered the definition of a good friend consisted of. Four out of twelve pupils highlighted the importance of being able to trust their friend and being able to rely on them when needed. There was also an emphasis on a friend being someone you could confide in, knowing they were loyal and would not tell on you if you told them something or if you had done something.

*ST1: Trust, reliability and loyalty (Total frequency: 4 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST1:*

“someone you can trust and you know who will be there when you need them...someone for example who’s not gonna snitch on ya to others if you told them something...”

(Jack, Year 10)

“They are loyal, that’s it really...They can obviously not get like too jokey that it gets too serious like and going to get into a fight, lame kind of jokes. Obviously they can have joke but I don’t know it depends...Like say, if I have a fight with someone here, well beat them up here...and then they will just tell someone like an adult or a teacher, a snake basically... coz I would not tell someone else if they got beat up, then obviously no, if they beat someone else, I am not going to go to a teacher...say somebody is my friend, I am not going to an adult, I would just deal with it myself...”

(Larry, Year 11)

“If someone’s my friend, I can trust them, I know I can tell them stuff about me and they won’t go telling off nobody... if I’m in a shit situation yeah, I know I can count on them to come help me”.

(Kevin, Year 9)

“Someone you can rely on, someone that like, someone that’s not like proper trouble, someone that won’t bring trouble to you, someone that listens to you, and you can listen to them...uhm someone that’s understanding....”.

Selena (Year 10)

### **Sub-Theme 2 (ST2): Duration of relationship and closeness**

A few pupils emphasised the importance of having known someone for a certain period of time to attain a level of closeness and the ability to develop friendships with them. As suggested by one pupil, this was also one of the reasons why she was not close to anyone at the PRU since she had not known anyone for that long there. Although this is only one pupil’s view, it could partly explain why pupils at the PRU may find it harder to develop close friendships at the PRU given that they are not usually there for a long period of time.

*ST2: Duration of relationship and closeness (Total frequency: 3 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST2:*

“...Other people I hang around with, I have known them for years. The reason why I am not so close to anyone here [at PRU] is that I don’t get attached to people unless

I have known them for at least more than 3 years...I don't think of them as a friend if I have known them less than that..."

(Meryl, Year 11)

Carter (Year 11) talked about the difference between a friend and a best friend and highlighted the duration of a particular friendship as a factor that contributed to their closeness: "I reckon a best friend will be someone like with whom you hang out mostly together for ages..."

"I have been here for nearly three months, but I have not really made any new friends. I say hello to my classmates, but we do not hang out after class. I still hang out with my old friends from my previous school...we go play football after school and sometimes we go to the shopping mall to eat fried chicken. I think the reason I haven't really made new friends here is because I do know enough about my classmates whereas I know the people from my old school really well and we have always done things together for a number of years. I feel more comfortable hanging out with my friends from my previous school".

(Hank, Year 10)

### **Sub-Theme 3 (ST3): Similar experiences and interests**

An important factor for some pupils that helped contribute to the formation of friendships was sharing similar experiences and interests. For one pupil, being able to share a significant experience in her life, such as being in the care system with another pupil meant that she felt understood and considered that person as a friend.

For two boys, having similar interests and being able to spend their time to do activities together was an important part of friendship.

*ST3: Similar experiences and interests (Total frequency: 3 participants)*

*Examples of quotes relating to ST3:*

"...and obviously she knows what I'm going through as well because she's in the care system...yeah we talk about it quite a bit..."

Sophie (Year 11)

"So yeah my friends and I are into the same thing, like playing football, play station and riding the bike around...so basically friends are those who will find the same

things fun, otherwise there's no point really, you just end up getting bored and stuff...".

Ian (Year 9)

"We have things in common...like football, euh we can play together, well just general sports, not necessarily just football, could be any sports...".

Larry (Year 11)

#### **Sub-Theme 4 (ST4): Shared values and ethnic background**

Shared values and similarity in background were mentioned by three pupils as being an important aspect of developing close friendships. One pupil highlighted that sometimes sharing the same background facilitated an understanding of each other. The two pupils who highlighted that they spend time with friends from the same ethnic background were also sensitive of the fact that they did not want to appear racist.

*ST4: Shared values and ethnic background (Total frequency: 3 participants)*

*Examples of quotes relating to ST4:*

"Someone who is moving forward and wants a future and not weary to stand around in front of everyone else...I don't really give respect to any people because a lot of people these days are just the same to be honest to me and they just make me sick. Everyone, well not everyone but the majority of people are the same. Everyone sees something on TV and they want to buy it, it's just how our lives is, but it is hard to get out of that circle as well...Yeah, that's why I say to a lot of people here, I don't like fakes, I like people who are real. Well I can say there are a lot of people here who are generally real but I can't see myself outside of school hanging around because I am a different person outside of school. I am a fun person, like when I go out, I am not being a racist but like the majority of my friends are Black, like... yeah...the people I hang out with, they know, I am African people like African black or this Caribbean thing, they know how it is if you get me...that's why I hang out with people who their cultures are the same like me, we can joke around like, 'Yeah ,mommy girl, oh yeah, my mom beats me' but if a white person was like just there, 'Yeah, your mom beats you?' and will just stop, the music will just stop by itself..."

(Meryl, Year 11) [This quote was clarified with the pupil and she was referring to discussing an example of cultural differences with reference to watching a scene from a TV series with her friend].

"Yeah, they have the same link kind of country, not trying to be racial but...I am not saying liking I will like you more but obviously we have a lot more in common if we are from the same country"

(Larry, Year 11)

"...my best mate, he just gets me, like he's in my neighbourhood, he knows who is who, his mum is friends with my mum and basically, we have the same background you know, like his mum isn't from around here too, I mean I dunno how to explain it, like we just have same family values and all that, I don't have to explain some family stuff about culture and what else..."

(Kevin, Year 9)

### **Sub-Theme 5 (ST5): Proximity**

Proximity was considered as an important factor for pupils who had maintained friendships with peers outside of the PRU such as those who had been at their previous mainstream schools. Some participants spoke about living on the same estate and being able to meet up with peer groups that were from the same area. Proximity was cited as a source of convenience for them to maintain their friendships.

*ST5: Proximity (Total frequency: 3 participants)*

*Examples of quotes relating to ST5:*

"I have kept in touch with some of my mainstream friends, they live really close by to me so I do see them quite a bit and we still hang out..."

(Ian, Year 9)

"I still got friends there [referring to his previous mainstream school]...I saw them yesterday, usually like twice a week..."

*Researcher:* Ok, and do they live around in the estate then...*James:* "They live around, yeah"...*Researcher:* What about the ones who don't live in your estate, do you still keep in touch with them? Like Facebook, email, phone...*James:* "No"

(James, Year 11)

"...my mates live around where I do, not too far from here actually, you know its just easier when you live near each other...don't have to travel far, we kind of hang about same places, we know the local places and all that stuff..."

(Sarah, Year 9)

### **Sub-Theme 6 (ST6): Similar physical appearance**

Only two male pupils out of the twelve participants talked about the importance of their friend having similar appearance as them, such as having the same 'body build'. The pupils indicated that if they had smaller friends than them, these smaller friends might not always be able to defend themselves and might seek their help. The sense of threat to self was therefore considered a possibility if a friend was physically weaker. There was the feeling that having friends who were as big or bigger in physical appearance would provide safety or reduce fear of intimidation by anyone. It was noted that none of the female participants mentioned anything regarding physical appearance being a requirement for any of their friends.

*ST6: Similar physical appearance (Total frequency: 2 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST6:*

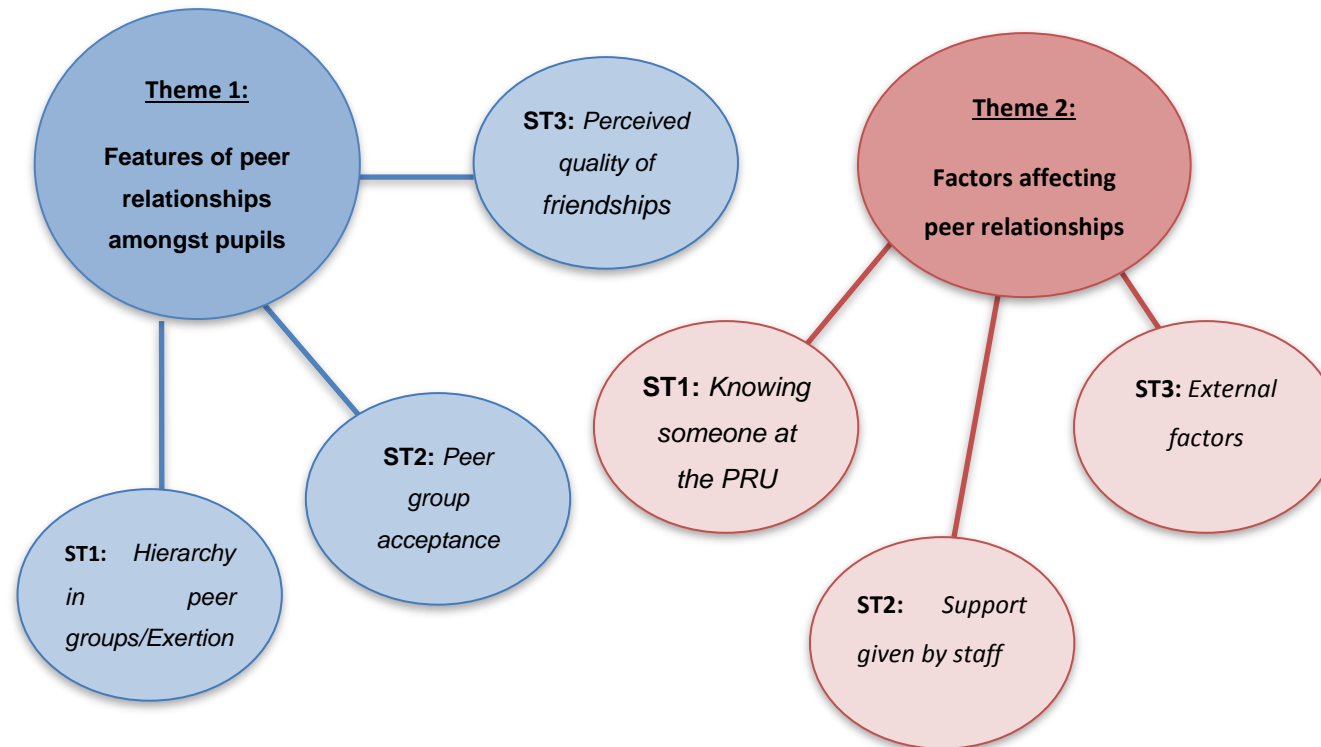
"He has to be someone like me...like a big man...same body build as me...big like batman...well I have got some small friends but because they sometimes they gain issue you have to help me..." (James, Year 11)

"I don't know how to say...it's like my friends, people I hang out with, they can't be weak,...I don't know...it's like for example, I like my best mate...he's cool and stuff but also, he is quite a massive guy you know, like I don't need to take care of him yeah, if he was like...I duno I just feel if some of the small ones were around, they'd get picked easily and whereas T, you know he's a big guy, he can sort things himself..."

(Jack, Year 10)



*Figure 2. Overview of Thematic map from staff interview data.*



## Research Question 2:

### How do staff in a Secondary Pupil Referral Unit perceive peer relationships and friendships amongst pupils at the PRU?

#### 4.5. Theme 1 (T1): Features of peer relationships amongst pupils within PRU

There were several key features of peer relationships amongst pupils at the PRU that were highlighted by staff, and therefore this was identified as the most widely mentioned theme. Within this theme, there were three sub-themes identified: Hierarchy in peer groups/Exertion of dominance, Peer group acceptance and Quality of friendships.

##### Sub-Theme 1 (ST1): Hierarchy in peer groups/Exertion of dominance

The majority of staff interviewed highlighted that there was often a clear hierarchy amongst peer groups of pupils at the PRU. Certain pupils demonstrated highly dominant behaviour that appeared to be prevalent within both Key Stage 3 and 4. Staff mentioned that the relationships within groups were often imbalanced, with one holding a lot of power over the other for example, “so, for example we had two Year 11 students who have just left and one of them you know, he ran the show, he ran the Year 11...”. Several members of staff likened such behaviour to similar systems in nature such as in the ‘animal kingdom’ to convey the notion of a system where there were those who were at the top who exerted dominance over the rest, with the rest following the leaders. Whilst there was a general notion that these hierarchies were sometimes “dysfunctional”, one member of staff admitted that sometimes having a hierarchy is what maintained the peace in these relationships, as the pupils know their place within the peer group. It was also highlighted by staff that these hierarchies were easily noticeable as well because of the small nature of the setting, which made it relatively easy for staff to observe the impact of these behaviours.

*ST1: Hierarchy in peer groups/Exertion of dominance (Total Frequency: 7 participants)*

##### *Example of quotes relating to ST1:*

“...it’s an animal kingdom, so there is always a hierarchy within all of that, so the people in Key stage 3 want to make themselves feel very important, they want you to know, exert their influence and a bit of dominance and the same thing happens in Key stage 4, there is always some three or four people that are you know the heads as such and everyone sort of...follows...” (Macy, Learning Assistant)

“...I mean the ties that are there are sometimes quite dysfunctional, so you got one student with a lot of power over another. They do kind of rely on that relationship but

it's very unequal, so, for example we had two Year 11 students who have just left and one of them you know, he ran the show, he ran the Year 11..."

(Adam, Class Teacher)

"...my theory is a bit like dogs, you know there is a big dog, the followers, you know there is very much...what you see here is very bold relationships between humans, you see more clearly how relations are, who are the owners, you know what I mean about this...so for example you study chimpanzees, you have the male, and here you see it...the bullying...you can see more clearly...if you are in another environment, you need longer to realise how these relations are but here, in short time, you see very clearly who are the ones who are...there are hierarchies..."

(Furla, Class Teacher)

"You can very quickly observe who the leaders are in a class. They are the ones who tend to create the most noise and disturbance in class. It is as if they think they have to do it so that their peers can see who is the boss. They want the others to be in awe of the fact that they can stand up to the adults here and get away with it without any punishment. It is a way for them to build up their image as the alpha-male or alpha-female and create the impression that they are on another level to the rest of the student population. This perception they project of themselves is critical to their status as belonging to the top of the pupil hierarchy"

(Andy, Learning assistant)

"You have those who lead and those who follow. You can see that in the classroom and you can see that on the playground during school break. Some of the kids here are very dominant and I think they are feared by the rest of the pupil population. You don't want to get on the wrong side of them or else there is going to be trouble. In an eco-system populated by kids with behavioural issues, this can make for a volatile environment"

(Rayna, class teacher)

A few weeks ago, a new pupil joined us who was quite physically imposing considering his age. He was also very boisterous and threatened a few of his classmates during his first few days here. The teachers tried to rein him in a bit, but his reputation as a bully was already well and truly established by then among the pupil population. He ruled by fear and you can see the other pupils trying to stay clear of his path.

(Jordan, Class teacher)

## Sub-Theme 2 (ST2): Peer group acceptance

Another commonly mentioned feature of the peer relationships amongst pupils at the PRU that staff noticed was that in spite of the emotional nature of their difficulties, pupils appeared to be accepting towards each other, especially taking into consideration a context in which the group dynamics can be frequently and unexpectedly disrupted following arrival of newcomers throughout the year (that is, pupils excluded from mainstream schools throughout the year). Staff reflected that there appeared to be a shared understanding between the pupils, perhaps because they had all been excluded from mainstream setting. There were also some members of staff who commented that some pupils were equipped with the social skills to approach new comers and facilitate their entry to the PRU.

*ST2: Peer group acceptance (Total frequency: 5 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST2:*

“Hmm, may be, I think there is a bit of a problem but on the whole they seem to be quite good at just naturally, forming sort of friendship groups, yeah...”

(Jordan, Class teacher)

“...there are more vulnerable kids here but they seem to make friends and have friendship groups and it seems that a lot of the time, a lot of the time, students just will ignore...or, there are a vulnerable group of kids maybe and they are just sort of maybe ignored by the masses rather than picked on as they probably would be in a mainstream school...”

(Ben, Class teacher)

“Is it possible for new joiners to integrate a friendship group? I think it is more difficult than in a normal school as these are kids with behavioural issues, but usually everyone does eventually find himself or herself a group that, to a degree, takes him or her in. As in normal school, there are some lone wolves but for the most part, friendship groups do form and pupils find the group most suitable to them and tag onto the group, for better or for worse”.

(Andy, Learning assistant)

“There are definitely friendship groups that form here. Bearing in mind that these are kids with behavioural issues, I think this is quite impressive. Typically, most kids are able to connect and tag along with like-minded peer groups.”

(Paul, Learning assistant)

### **Sub-Theme 3 (ST3): Perceived quality of friendships**

The majority of staff interviewed were not certain about whether the pupils at the PRU were able to make friendships that were of high quality, for example, these friendships could be fragile and break down easily if conflicts occurred. Staff reflected on their experiences of friendships at school to think of any friendships that may exist between pupils at the PRU. The quality of these friendships if they existed were related to several possible reasons, such as the length of time that the pupils stayed at the PRU or knew each other. Similarly, it could also be argued that as the pupils placed in PRUs are more likely to be more vulnerable and have difficulties such as SEMH, this could make it harder for them to manage conflicts with friends and overcome them in order to sustain lasting friendships. The ability to overcome conflict in friendships is considered an essential aspect of friendship maintenance.

Therefore, this sub-theme was mainly about the perceived quality of friendships that these pupils made. According to the majority of staff, pupils are able to get along well together but they may lack the higher level skills needed to form high quality friendships, though there was one or two exceptions of good friendships as illustrated in the last quote.

*ST2: Perceived quality of friendships (Total frequency: 4 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST2:*

“...he had his sort of mate who did all the work for him basically, do anything he said, was terrified of him, you know. So, can you call that friendship? I don't know, they certainly had a relationship, some sort but...”

(Carina, Class teacher)

“Here, at times I wonder, whether it's a solid friendship or it is a friendship of need because you need to have a friend. We have seen so-called friends...I think there are few solid friendships but I think they can turn on each other quickly”

(Carla, Learning assistant)

“I mean don't get me wrong, there are kids who are friends and argue but in a mainstream setting, that ... when I was at school, I was always arguing, rallying my mates , you know when I was a kid but I definitely think that friendships can be

formed here but then also there is a lot of friendships that, for example N and S their friendship brought them now they are the worst enemies”

(Rayna, Class Teacher)

“Sometimes, I wonder if it is purely a marriage of convenience. You need a friend so that you are not alone or picked on by other groups, hence you are willing to make a lot of compromises when trying to find someone to tag along during break time. Because of that, the bond of friendship can be quite fragile in many cases...although I have also seen instances where a common set of circumstance, for example getting constantly bullied by the more dominant groups, has forged some very strong and durable friendships...”

(Furla, class teacher)

#### **4.6. Theme 2 (T2): Factors affecting peer relationships**

This was the second main theme that was identified from the Thematic analysis and included factors that can affect peer relationships positively or negatively at the PRU. Under this main theme, there were three sub-themes: Knowing someone at the PRU, Support given by staff and External factors.

##### **Sub-Theme 1 (ST1): Knowing someone at the PRU**

Staff commented that the majority of pupils knew someone at the PRU upon arrival and this facilitated adjustment to the PRU and helped initial development of positive peer relationships with other pupils. As Borough L is relatively a small borough, some staff mentioned that it was often the case that pupils who came to the PRU would either directly know someone at the PRU or had a mutual acquaintance from outside of the PRU, which subsequently acted as a facilitator for them to get on well with others. It was also an important factor because staff aimed to be aware of those new pupils who might not be familiar with any other pupils at the PRU and therefore might be more vulnerable and may need more support developing relationships with the existing pupils.

*ST1: Knowing someone at the PRU (Total frequency: 4 participants)*

*Example of quotes related to ST1:*

“I would say the majority of them tend to get on quite well, coz they all know each other. You usually find that when a new kid gets referred here, they walk in and they know absolutely everyone, or they know a large majority of the kids here”

(Carina, Class Teacher)

“You are much more focused on the ones who come in on their own because you are just worried about anything happening to them...”

(Macy, Learning assistant)

“I think the newcomers who already know someone here tend to integrate into his new environment more easily and quickly. To be honest, this is no different to other fields of life - for example, someone starting a new job where he already knows some of his colleagues or a new player walking into a football team where he knows most of the existing players. For the kids who do not know someone here already, I think they obviously find it more difficult to adapt, but my experience is that they eventually get there...they just need more time”

(Paul, Learning assistant)

**Sub-Theme 2 (ST2): Support given by staff**

Generally, staff were not aware of any specific support that they formally provided to pupils to support them with developing positive peer relationships. However upon reflection, there were several informal ways in which staff helped support pupils with developing and maintaining positive peer relationships and this was therefore included as a sub-theme under Theme 2.

An important way in which peer relationships were affected in the PRU was with regards to the grouping of classes. The head teacher who knew all pupils at the PRU would usually re-arrange classes depending on how pupils got along with each other and these class groupings could change frequently due to newcomers who could affect the dynamics of each group. Frequent shuffling of these classes therefore indicated how significant peer relationships could be when taking into account classroom learning for pupils at the PRU, in order to ensure that staff spent less time with behaviour management.

Staff also reflected that by modelling good behaviour amongst colleagues, this was also potentially a way by which they encouraged positive peer relationships amongst pupils.

Staff were also aware of the importance of lesson planning and being able to provide differentiated work because due to the low self-esteem of some of the pupils, this could at times create tension and affect the relationships between peers in class, that is, if pupils with low self-esteem find that they cannot do the same level of work as their peers, this might result in difficult behaviour to mask their learning difficulties, which could consequently cause trouble in class. Hence, it was an important area for staff to be particularly sensitive about.

*ST2: Support given by staff (Total Frequency: 4 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST2:*

“...in my experience you know, if you can win the strongest student socially over to you , then the rest will follow and I guess it depends a lot on the dynamics of the classroom and the relationship between the teacher and the students, whether it is possible for them to have a positive influence on each other. I certainly don't think that they would have a positive influence on each other if they were completely left on their own devices”

(Adam, Class Teacher)

“yeah, if you are talking to another member of staff and there are students present , you make sure that you don't swear and that you are polite, you say Please and Thank You. I think it can be tempting for us in an attempt to develop relationships with them, to, I am not gonna say come down to their level but to...”

(Norma, Learning Assistant)

“Yes of course, thinking about how they well they can get along with each other, that's why they are put in a certain group and then if the dynamics are working well then they are changed to a different group”

(Ben, Class teacher)

“Every now and then you will get a kid doing this babyish work - Why am I doing this and so you try, even if this student is much lower ability, you try to disguise their work so that it doesn't seem like it's babyish compared to things that other students are doing...”

(Rayna, Class Teacher)



### **Sub-Theme 3 (ST3): External factors**

This sub-theme was mostly related to factors that occurred outside of the PRU and was mostly in relation to gang culture. The staff who identified these external factors commented that whilst they were usually good at managing potential conflicts between gangs within the PRU, there had been a few occasions where pupils were affiliated to different gangs and could not be placed within the same PRU and therefore during that period, one pupil could not come back. Staff who mentioned this highlighted that it was important for staff to be aware of these possible external factors as these could affect the relationships within the PRU and consequently cause disruption and endanger the safety of other pupils at the PRU. Although only three members of staff mentioned this, it was thought to somewhat be a situation of relevance in regards to the social relationships existing within the PRU and how staff perceived these external factors to have an impact on the peer relationships.

*ST3: External factors (Total frequency: 3 participants)*

*Example of quotes relating to ST3*

“I mean there is the odd situation where they would come from...We have only had one situation this year actually where a boy turned up, who knew a bunch of the boys here in a sort of negative fashion, coz they were in different gangs and as a result they ended up having a fight and that boy could not come back. But that has only happened once. Usually they are all quite alright with each other and they bicker and do what the sort of PRU kids tend to do...”

(Carina, Class Teacher)

“There are a couple of outside factors that have affected you know a few relationships that we have had to deal with, you know, so... where..., just where gang stuff like style in the school has come in and there will be one student who has had a disagreement with another student and then outside forces will get involved and may be have a go at that student outside of school, so that kind of stuff you have to be aware of , obviously”

(Adam, Class Teacher)

“We do have... you know we have stuff that happens in London comes also in the schools, so they come from a group of part of Borough L and this boy from another part of Borough L, different groups so we have had that euh, you know there are

gangs , they can be many things, they can be just a group of friends , so we have had a couple of incidents like that...”

(Andy, Learning assistant)

#### **4.7. Summary of chapter**

In summary, Thematic analysis was carried out on the interview data and three main themes emerged from the pupils' interviews. The first main theme (T1) from the pupils' data suggested that there were facilitators that pupils perceived as helping them being accepted by peers and developing positive peer relationships at the PRU. Some of these facilitators were identified as sub-themes under Theme 1: Knowing someone at the PRU/mutual acquaintance (Sub-theme 1), Impact of small setting (Sub-theme 2) and Being excluded from mainstream (Sub-theme 3).

The second main theme (T2) identified through Thematic analysis were the barriers that pupils perceived as affecting positive relationships with their peers at the PRU. Under this second main theme, there were three sub-themes identified: Negative/Disruptive behaviour (Sub-theme 1), Limited range of activities and boredom (Sub-theme 2) and Exertion of dominance (Sub-theme 3).

Lastly, a third main theme (T3) was noted in the analysis of pupils' data. This was the Factors contributing to friendships. Six sub-themes were considered as factors identified by pupils when considering friendships made: Trust, reliability and loyalty (Sub-theme 1), Duration of relationship and closeness (Sub-theme 2), Similar Experiences and interests (Sub-theme 3), Shared values and Ethnic background (Sub-theme 4), Proximity (Sub-theme 5) and Similar physical appearance (Sub-theme 6).

With regards to the Thematic analysis of staff interview data, there were two main themes that emerged. The first main theme (T1) that emerged consisted of the Features of peer relationships amongst pupils, as perceived by staff. Sub-themes from this main theme included a perceived hierarchy in peer groups, peer group acceptance and quality of friendships.

The second main theme (T2) observed from the staff Thematic analysis was Factors affecting peer relationships of the pupils at the PRU. These included factors such as Knowing someone at the PRU (Sub-theme 1), Support given by staff (Sub-theme 2) and External factors (Sub-theme 3).

The following chapter (Chapter 5) discusses these findings in more detail and in relation to the literature review.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Overview of the chapter**

The following chapter has been structured into several sections. The first section provides a brief overview of what the study set out to explore, followed by a summary of the findings in relation to the research questions posed. An interpretation of these findings is looked at in the context of relevant literature and any similarities in the themes that emerged between the young people and the staff at the PRU regarding peer relationships are also discussed. Finally, the chapter will address the limitations of the current study and future directions, including outlining any implications of the study in relevance to educational psychology practice and to other professionals.

### **5.2. Summary of the aims of the study**

The main purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of pupils attending a secondary PRU with regards to their peer relationships and friendships. Pupils were interviewed about their own experiences of their relationships with their peers and friends and Staff at the PRU were also interviewed regarding their observations of the peer relationships amongst the pupils. Both the views of staff and pupils were gathered as it helped give a richer understanding of the peer relationships at the PRU when considering Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model that puts emphasis on the importance of different systems surrounding the child or young person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Interviewing the pupils about their experiences was important as it is an essential role of the EP to increase awareness of the child/young person's voice. Additionally, by interviewing the staff to find out their views on pupils and their peers, this helped to identify if any support was given to pupils in regards to their peer relationships. As explained, the researcher employed the social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003) and aimed to get an overview of the multiple realities of these peer relationships at the PRU.

It was mentioned previously that even though there has been some increasing research on gaining the views of young people with SEMH, this group of young people remains the least listened to, empowered and liked (Baker, 2005; Cooper 2006) and studies on these young people's views still remain limited (Davies, 2005).

Little research has explored the social experiences of being excluded for these young pupils with SEMH, with regards to whether they maintain their friendships from mainstream schools and whether they are able to develop relationships with their peers at a transitional setting such as a PRU. Consequently, the present study interviewed young people at a secondary PRU in an inner London borough regarding this and staff interviews were also included in order to gain a broader perspective of the proximal environment of the young people's development as highlighted by

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model which was adopted as a theoretical approach in the study.

### **5.3. Research Question 1**

#### **What are the experiences of peer relationships and friendships of pupils who attend a secondary PRU and have been permanently excluded?**

Three overarching themes were derived from the thematic analysis of the pupils' interviews. These were: Facilitators to peer acceptance (Theme 1), Barriers to peer acceptance (Theme 2) and Factors contributing to friendships (Theme 3) and a discussion around these has been laid out accordingly below.

##### Facilitators to peer acceptance (Theme 1)

The research findings from the study indicated that pupils interviewed generally felt accepted by their peers. This finding seemed to reflect past studies on the views of young people who have been excluded to alternative provision, where relationships with their peers at the PRU was perceived as being positive (for eg: O'Connor et.al., 2011).

Identifying facilitators that helped pupils feel accepted by their peers at the PRU might be useful because involvement with the school peer group in terms of peer acceptance and friendship has been suggested as being important to feelings of school belonging (Lubbers et al., 2006; Osterman 2000). Of particular interest, it was noted that a few pupils who mentioned feeling accepted by their peers at the PRU also felt they enjoyed being at the PRU better than being at mainstream school. In contrast, a few pupils who mentioned not getting along with their peers tended to also have a negative perception of the setting and felt that they did not deserve to be at the PRU. There was also the perception of peers at the PRU being different to them. This therefore appeared to support previous research regarding how pupils tend to associate good relationships with their peers as important with regards to whether they felt they belonged at the school (eg: Libbey, 2004).

As mentioned by Osterman (2000), feeling accepted leads to positive emotions such as happiness and contentment, whereas experiencing exclusion and rejection can lead to negative emotions such as loneliness, anxiety and jealousy. Whilst it was not established what their prior experiences were with their peers at their previous mainstream school, it was possible that they felt rejected from their previous school following exclusion and therefore coming into a PRU setting where other peers had

also experienced permanent exclusion made them feel like they belonged to the same group, which could lead to positive emotions (Osterman, 2000).

Research (eg: Newman, Lohman & Newman, 2007) has suggested that young people who perceived peer group membership as being important and had a positive sense of peer group belonging were more likely to have less behaviour problems than those who did not feel a positive sense of group belonging despite perceiving peer group membership as being important. In this respect, this highlights the benefits of feeling accepted for pupils at the PRU and feeling they belonged there. Furthermore, one of the facilitators to peer acceptance at the PRU was the fact that they had all been excluded from mainstream school. Pupils in the study highlighted that this provided them with a common ground to start conversations. It was important to note that although this was the case for most pupils, others conversely still felt they did not belong at the PRU because they did not feel their behaviour at their previous mainstream school meant they deserved to be there.

Though there was a general notion of pupils feeling accepted by their peers, it must be reiterated that getting along with their peers at the PRU did not necessarily indicate that they were able to deepen their relationships with those pupils to become friends with them. As research has indicated, peer acceptance and friendship has been defined as different aspects. It was explained earlier in Chapter 2 that whilst peer acceptance is defined as the extent to which a child or young person is well-liked or accepted (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996), friendship on the other hand is usually considered as a special relationship between two individuals where there is an element of liking and commitment (Hartup, 1993). Therefore, although upon arrival to the PRU, a newly excluded pupil may initially find common ground with others because they have all gone through the process of exclusion, research has indicated that perceived similarities may eventually become less important when friendships are established. There may need more to be more than perceived similarities especially in adolescence for friendships to form (Scholte & Van Aken, 2008).

The facilitators identified above also highlighted the fact that pupils who may not know anyone upon entry to the PRU may be more vulnerable to social isolation at first given that pupils suggested that knowing someone or having a mutual acquaintance facilitated their relationships with their peers. This finding seemed to fit into previous research that indicated that during transition, young people use friendships and acquaintances purposefully in order to support their adjustment to the new school, for example in transition to secondary school (Weller, 2007). Though being excluded and placed into a PRU is not necessarily the same as transitioning to secondary school and likely takes place under more stressful conditions, it can be argued that the process of being placed in a new setting such as the PRU is

nevertheless a process of transition, albeit less anticipated than a secondary school transition would be. By identifying with someone familiar or a mutual acquaintance, this appeared to facilitate the adjustment of the pupils into the PRU as being accepted by peers can help accelerate the adjustment process.

Findings also indicated that one of the facilitators to peer acceptance was the small setting of the PRU. This finding does seem to fit with previous studies (eg: Hart, 2013) that indicate that pupils with SEMH, who found it difficult to cope in mainstream schooling preferred the small setting of the PRU. In regards to developing peer relationships, this appeared to help them to get to know most pupils at the PRU relatively quickly. It can however also be argued that with it being a small setting, dynamics of the relationships may change quickly because new pupils can enter at anytime of the year. If the needs of the pupils with attachment difficulties are considered, this can be quite difficult because just when they may start to trust certain peers they suddenly need to develop relationships with newcomers who arrive unexpectedly. This therefore gives rise to the question of how appropriate the setting of a PRU really is in terms of providing stability for pupils with SEMH/attachment difficulties.

#### Barriers to positive peer relationships (Theme 2)

The research findings from the study indicated that whilst most pupils interviewed generally accepted and felt accepted by their peers, some identified barriers to positive peer relationships and peer acceptance within the PRU. As described in Chapter 4 (Results), these perceived barriers include: Negative behaviour, Limited range of activities and boredom and Exertion of dominance. These barriers appeared to indicate what pupils found difficult when considering what prevented them from getting along and developing positive relationships with their peers.

As expressed by these pupils, peers with disruptive behaviour, that is, with perceived poor social skills were considered to be difficult to get along with, with a few participants mentioning that these peers might affect their chances of reintegrating into mainstream school. As explained by one male pupil, it was important to note that he felt a lack of belonging to the PRU and that he did not feel he “deserved” to be there. He also perceived a lack of similarity between him and his peers and highlighted that he did not have friends at the PRU. Previous research (Ray, Cohen, Secrist & Duncan, 1997) has identified negative behaviour such as aggression and lack of poor social skills as traits (factors) that affect whether children and young people accept their peers.

Albeit this was the view of only one young person, this to a certain extent echoed previous research that suggested the importance of peers in creating a feeling of

school belonging (Osterman, 2000). In the particular case of this pupil, the perception that he did not resemble or feel connected to his peers also seemed to be tied to his perception of not belonging to the PRU. It was also worthy to mention that this pupil had also recently come into the PRU and although most pupils had willingly explained why they were excluded from mainstream school, this pupil told the researcher he preferred not to say why he had been excluded (the researcher respected his wish and did not probe further). It is possible that due to the recent event of his exclusion, the pupil was still coming to terms with the exclusion and had not yet settled well into the PRU. It is also worth mentioning that the pupil in question had only recently arrived to the UK and although his spoken English was relatively good, it can be speculated that there could have been some cultural differences into settling into a mainstream school in the UK. This issue is mentioned because it seemed that pupils such as him, who were perhaps still new to the PRU and did not know anyone prior to or upon arrival (one of the mentioned facilitators to peer acceptance earlier) may be more prone to feelings of isolation.

Aside from this newcomer and another (who had both been at the PRU for under six months), all other pupils interviewed were at ease with disclosing the reasons why they had been excluded from mainstream school, perhaps because they had become better adjusted to the PRU context over time and had come to terms with the reasons why they had got excluded (although two female pupils who had shared their reasons for being excluded had only been at the PRU for two months). Whilst there was no clear differences between the views of pupils who had recently started at the PRU versus those who had been at the PRU for a longer time in terms of peer relationships, it can be suggested that those who had been at the PRU for longer were more likely to know their place within the social dynamics in the PRU as opposed to those who just arrived. Even if the pupils did not necessarily express this, this was pointed out by staff who were able to observe how pupils would form hierarchies.

As discussed earlier, as young people enter adolescence and peers play a bigger part in their life, young people lacking social support tend to be associated with a higher risk of negative feelings such as loneliness, which could contribute to poorer mental health (eg: Crick & Ladd, 1993).

Even though this is the view of one pupil in regards to how he felt disconnected to the PRU and his peers, it is important to draw attention to this firstly because he may not be the only one within the PRU with such feelings of isolation, considering that other pupils who did not take part in the study may be struggling even more with their social relationships. Secondly, because these are essentially the young people who require the most support from the adults around them such as the PRU staff, the researcher thought his perspective was worth highlighting.

Reflecting upon Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model and upon the systems around this young person, one can perceive that there had been likely influences greater than within his microsystem, for example when taking into consideration the extent to which cultural influences might have been involved given his relatively recent arrival in the UK. Although the researcher could not discuss particular pupils interviewed with members of staff due to confidentiality considerations, it would have been interesting to find out how much background information the PRU received from the secondary mainstream school he was excluded from. For example, in an Ofsted (2007) report, it was found that even though there were some successful PRUs with good systems in place, all of them commented having received too little information about the pupils from their mainstream schools. It has been commented by some (eg: McCluskey, Riddell & Weedon, 2015) that the process of integration has become perceived more as an issue of whether it is convenient for the education settings involved, which has partly contributed to the low reintegration rates.

Under the same main theme, an important finding which arose was that of several female pupils who perceived a lack of activities and consequent boredom to be the cause of poor peer relationships at the PRU. Historically within the context of this particular PRU, there only used to be male pupils until recently when they started to get more girls placed there. The exclusion rate for boys is higher than that of girls across the country (DfE, 2017). In the opinion of one female participant, boys were perceived to have more activities put in place for them, whereas girls did not have as many team bonding activities.

The views of the pupil are also considered to be insightful as this could help staff reflect and develop more activities that could develop positive relationships amongst girls, or activities that could also motivate them to participate with boys such as outdoor activities (for example in the previous PRU the researcher worked in, some gender-neutral activities which appealed to both genders included horse riding, rowing and gardening). This is also in line with some research that indicates that pupils who are disengaged from education tend to enjoy activities outside the classroom or life skills activities that have relevance such as cooking (eg: Cefai, 2008).

According to the female pupil in question, when pupils were bored and did not have an outlet to vent their energy and anger, this often resulted in them turning onto each other at the PRU. Again, despite this being the view of one particular pupil, it was nevertheless a rather eloquent insight into how one pupil rationalised any difficult behaviour that occurred amongst pupils. It has been suggested previously that gaining excluded young people's views can help them reflect upon ways things can improve and encourage them to have more ownership of their behaviour (Hapner & Imel, 2002; Kroeger et al., 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2006). In this particular case, the



pupil in question did indeed explain that she wrote a letter to staff to ask for whether they could get table tennis as an activity. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory states that whilst the child's development is to some extent impacted by the multiple layers of environment systems surrounding him/her, it must also be acknowledged that the child/young person herself is an active participant exerting influence on her own environment. With this taken into consideration, it would seem encouraging these young people to share their views regarding what helps with their peer relationships can be indeed an important tool for the adults working with them in terms of developing systems in place such as recreational activities to encourage positive relationships to flourish.

Lastly, a factor that was considered as a potential barrier to relationships with peers was that of perceived dominant behaviour. Participants who mentioned this factor suggested that their own behaviour was perceived as a threat to some of their peers and this often hindered others in approaching or developing close relationships with them. Interestingly, the fact that these pupils were so willing to express their views about their perceived power over others in the interviews could in itself indicate that it was something that they felt was a positive trait to possess in a context such as the PRU. This revelation can be reinforced through the view of one pupil who said that he had a certain reputation, not only within the PRU but within the borough (one that incited fear in others according to him). This perceived dominant behaviour can be linked to what staff expressed (discussed further in later section) regarding perceived hierarchy amongst pupils within the PRU and may in itself serve a purpose for these pupils within a setting where they feel that a sense of dominance hierarchy might be essential. While it is typical in most social contexts to have a social hierarchy, previous research has also indicated that during uncertain times, such as transitions to secondary school, where social hierarchy is not yet clearly defined, the social context may be particularly vulnerable to expressions of aggression (Merten, 1997; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Strayer & Noel, 1986). This makes it even more particularly relevant to the PRU context where pupils enter throughout different times of the academic year due to exclusions taking place unexpectedly (eg: Yell et al., 2009)

In such context as the PRU, dynamics amongst pupils are likely to change often due to new comers, which could consequently cause fluctuations in the social hierarchy of these pupils. It would seem understandable that in such situations, being perceived as dominant and being perceived as aggressive (as expressed by the male participant), may be deemed useful in order for him to maintain a status of dominance in the context of fluctuating dynamics (possible strategies to address this will be explored further under the themes gathered from the staff interviews as they also came up with similar views in regards to the dominance issues).

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, if Selman's theory of social perspective-taking is considered in this context, it can be argued that pupils displaying negative behaviour may have not yet developed the appropriate social-perspective taking skills required in order to understand the views of others, which may result in more conflict. Selman (1980) implied that although his stages of development were in relation to age, individual differences also had to be taken into account. In the case of pupils with SEMH needs, it is possible that these young people may present younger cognitive abilities than their peers without SEMH. It could also indicate poorer quality friendships where there are more negative features of friendship such as conflict, rivalry and dominance (Berndt, 2002; Berndt, 2004).

However, that said, this theory only explains the poor social skills of the young people from the within-child perspective and a discussion on staff support regarding how staff manage behaviour will provide a better picture as to the relationships amongst the pupils (which will be looked at under the staff themes) if we take into account Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model.

### Factors contributing to friendships (Theme 3)

An important theme that emerged was the factors that influenced young people at the PRU when making friends or when reflecting upon their current good friends. This was either with other peers at the PRU or with young people outside of PRU. These factors seem to fit into previous literature (eg: Ladd & Kchdenderfer, 1996) with sub themes such as trust, reliability and loyalty being cited as essential traits for good friendships to take place and remain stable.

It was an important criteria for some young people that they had known the person for a long period of time and most of the best friends they described had been part of their life since childhood (mostly living in the same neighbourhood and/or their parents knowing each other's' parents). Although it could be deemed presumptuous given the small sample of participants, it could be suggested that pupils who are placed at the PRU tend to have difficulties with behaviour and social relationships and therefore it could be implied that for this particular group of vulnerable young people, a longer period of time may be necessary for some to be able to develop that trust in order to form relationships. Consequently, this could also explain why certain pupils may find it more difficult to develop stable and good friendships at the PRU especially if they are not placed there for a long time or they do not know for how long they will be there for. Reflecting upon Bowlby's attachment theory, these young people are likely to have difficulties in establishing relationship with others if they have had insecure attachments earlier in childhood. This suggests that they

may have a lower sense of security and trust in their establishment of new relationships.

Although the length of time was important for some to develop good friendships, for a few pupils, it was also helpful to have had similar experiences. Particularly worthy of mentioning, one female pupil recounted how she became friends with someone at the PRU as they both had gone through the experience of being in foster care and moving homes frequently.

In addition, although this was highlighted by only two male pupils, it seemed significant to mention that these two boys felt that having friends of similar appearance was important, that is, having similar body build as them because any friends who were physically smaller might be perceived as weaker and requiring help in the event of a fight with someone. This finding also seemed to raise the issue of whether the physical appearance of a friend was taken into consideration due to experiences of threats encountered previously and could also be linked to what staff mentioned regarding the dominance in peer relationships. This does connect to some of the literature in regards to boys' friendships being perceived as being less intimate than those of girls. There is some evidence (eg: Chu, 2005) to suggest that boys may refrain from developing close intimate friendships, not because they do not want to, but because of the masculine stereotypes of what male friendships should represent. In a similar manner, the views from the male participants mentioned also suggest that by having a friend who is of bigger build, this can enhance their perceived dominance and masculinity even if they might discreetly wish to establish close friendships with peers irrespective of physical appearance but rather based on other aspects.

#### **5.4. Research Question 2**

##### **How do staff in a Secondary Pupil Referral Unit perceive peer relationships and friendships amongst pupils at the PRU?**

Interviews with the PRU staff revealed two main themes. The first main theme was about what staff perceived were the features of peer relationships amongst pupils at the PRU. Staff noted that within the PRU context, there tended to be a hierarchy within the peer groups of pupils. This finding could be linked to what was found within the analysis of the pupils' themes where some pupils voiced out that exerting dominance towards their peers could be a barrier to positive peer relationships. Whilst staff reflected that this hierarchy appeared to serve a function in terms of maintaining order within the PRU, pupils perceived that exerting dominance could be a barrier to positive peer relationships, though this in itself also appeared to serve

a purpose as those pupils felt that their “reputation” was one that incited fear by others and it may be possible that for them, exerting dominance towards peers was to gain status.

Although they mentioned the hierarchy that existed within the PRUs, staff did not comment on any clear strategies or systems in place to help identify and support any pupils who were less likely to be dominant. Given that this theme also came up in the pupils’ interviews and as mentioned earlier, pupils tended to be open about their perceived dominance, this could be used to encourage pupils with more ‘dominant’ personalities to a positive purpose, for example, helping them discover any potential leadership qualities by for example being a peer buddy to new pupils who come into the PRU. This role can be particularly applied for pupils who have been at the PRU for longer and with whom staff have developed trusting and good relationships with.

It was rather noteworthy to point out that certain members of staff did not appear to disapprove of the dominance displayed by some pupils, for example, one staff members openly reflects that “...it’s an animal kingdom, so there is always a hierarchy within all of that...” as a matter of fact, rather than an area of concern. Another quote by a different member of staff expressed “...my theory is a bit like dogs, you know there is a big dog, the followers,so for example you study chimpanzees, you have the male, and here you see it...the bullying...”. Albeit only two members of staff used analogies of animals to illustrate the relationships the pupils have, the researcher reflected that this understanding of social dynamics on their behalf may have implications on how much they attempt to dissolve these hierarchies. It could be that the members of staff were not sufficiently well-trained to deal with the social relationships in place at the PRU. Considering this through the lens of the Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystemic model, if pupils are not being taught the appropriate social skills at the PRU by staff, this can to some extent explain how successful the reintegration will be once they are placed into mainstream schools. It may be that the dominant pupils at the PRU are not able to re-adapt their behaviour to fit into mainstream settings where rules may be stricter and where this behaviour is not perceived acceptable. Hence the impact of the PRU staff and systems they have in place (or lack thereof) may consequently affect the child’s reintegration.

Despite the previous feature of hierarchy/exertion of dominance taking a possibly negative tone, another more positive feature of peer relationships that was noted was that pupils generally tended to be rather accepting of each other. Some staff who had worked in mainstream school prior to working at a PRU mentioned that pupils at the PRU seemed to be more accepting of each other, which also appeared to echo what was found from the thematic analysis of pupils’ interviews, where some pupils explained that their peers appeared to be more understanding of each other,

for example feeling accepted to a certain degree because they had all been excluded from mainstream school and may feel a common sense of rejection.

In this particular study, it was noted that peer acceptance had a slightly different interpretation from the traditional definition of being well-liked. Peer acceptance in the current study seemed to imply that whilst pupils may or may not necessarily be well-liked by peers, they have an underlying understanding towards each other and this can be considered as a particularly PRU context-specific phenomenon for these pupils who have all been excluded. These pupils have essentially shared a common experience of rejection from their previous mainstream schools. It was particularly worth highlighting that some members of staff acknowledged that despite these pupils each had their own SEMH needs, they were able to get along relatively well.

It can be implied that such peer acceptance may in essence be quite peculiar in contrast to mainstream settings where pupils may not have shared the experience of being excluded from schools. Having this experience in common and being around others with SEMH needs may give these young people a perception of normality and belonging in contrast to mainstream settings where they may have been perceived as different when compared to their typically developing peers who did not have SEMH. This perception of belonging and not being outcast can to some extent explain the notion of “peer acceptance” that exists at the PRU.

Although the staff felt that some pupils were able to form appropriate peer relationships, they reflected that the quality of friendships made within the PRU amongst pupils were not necessarily stable and could fluctuate. This was perceived as being due to their immature social skills where pupils were possibly not well-equipped enough to deal with conflict resolution. This can be related to research on quality of friendships which states that pupils in poor quality friendships may not be able to negotiate the boundaries and conflicts that occur, and this may result in the dissolution of the relationship (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011).

Conversely if young people can manage these conflicts, the friendship can become stronger and this also helps develop the young person’s social skills (Woodburn et al., 2005). Considering the research on young people with insecure attachments, this rests upon their difficulty with building and sustaining lasting relationships. Again, when these were mentioned, little was elaborated in terms of how staff dealt with this. It was also interesting to note that within the range of staff interviewed, some participants were more confident than others in dealing with difficult situations. For example, although there appeared to be no formal guidelines in place for these staff to follow with regards to managing peer relationships, some staff had commented using informal ways such as modelling good relationships with their own colleagues. On the other hand, with some other members of staff, there was the impression that

because no formal systems were in place, managing peer relationships may not have been a priority for them.

A second main theme emerging from the interviews with staff was identified as the factors that staff perceived to affect the peer relationships of pupils at the PRU. Under this theme, three sub themes were analysed: Knowing someone at the PRU, Support given by staff and External factors. Staff reflected from their experience that most pupils who came to the PRU tended to know someone or have a connection with someone at the PRU, which they partly explained was due to the fact that borough L was relatively small, and people often knew each other. They perceived this as a factor that could affect peer relationships either positively or negatively, for example, if pupils knew someone at the PRU upon entry, this could facilitate adjustment, something which was also noted by the pupils themselves, emerging as a facilitator to peer group acceptance. However, in addition to being perceived as a facilitator, a few members of staff (who had been working at the PRU for a long time) highlighted that knowing someone at the PRU could also be perceived as a barrier because there had been a few occasions where pupils from different conflicting gangs had been at the PRU and this had been a problem because they could no longer take in one of the pupils due to safety reasons. Therefore, in the staff's point of view, unlike the pupils', knowing someone at the PRU was not always necessarily a facilitator but rather a factor as it could have either a positive or negative impact on peer relationships. It must be mentioned however that most of the time, knowing someone was perceived as helpful rather than as a negative issue (instances of pupils being member of opposing gangs were seen to be relatively rare). In such circumstances, it could also be argued that knowing someone at the PRU upon arrival could facilitate a pupil's acceptance status if for example they were connected to a young person who was perceived as dominant at the PRU by his or her peers.

Another factor that was considered as impacting on peer relationships was the support provided by staff. Most staff did not think that there were any formal support systems to help pupils with peer relationships, however when asked to reflect upon any informal ways in which they helped facilitate pupils' peer relationships, some staff referred to informal ways such as modelling good peer relationships amongst themselves as staff members when in front of pupils.

Most importantly, an apparent system that facilitated pupils' relationships with each other was the grouping of classes, where management would observe and evaluate which pupils would get along together and place them in class groups. Given that in PRUs, new pupils may be placed at the PRU throughout the year, this also meant that the dynamics of the group could frequently be affected and therefore reshuffling of the pupils in groups was often done to accommodate for facilitated relationships. Though this may be perceived as a way in which staff tried to facilitate peer

relationships, it may be questioned whether this helped develop and improve pupils' social skills to interact with those with whom they find it difficult to. It could be argued that placing pupils in groups which are meant to be easier in terms of peer relationships could also mean that they were not being taught to deal with facing and resolving difficulties with peers of different personalities, something which may make the reality of returning to mainstream school harder given that in mainstream schools, classes are not usually grouped according to the dynamics between the pupils but rather on age and ability.

### **5.5. Limitations of the study**

In reflecting upon the process of carrying out the current study, several limitations were identified. Firstly, it is acknowledged that the current study took place in one secondary PRU in a small inner London borough and therefore findings from the study should be considered in relation to the specific context of the PRU as the characteristics of the PRU itself and of the participants may vary from those of another PRU or from an outer London borough.

The sample of participants was relatively small, and it may be possible that their views were not reflective of the views of other excluded pupils and staff working at the PRU. The pupils who decided to take part in the study did so voluntarily and this may suggest that they may have better social skills (for example, agreeing to interact with the researcher who was an unknown adult to them) and may also be possibly more engaged at school than those who refused to take part. This could have an impact on their social relationships and their views and experiences of them compared to other pupils who did not take part and who might be struggling more with their relationships with peers and might be the most vulnerable in terms of social isolation. Furthermore, it is possible that the participants who took part and whose parents or guardian gave permission to take part in the study may have been in better home circumstances as compared to those parents or guardians who refused permission or who were not responsive (Michael & Frederickson, 2013). Despite the fact that the findings cannot be generalised, it has been argued (Yardley, 2000) that qualitative research aims to contribute to current research knowledge instead. In this case, the study has raised awareness of the importance of taking into account the views of this group of vulnerable young people in relation to their social relationships following exclusion from mainstream school.

Another possible limitation of the study was that there was no specific criteria of the minimum time length pupils needed to have been attending the PRU to take part in the study. This may have had an impact on how close they may feel with their peers if they had only spent a short time at the PRU upon the time they were being

interviewed. However, because this group of young people can be difficult to reach out to, it was believed that adopting a time length criteria would further impose a restriction to the number of participants willing to take part. The researcher also contemplated that within the context of the PRU, there would likely be pupils starting at the PRU at any time throughout the year and therefore this would give a more varied and realistic picture of excluded pupils' experiences with their peers by essentially immersing into their constantly fluctuating social context. The benefits of allowing participants that have been at the PRU irrespective of the length of time spent there was therefore considered to outweigh the disadvantages of having a specific criteria in regards to the duration the pupil had been attending the PRU.

Taking a social constructionist perspective, the researcher also remained conscious throughout the research that her experiences and background could have influenced the analysis of the data and therefore ensured to minimise this by discussing with peers and research supervisors throughout the process.

#### **5.6. Future research directions**

The findings from the study provided some insight into the views of staff and pupils at a PRU regarding the peer relationships of permanently excluded pupils. Further research could also involve parents' views of their children's peer relationships and friendships to gain a wider understanding of social relationships that may exist out of the school context. In taking into account Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic model of the different systems influencing the child, the current study focused on predominantly the adults within the context of the school.

Parents of the pupils at the PRU who took part in the study were also particularly difficult to reach and to gain consent from them to allow their children to take part in the study; this required the researcher to carry out repeated phone calls before being able to reach them and gaining their consent. The researcher was also able to reflect afterwards that initially sending letters to the parents/guardians may have received low response because the possibility that some parents/guardians may themselves have literacy difficulties should not have been dismissed. Therefore, when considering working and gaining access to this vulnerable group of young people, the researcher reconsidered that similar sensitive awareness should have been anticipated when reaching out to parents/guardians.

Further expansion of this topic could also include gathering information from the mainstream schools where these pupils were excluded from to get a better understanding of their social experiences prior to the PRU context. For example, a



case study of one pupil's social journey from mainstream to the PRU could be examined.

Lastly, though this research study focused on the views of permanently excluded pupils, it would also be worthy to explore the views and experiences of pupils who may have been on a fixed term exclusion at the PRU to identify whether their views may differ from pupils who have been permanently excluded given their time at the PRU is limited unlike permanently excluded pupils who may not know how long they will be spending at the PRU.

### **5.7. Implications of the findings for EP practice**

The results from pupils' interviews identified above highlighted the fact that pupils who might not know anyone upon entry to the PRU may be more vulnerable to social isolation at first given that pupils suggested that knowing someone or having a mutual acquaintance facilitated their relationships with their peers. Most research has investigated the difficulties of transitioning from primary to secondary school, but it must also be highlighted that for pupils who have been excluded from mainstream school, there may be a much more challenging transition to a PRU due to the unexpected change of schools and, at times, lack of support from the mainstream school in supporting the excluded pupil's transition to a PRU (in comparison to the usually expected support provided to pupils transitioning from primary to secondary schools). As highlighted by Rae (2014), there are many potential difficulties that can occur during transition from primary school to secondary school for pupils with SEN and complex needs. Although there may be some differences, for example meeting a larger cohort of pupils and staff as a student would when transitioning from primary to secondary mainstream school, it may be equally as challenging (if not more) for a pupil to be placed in a PRU where there is a smaller number of pupils and staff compared to mainstream schools. Being in a PRU typically leads to more restricted choices when selecting friends and possibly intensifies dynamics given the small environment (as found in the results of the study, the size of the setting was also considered a factor affecting peer relationships). Hence, factors such as these should be taken into consideration when a pupil has been excluded from a mainstream school and placed into a PRU.

Because EPs help support the inclusion of the most vulnerable pupils, EPs could act as facilitators between mainstream schools and PRUs, as well as coordinate any information available from other agencies. In the process, EPs can help address anxieties felt by pupils transitioning from mainstream school to the PRU and facilitate communication. EPs could also train staff at the PRU with regards to supporting the new pupil who has been excluded. For example, Rae (2014) recommends providing

student resources to teachers on how to help pupils cope with change and this programme could be adapted and implemented into the PRU programme of induction to new students.

EPs work at various levels: individual, group and systemic levels. Kolbert & Crothers (2003) discuss various ways on how staff can be trained to support young people vulnerable to dominance hierarchy, for example helping them identify who is more likely to reciprocate their friendship (usually those who share similar status in the dominance hierarchy). This could consist of one of the systemic ways in which the EP can work.

Additionally, EPs can play a role in training school staff on these psychological theories of friendship. From the current study undertaken, it seemed that perhaps staff might not understand the importance of peer relationships and how it can have an impact on school outcomes. EPs can therefore provide information to staff on the benefits of research on the positive impact of peer relationships as it also appeared that a few staff were focused on achieving academic outcomes.

They can take part in developing systems at the PRU for identifying particularly vulnerable pupils upon placement at the PRU and help run social skills groups for those who are struggling to fit in. Furthermore, EPs can encourage staff to think about more detailed information regarding their placement at the PRUs, for example, gathering information from current pupils at the PRU to reflect on their experiences and identify issues that they felt helped them or they found difficult upon their arrival, for instance, this could include the use of a welcoming pack for pupils new to the PRU in a adolescent-friendly format.

Furthermore, EPs working in PRUs can also carry out solution-focused approaches when working with groups of staff to particularly identify as a group the possible ways in which they can address the relationships of these pupils and how these can be implemented as guidance for staff, should there be any doubt on how to support peer relationships amongst pupils.

Although this is an issue that is not always within the control of the EP, the local authority can ensure that pupils who are excluded have one constant professional (possibly an EP) in supporting the transition. EPs can also ensure that if they are not working at the same mainstream school/PRU that the pupil was attending, that any information from the school or allocating EP who was following the pupil can be obtained.

### **5.8. Implications for the PRU staff/ management**

As mentioned, staff can help support pupils prior to their arrival by gaining extended knowledge from the pupil, for example regarding if they knew anyone from the PRU.

Mainstream schools who exclude pupils should bear greater responsibilities in helping facilitate the transfer of the pupil they excluded by perhaps explaining to these pupils what can be expected in the PRU setting (Ofsted, 2007).

Furthermore, although staff interviewed was aware of certain pupils who were likely to be more isolated (for example, because they did not know anyone at the PRU upon entry), this was likely to be a general informal observation on their part, including trying to get these pupils to connect with peers. Therefore, the PRU management could discuss with staff and provide some clear guidance as to how to work with those pupils for example setting up more structured activities during break time and taking turns to monitor activity-based groups which could help the pupils initiate conversations. In light of an increase in the number of girls being placed in the PRU in the current study, there is a need for PRU management/ staff to consider what activities can be set up for girls, or for both genders. As expressed by one female participant, some pupils are willing to have their voices heard (where she expressed her views to staff). Staff could therefore encourage pupils to reflect on what activities (within the remit of the PRU's budget/ facilities) can be set up. Particularly considering the difficulties that these pupils may have with their social skills and focus, activity-based programs can be useful to promote social development. In regards to facilitating transition from mainstream to the PRU, staff could collect information from current pupils to describe how the PRU context works and identify issues that they felt helped them.

PRUs can establish closer connections to other PRUs within similar demographics as they could share information with each other in regards to any particular systems, activities that may have been successful. Clearly, there may be a wide variety of PRUs as well as differences in their allocated budgets, however there needs to be a more centralised policy as to how the relationships of pupils can be improved as this is essentially the role of the PRU yet there does not appear to be planned programmes to support this.

## **5.9. Conclusions**

Upon reflection on one of the initial personal reasons why the researcher undertook this topic, that is, during her time as a Teaching assistant in a PRU prior to this EP training course, it was mentioned that there was speculation amongst the staff at the PRU that pupils who settled well into the PRUs may then have difficulty in reintegrating back into mainstream because the PRU setting may become a safe haven for them if they make good friendships there, especially considering cases where they did not feel accepted by peers in mainstream schools.

Essentially the concept of the PRU itself as an intervention is quite a controversial one because although the needs of these pupils with SEMH need to be addressed

and the goal is for the adults around them to help them reintegrate into mainstream education, the views from the current study suggest that for those pupils who settle relatively well at the PRU and make friends, this can adversely impact on their desire to return to mainstream school especially if they develop very good peer relationships with those at the PRU and feel a sense of belonging there. This is ironically quite the opposite effect of what the concept of the PRU was initially set up for, that is to help them reintegrate back into mainstream school. Furthermore, it was generally gathered from the views of staff themselves, that although they hoped for pupils to get along (they might be to some extent aware of the social and emotional needs of these pupils), there seemed to be an internal conflict from their view as to whether they should encourage and further develop friendships between pupils at the PRU. This conflict within their own perceptions could also make one reflect whether staff are unconsciously sending mixed messages to the pupils themselves. Hence, these issues should be addressed at a more managerial level and clear guidance needs to be given to staff on how to not only manage behaviour but to positively support relationships, without them having to informally decide on their own what best ways should be used.

As commented by Jalali & Morgan (2017), there has been a paucity of research into excluded young people's views on why reintegration into mainstream schools has been relatively unsuccessful. As this study demonstrates, given that peer relationships also play a large part in the mental well-being of young people, gaining the views on the experiences of this vulnerable population is of importance.

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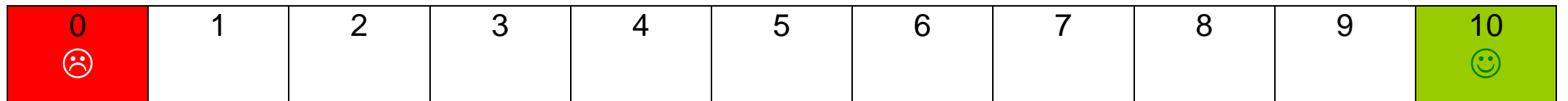
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Appendix A1 – Visual prompt sheet

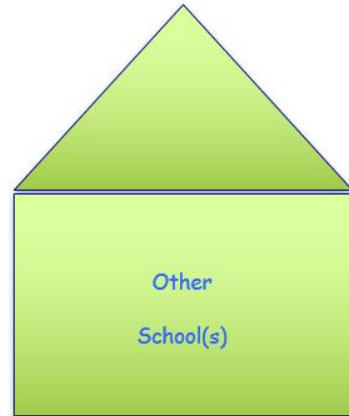
How well do you get along with the pupils here?



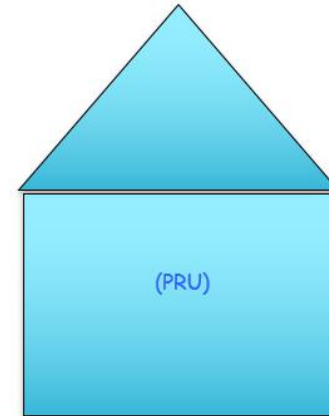
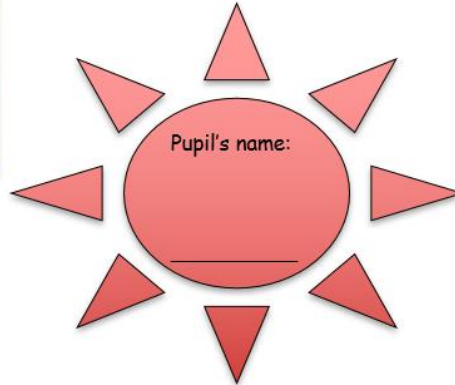
0- Very difficult to get along with all the pupils here

10- Very easy to get along with all the pupils

## Appendix A2- Visual Prompt sheet



Neighbourhoods



Any out of school clubs

Family-Friends/Relatives

## Appendix 1- Information and Consent Letter to parents/guardians



Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Fiona Lee and I am a second year Trainee Educational Psychologist from the Institute of Education, University of London. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, my role consists of working with schools and parents to help support children and young people who have a range of needs that may affect their learning. A main part of my role also consists of working individually with these young people themselves to find out about their views about their school life.

As part of my Doctorate training course, I am carrying out a research project and I am particularly interested in exploring the experiences of peer relationships and friendships of pupils attending a Pupil Referral Unit. My project will also aim to explore the views of staff about the pupils' peer relationships within the PRU and the find out whether they encourage and support these relationships.

Research has shown that peer relationships play an important part in young people's lives, and these can have an effect upon their well-being. Whilst there is much research that has been carried out in gaining the views and experiences of pupils attending mainstream schools, not much is known about the experiences of pupils who attend Alternative Provision such as the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

Due to the circumstances in which pupils are usually referred to PRUs, there is often an element of uncertainty about the length of time they will be placed at the PRU, which makes this a particularly interesting context to explore how pupils develop and maintain friendships at the PRU and the extent to which they maintain relationships with peers outside of the PRU context.

I am hoping to carry out an informal interview with individual pupils at the PRU and this will last approximately between 30-45minutes. During this interview, I will be asking your child about their experiences with their peers at the PRU, as well as exploring whether they have any other peer relationships out of the PRU.

I will be using an audio recorder to record the interview with your child, however any information that is given will remain strictly confidential between me and your child, unless he/she happens to mention an issue which may affect his/her safety or those around him/her, in which case I would discuss this accordingly with a member of staff. I will also make it clear to your child that he/she does not have to answer any



## Appendix 2- Information and Consent Sheet for pupils



**Who am I ?**

My name is Fiona Lee and I work in a range of different schools with pupils, their teachers and parents. An important part of my job is to find out about pupils' views about different things about school, for example what they like and do not like about school so that people around them can make school a better environment for them to learn.




**What is my project about?**

I am interested in finding out about the views and experiences that pupils at this school have in terms of how they get along with their classmates at this school as well as whether they have any other friends out of the school.



**What will happen if  
you agree to take**

I will be asking you to answer some questions for example about your friends and other pupils at the school. If you feel like you do not want to answer a question, you can let me know at any time and you can also change your mind if you do not want to continue with our conversation.



**Do you have any questions?**

I will also be recording our conversation with a voice recorder to help me make notes of it later on. Our conversation will remain confidential, meaning that the information you give me will remain between us only, unless you mention something that might affect your safety or the safety of those around you, in which case I would have to tell a member of staff. Our conversation should take about 30-45 minutes.

If you are happy with the information that I have given you and would like to take part in my project, please write your name and sign below:

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Year Group:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnic group:** \_\_\_\_\_

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

Thank you for your participation! ☺

### Appendix 3- Information and Consent Letter for staff

Dear Member of staff,

My name is Fiona Lee and I am a second year Trainee Educational Psychologist from the Institute of Education, University of London. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, my role consists of working collaboratively with schools and parents to help support children and young people who have a range of needs that may impact on their learning. A main part of my role also consists of working individually with these young people themselves to gain insight into their views about their school life.

As part of my Doctorate training course, I am carrying out a research project and I am particularly interested in exploring the experiences of peer relationships and friendships of pupils attending a Pupil Referral Unit. My project will also aim to explore the views of staff about the pupils' peer relationships within the PRU and the extent to which they may help facilitate these relationships.

Research has indicated that peer relationships play an important part in young people's lives, and these can have an impact on their well-being. Whilst there is much research that has been carried out in gaining the views and experiences of pupils attending mainstream schools, not much is known about the experiences of pupils who attend Alternative Provision such as the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

Due to the circumstances in which pupils are usually referred to PRUs, there is often an element of uncertainty about the length of time they will be placed at the PRU, which makes this a particularly interesting context to explore how pupils develop and maintain friendships at the PRU and the extent to which they maintain relationships with peers outside of the PRU context.

I am hoping to carry out an informal interview with individual members of staff at the PRU and this will last approximately between 30-45minutes. During this interview, I will be asking you about your views on the peer relationships and friendships that exist amongst pupils at the PRU. I am also hoping to gain your views on the extent to which you feel that staff may help support these relationships at the PRU.

With your permission, I will be using an audio recorder to record the information during our interview for analysis purposes, however any information that is given will remain strictly confidential and will be kept safely. Your name will be anonymised when reporting the results. You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to and if you feel you would like to withdraw from the project, you are free to do so.

If you are happy with the information given and would like to take part, please print your name below. A summary of my findings will be made available to all staff following the completion of the project.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(Name), am happy with the information given to me by the researcher, and would be willing to take part in the interview.

## Appendix 4- Interview schedule for Pupils Key Stage 3 & 4

### General warm-up questions

- How long have you been at this school/...?
- What year group are you in?
- How do you call this place? (School, PRU, College)  
*Use term that the pupil uses to refer to the PRU throughout the interview*
- When did you start coming to this school?
- Is this your first time here? Why were you placed in this school?
- What school/s were you in before?
- Do you like coming to school here? What are the things you like about it here? What are the things you like less?

### Main body (example of nature of questions)

#### General experiences of relationships with peers at PRU

- How well do you get along with the pupils at this school?

*(Present Visual prompt sheet A1-So for example, if '0' means "Very difficult to get along with all the pupils here" and '10' is "Very easy to get along with all the pupils here", what rating would you give on this scale?)*

- Can you tell me a bit more about why it is a...? (for example, pupil gives a rating of '6').

*Is there anyone who you get along well with? Is there anyone you find difficult to get along with?*

*What makes it difficult/easy to get along with...?*

*Would you say that you made any friends during your time here?*

- What do you think has helped you get along well with the other pupils here?  
*For example, what is it about the pupils that made it easy?*

*Are there any situations/lessons in which you find it easier to get along with the other pupils?*

- What do you think makes it difficult to get along with pupils here?  
*Are there any pupils who you find difficult to get along with? Why is that?*

*Are there any situations/lessons in which you find it more difficult to get along well with the other pupils?*

#### Exploring perception of what friendship both within and out of PRU

- In your opinion, what is the kind of person you would like to be friends with?
- Are there different types of friends? (eg: is there a difference between a friend, a good friend or a best friend?)



*Can you think about someone you know or describe someone who you think would be a friend, good friend, or best friend?*

*What does this person look like? What does he/she do? What activity/activities does he/she like doing?*

- **Is there anyone who is at this school who you would consider as a 'friend'?**  
*Why? What activities/hobbies does this person share with you?*

*Do you ever spend time with each other out of school?*

- **Can you tell me a bit about your friends who are not at this school?**  
Use visual prompt sheet A2 to prompt pupil to think about various settings- *You can use this sheet to help you with your thinking*

*(Is he/she at your mainstream school? Does he/she live in your neighbourhood?)*

- **How do you usually keep in touch with this friend/s? What type of friend is he/she?**  
*Is he/she a friend, good friend, best friend?*

- In your opinion, what is the opposite of a 'good friend'? What makes someone a 'bad friend'?
- Can you think of anyone who you would not like to be friends with? You do not have to tell me what the person's name is, you can just mention the first letter.

*What does this person look like? What does he/she do? What activities does he/she like doing?*

*(exploring possible negative aspects of peer relationships- eg: bullying etc...)*

**Is there anyone like this, who you can think of, at this school?**

*What about at your other school? Anywhere else?*

Signal to pupils that you only have a few questions left

- Pupils' perceptions of staff's involvement with supporting pupils with relationships at the PRU.

- How do you feel that the staff at this school help you every day?

*Are there any particular activities that the school organise that help you make friends and get on with the pupils here? What about your teachers and other adults in the lessons?*

*Is there anything else that you feel the school here can do to make it easier to get along with and make friends with the pupils here?*

**Closing comments**

Do you have any questions, or anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you very much for taking part!

## Appendix 5- Interview Schedule for staff

- **General warm-up/Introductory questions**
- How long have you been working at this school?
- What is your role at the school? Can you tell me more about it?

*What exactly does this consist of?*

*Would you say that you have contact with most pupils at the PRU? Or more with a group of them (eg: class teacher, TA allocated to specific class?)*

### Main body of questions

- From your observations as a member of staff, can you tell me what your general views are about the extent to which pupils at this PRU are able to get along well with each other? (so for example, on a scale of 0-10, with 0 being "Pupils here cannot get along with each other at all" and 10 being "Pupils here can get along very well, what would you rate this?)

*Can you tell me a bit more about this, any specific examples?*

*What do you think helps pupils get along well with each other? What do you think makes it difficult for pupils to get along with each other?*

How important do you feel it is for pupils to form friendships at the PRU? How do you think these are implemented within the curriculum?

*Do you feel that as a member of staff you have a role in this?*

*Can you give me any specific examples of how you do this?*

- To what extent do you think pupils at this school are able to become friends? How do you think these pupils relate to each other? Do you think they are able to become good friends? Best friends? What are their friendships like?

- Are there any other factors at the school that you feel are impacting on pupils' relationships amongst each other? Are there any that you feel are helpful/not so helpful?

- From your experience of interacting with the pupils here, to what extent do they have opportunities to have friends out of this school?

*Do pupils ever talk about friends that they know from other settings? What do they tell you about them?*

- To what extent do you feel staff at the PRU are able to support the development of positive peer relations?

*Are there any existing systems/strategies at the PRU that help with this?*

*Are there any other things you feel that would help staff to support peer relationships?*

- In your opinion, to what extent does peer relationships amongst the pupils have an impact on their learning at the school?

If you can tell me more from your experience as a teacher, TA, LSA, LM...

(exploring possible positive and negative influences...)

Signal end of interview coming close

Do you have any questions or anything else you would like to comment on?

**Appendix 6 - Example of Phone records of parental consent**

<b>Date &amp; Time</b>	<b>Pupil's name (Guardian/Parent)</b>	<b>Information about research given</b>	<b>Consent given</b>	<b>Any additional notes</b>
14.10.13- 9:32am	M (Guardian)	Yes	Yes	Parent wanted to be reassured that child's name would remain anonymous in study- reassured of this

**Appendix 7- Excerpt of an annotated interview transcript with pupil M**

Interview transcript	Initial coding
<p>...</p> <p>Researcher (F): Ok, so, what do you think makes it more difficult to get along with students here? Apart from the fact that you have your own opinion...</p> <p>M: The reason why it is difficult to get along with the students here is because when, you know, like when people come here, not me, but when a lot of people come here, their first thing is – I need to make friends ASAP ASAP, so they make friends and then when they have their friends, they start copying them, you get me?</p> <p>F: Oh, what do you mean?</p> <p>M: As soon as they arrive here, they want to fit in and they have to keep on playing this act and to be honest, I am not on that, so like, yeah ...</p> <p>F: Ok, so you feel that one of the things that makes you find it difficult to get along with them, because they just come here and?</p> <p>M: Yeah, that's why I say to a lot of people here, I don't like fakes, I like people who are real. Well I can say there are a lot of people here who are generally real but I can't see myself outside of school hanging around because I am a different person outside of school. I am a fun person, like when I go out, I am not being a racist but like the majority of my friends are Black, like... yeah?</p>	<p>Pupil's view on why she struggles with some peers/newcomers (barriers to making positive peer relationships)</p> <p>Characteristics of desired friend (shared values)</p>

<p>F: Ok</p> <p>M: So I keep to it, I just keep to how it is. Other people I hang around with, I have known them for years. The reason why I am not so close to anyone here is that I don't get attached to people unless I have known them for at least more than 3 years...I don't think of them as a friend if I have known them less than that..."</p> <p>F: OK, fair enough. So that means you don't hang out with anyone from here outside of school?</p> <p>M: Yeah I don't</p> <p>F: Ok. Now I am going to ask you to take a few minutes to think about this - in your opinion what is the kind of person you would like to be friends with?</p> <p>M: Someone who is moving forward and wants a future and not weary to stand around in front of everyone else</p> <p>F: So, somebody with his own individual opinion?</p> <p>M: Yeah, somebody who is not afraid to speak their mind, like even if it hurts, someone who could actually be like, Ok , I am coming to you , like you know start thinking about going out OK , like they are straight in ,straight out , if you get me ?</p> <p>F: Ok, so just like focus on what you have to do?</p>	<p>Length of time pupil perceives necessary to see someone as friend--- Duration of relationship (Factors contributing to friendship)</p> <p>Does not spend time with peers outside of PRU</p> <p>Characteristics of desired friend (shared values)</p>
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<p>M: and not following, like the spies who came here, all of them, all of them are followers</p> <p>F: All of them are followers? You mean, who do they follow?</p> <p>M: Yeah, like they always follow what I do, what the others do, what everyone does and it is so really annoying and that is why, I am not trying to be rude, that's why I treat them the way I treat them</p> <p>F: What do you mean? How do you treat them?</p> <p>M: Like I tell them to shut up, walk over them, like the reason why I was doing that, I wanted to see how they were</p> <p>F: To see how they react?</p> <p>M: Yeah, that's how I am with people, either I tell you to shut up or come here with me and you do it, that's where I know (taps her fingers) straight away, you are a dog , you are a dog, like you are a follower, that's what you can do . Like with all my friends, I used to be that girl, that's what I do, not to bully them but to teach them, like I will say straight up to people's face – you need to stop following because right now you are not looking like a girl, you are a dog. And I hate when people follow me, I really do</p>	<p>Sense of authority (Exertion of dominance)</p> <p>Behaviour displayed by pupil (Exertion of dominance)...(Barriers)</p>
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<p>F: You like it when people have their own mind, so that's what would make it something you would be looking for in a friend?</p> <p>M: Sure, I like individual people</p> <p>F: OK that's interesting, and do you think there are different types of friends?</p> <p>M: Yeah, there's fake ones, there's acquaintances</p> <p>F: So, like a friend or a good friend, best friend?</p> <p>M: There is good friend. To me, there is friends, there is how my stage goes: there is me</p> <p>F: Ok?</p> <p>M: There is acquaintance, there is me, there is a friend, there is people that you just hang around all the time they are your buddies and there is your family, they are not my family but this group of friends that I am close, that I call my family, those are my boys. I hang out with boys, I have about (hesitates) 7 friends, 1 of them is my cousin, 1 of them is my foster sister, 4 of them are boys and 1 of them is a girl. That's my only friends.</p> <p>F: You prefer making friends with boys or girls?</p> <p>M: No, no no no. Before I used to be like – oh yeah, boys are so easy to get along. No NO but boys, they</p>	<p>Pupil's way of differentiating between types of friends</p>
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<p>are so sly, oh yeah, he's my boy, he's my boy, but behind your back, he's probably talking so much crap about you</p> <p>F: Oh, really? I thought there is always this stereotype, you know, that boys are more straightforward?</p> <p>M: Exactly, the thing is yeah, with boys, they are very clever, they know how to hook you on, and they know how to talk shit about you, sorry, but without you knowing . I bet you, boys are more bitchy than girls, they really are...</p> <p>F: Oh, I see.</p> <p>M: Yeah, they don't want you to love. The problem is, with every fight, there is always a boy behind it</p> <p>F: That's true? You mean, they get caught on as well more than girls ?</p> <p>M: Yes, and they are the ones that provoke it, like yeah yeah, she's talking bad about you, come on girls... There is always a boy behind the scene.</p> <p>F: Were you in a mixed school before? Or were you in a girls' school?</p> <p>M: Girls school</p>	<p>Pupil's view on explanation of disagreements</p>
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F: Girls only school, OK. So, I guess it must have been interesting for you to come here with a mix of boys attending the school as well?

M: No, not really ...

F: How did you adapt?

M: You know, I don't take notice of them, they are very very immature, they all act the same.

F: Oh, OK. Can you tell me more about your relationship with them?

## Appendix 8- Excerpt of an interview transcript with staff member

Researcher (F): ok, that's interesting; how important do you feel it is for students to form friendships at the PRU?

Learning Assistant (LA): Definitely, it's important for a multitude of reasons. Obviously it's just, it stops people feeling left out, I mean it promotes inclusion and lets everyone being included and I think it's important because for example my guy who I have worked one to one with, Alistair, doesn't have a lot of friends; so the times where me and him are having one to one in favour of cool playing basketball and playing cards, it's been nice when you can see other students join him and play because he doesn't have much social skills, so I feel it's important for that, but kids having friendships, promotes, you learn, like you learn every day, you learn from things you see in the streets, from kids, from your parents, your teachers, kids soak when they learn, if you have no friends you don't learn how to socially develop and that's why it is important I think, it helps you learn and grow as a person.

F: OK, you obviously feel it's important for students here to form friendships, but do you know if there are any ways, in which as a member of the staff, that you can help support, develop or maintain these friendships?

LA: by trying to find things in common, I mean to be honest, everyone in this world is different, like me and you are different, but I'm sure if we have a long conversation we can find some things that we have in common and we stick to those things and try to build it from there, so I feel that (pause) even sports for example

I know that's the obvious thing to go for, there is a lot of students – for the boys Aspire

coz there are lots of boys who are very different, but if you are good at, you can be, you can like.. or he can.., like whatever he can like go into more sports in the weekend ... you can like drawing in your house but both are good at football – so when it comes to lunch time you can be on same team, you can get along you can talk about football, you might support the same team

F: so, that's one of the platform you think, that you can as a staff, help support these relationships?

LA: definitely and just also, I guess, you sort of being there just to, as long as there is a presence there to defuse and explain, coz sometimes kids specially in in a place like a PRU, are always on the defensive because you always feel like someone trying to attack you, always.

So, a lot of the time the kids take that off out of perspective; there's been lot of time when I have been here to say that's not what you mean and that's not what's happening and just being that middle person to just explain things through helps a lot.

F: You feel like a referee?

LA: yeah, basically that helps a lot, to be honest, just a mature and just someone who's calm, to just calm down the situation and explain.

I've seen like a potential argument turn into shaking hands, and then being cool and making up and its OK I understand why you're trying to do that, and I think that's important and In terms of that, just try to find similarities between 2 students, as a teacher you gonna get to know a lot of students, so you know which students have similarities and you just try to group them together like that. Yeah, this is how I do it really

F: is there anything specific in the policies or school curriculum that helps support peer relationship or, like may be, teach these students to make friends?

LA: well, definitely, the policies in terms of zero tolerance and stuff like bullying, always try to just promote inclusion to make sure everyone has the opportunity to get involved

so even girls at lunch time, there is no, say, no girls cannot come in and play football, because, for example... yeah, a good example of that – there's a student who, a year 10 female, who quite involved in a big football match with just boys – she came and she performed really well and a lot of the boys and everybody gave her lots of praise and since then you've seen her sort of talk more with the boys and stuff like that, coz they may have had so many differences but they have had opportunity to see something that they had a similarity and she had done well, and so, often

inclusion allows a girl to be involved in stuff that's meant to be male dominated or vice versa.

It's always good, or even for Food technology, means there's food for every race and people come together and all get involved , when there is certain students who have not been able to involved, whether its due to age, gender or race , so for those part of the policies in school , they definitely do help promote those things.

F: ok, obviously you mentioned that it is important for these students to form friendships, to what extent do you think the students here are able to actually become friends?

LA: it's hard, to be honest, I can't answer that question to you because I also do understand that friendships that are based in school may not be so strong that they spill over outside of school. A lot of people you think are best friends in the world but as soon as the bell goes off, they live their separate lives.

F: You mean, they talk about not spending time together outside of school? Is that how you know?

LA: yeah, that's how I know, I've asked for it ... and they say outside of school we don't show but to be honest that is dependent on a lot of things, a lot of external factors specially at this age, I mean, I guess these kids don't have as much boundaries, so they don't have to be in as early. When you leave far from someone, those things are a fact unfortunately. I mean you have a lot of kids who are tied in school and they are tied outside school because they live in the same area, but I also asked a lot of people do you chill outside school, and it's not really coz they do live far unfortunately so that means when it comes to weekend they can't chat or they have to do some stuff at home and they can't really meet up. So a lot of friendships are based on just at school

F: ok, but you're not sure, is that what you're saying? You are not sure whether they are able to become good friends?

LA: yeah, I'm not sure; well, how are we able to help them become good friends?

F: No, I mean, whether u feel that the people at this school are able to become good friends?

LA: oh yeah, they are definitely able to, I feel, coz a lot of them are fortunate to live in the same area in South Park; when the area is quite far, not always, it's dependent; it varies, to be honest. But I would say yes, but dependent on a lot of factors.

F: OK, and do u think there are any other factors at school that u feel can impact on the students' relationship with one other?

LA: yes, definitely, you may have 2 friends fighting; I have seen that a lot of time.

You have 2 people fighting each other, and each of those people have their own circle, and within that circle you may have some people who are like interacting with each other, now coz these 2 people are fighting, it creates a situation where now, other students can't be friends with each other coz they might mean that they are not being loyal to the friend that is fighting the other friend. So just arguments and conflict, arguments are the biggest reason why.... Hmmm, peer issues sometimes

What was the question again?

F: What are the factors at the school you feel can impact on the students' relationship with one another, obviously not knowing or not having the skills to resolve conflicts

LA: Yeah, not having the skills to resolve conflicts; like you said, or feeling anxious all the time like you are always sort of getting attacked... creates a situation where you feel you can't trust and trust isn't that great here because everyone just always feels attacked, even by your own friend you feel sometimes your friend might be trying to give a bit of a sly comment; so I just feel that a lot of them just feel insecure really

F: Is there any other thing that you think can help the students become friends with one another here, apart from the common interest that you mentioned earlier?

LA: hmm, I feel (pause) not really, to be honest, looking back at everything, whether that's inclusion, whether, well actually I feel that, I guess, more...(pauses) oh its hard, because I have been in a situation where I have pulled in different groups of people to come in and say for example playing cards together, you think, sometimes that just resulted in ...

F: Oh when is that? Is it like break time?

LA: yeah, break time or lunch time they might be playing black jack or something, and students are playing team and sometimes that result in students having to interact to come together and having fun and you can see they can play together in a structured way but then that also results in ..... conflicting, just ends up in a bad way

F: I suppose it also depends on what mood they are on that day, whether they can manage their emotions?

LA: yeah, but I feel that, in trying to put in more situation where students who don't interact can come together where a game situation whether that's sports, cards, a debate, just something where everyone can socially get involved helps a lot.

So I think a teacher can be a big influence in trying anyway, making a big attempt to get students together by just doing a bit more



## Appendix 9 BPS Ethical Approval Form

### **DEdPsy (Y2) STUDENT RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM**

Psychology & Human Development

This form should be completed with reference to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct – available online from [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)

On which course are you registered? **Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology**

Title of project: **The views and experiences of peer relationships and friendships: A perspective from young people and Staff at a Secondary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).**

Name of researcher(s): Jade Fiona Jak Kee LEE

Name of supervisor/s (for student research):

Date: 10.2.13 Intended start date of data collection (month and year only): 4th March 2013

**Summary of planned research** (please provide the following details: project title, purpose of project, its academic rationale and research questions, a brief description of methods and measurements; participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria; estimated start date and duration of project). It's expected that this will take approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. Please also give further details here if this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee.

Research has indicated that peer relationships play an important part in children and young people's development. These relationships have mostly been studied in the context of mainstream school settings, and the context of alternative provisions such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) have not been explored much and yet, about 135, 000 pupils a year spend some of their time in Alternative Provision in the UK. PRUs provide placements for about one third of these pupils in Alternative Provision. This setting offers a unique context in which pupils develop and maintain peer relationships for various reasons. Pupils who attend PRUs are usually expected to reintegrate to mainstream schools, however in many cases, many pupils tend to stay for longer periods until a more suitable placement is found for them or in many cases they end up staying there permanently. Therefore, the time that pupils spend in a PRU may vary, whether they have been excluded permanently or for a fixed period of time or are attending the PRU part-time. This provides an interesting context to explore the extent to which they form peer relationships and friendships within the PRU, as well as maintain any relationships with any other young people out of the PRU context. Another aim of the study is to gain the views of staff on these peer relationships, especially how they manage these relationships given that most pupils at the PRU will display Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD), which are likely to have an impact on the way they develop relationships with their peers.

***Research Questions:***

- 1) What are the experiences of peer relationships and friendships of pupils attending a secondary Pupil Referral Unit?
- 2) How do staff in a Secondary Pupil Referral Unit perceive peer relationships and friendships amongst pupils at the PRU?
- 3) How do staff at the PRU help facilitate peer relationships amongst pupils at the PRU?

***Methods/Measurements:***

Individual semi-structured interviews will be carried out with pupils and staff during the pilot study.

For the actual research project, individual semi-structured interviews will be used with the pupils and a semi-structured interview will be carried out in a focus group with staff.

***Participants:***

*Pupil Participants for the Pilot study:*

One pupil from Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and from a twelve-week program (Key stage 3- Fixed term exclusion) will be selected by the SENCO and Head teacher for the

individual interviews (3 pupils in total). They will be asked if they would like to take part in the project. Consent letters will be sent to the parents prior to this.

*Staff participants for Pilot study:*

I will send a letter by email to the headteacher and SENCO explaining the project and asking them to mention this to staff. I will then be spending a day at the PRU to familiarise myself with the setting, and will approach staff to ask if any members of staff (teaching and non-teaching) would be interested in taking part in the interview (2-3 members of staff) and I will arrange with them when I can interview them.

*Pupil Participants for the actual research project:*

I will go into the PRU and speak to the pupils from Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and the twelve week program and explain my project to them, mentioning that letters will be sent to their parents asking for consent, and if they would like to take part, I will be coming in at another time and will interview them individually (about a total of 15 pupils).

*Staff Participants for the actual research project:*

A letter will be sent to staff to ask who would be interested to take part in interviews. (total of 6-8 participants)

**Analysis of data:**

Thematic analysis will be used.

*\*Please find attached a copy of the letter that will be given to the pupils summarising the details of the study and asking them for their consent. A letter is also attached for the parents to give consent.*

**Specific ethical issues** (Please outline the main ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research, and how they will be addressed. It's expected that this will require approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. You will find information in the notes about answering this question).

Prior to participation, I will seek consent from the young person in the study as well as consent from their parents/guardians. (The pupil will be explained about the project both verbally and in written form).

I will ensure that both pupils and staff taking part in the study have a clear understanding of the research project and are explained that they do not have to answer any question that they do not want to, and have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

I will explain to pupil clearly before the interview that I have the duty to report any issue that they mention during the interview that could be a threat to their safety or that of others.

I will ensure that pupils and staff are aware that they will be recorded for the purpose of data analysis and that information collected will remain confidential and be kept safely.

At the end of the interview, I will make sure that all participants are aware that they have the opportunity to find out more about the results of the study.

### 3. Further details

Please answer the following questions.

		YES	NO	N/A
1	Will you describe the exactly what is involved in the research to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have ticked **No** to any of Q1-8, please ensure further details are given in section 2 above.

		YES	NO	N/A
9	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way?	<input type="checkbox"/>	*	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort? If <b>Yes</b> , give details on a separate sheet and state what you will tell them to do if they should experience any problems (e.g. who they can contact for help).	<input type="checkbox"/>	*	<input type="checkbox"/>

11	Will your project involve human participants as a secondary source of data (e.g. using existing data sets)	<input type="checkbox"/>	*	<input type="checkbox"/>
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If you have ticked **Yes** to any of 9 - 11, please provide a full explanation in section 2 above.

12	Does your project involve working with any of the following special groups?	YES	NO	N/A
	Animals	<input type="checkbox"/>	*	<input type="checkbox"/>
	School age children (under 16 years of age)	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Young people of 17-18 years of age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	*
	People with learning or communication difficulties	*	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Patients	<input type="checkbox"/>	*	<input type="checkbox"/>
	People in custody	<input type="checkbox"/>	*	<input type="checkbox"/>
	People engaged in illegal activities (e.g. drug-taking)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	*

If you have ticked Yes to 12, please refer to BPS guidelines, and provide full details in sections 1 and 2 above. **Note that you may also need to obtain satisfactory CRB clearance (or equivalent for overseas students).**

**There is an obligation on the Student and their advisory panel to bring to the attention of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee any issues with ethical implications not clearly covered by the above checklist.**

#### 4. Attachments

Please attach the following items to this form:

Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee, if applicable

Where available, information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research.

#### 5. Declaration

*This form (and any attachments) should be signed by the Trainee, Academic and EP Supervisors and then **submitted to Lorraine Fernandes in the Programme Office**. You will be informed when it has been approved. If there are concerns that*



Date considered: \_\_\_\_\_ Reference: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved and filed  Referred back to applicant   
Referred to RGEC

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ Chair \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_  
FREC: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Ethical review process

Students should complete the *Student Research Ethics approval Form* and discuss it with their supervisor and other members of their advisory panel as part of the project design process.

The completed form should then be left with the supervisor and other members of the advisory panel to sign.

If neither the student's Academic Supervisor nor the advisory panel member has concerns about ethical difficulties with the research or the student's ability to carry out the research ethically, then **the form will be returned to the Lorraine Fernandes in the Programme Office**, who will log the decision, place the form on the student's file, and inform the student. The outcome of student ethics review will be reported to the Institute's Research Ethics Coordinator

If either the student's supervisor or the advisory panel member has serious ethical concerns about the research, the form will be sent to the Department DEdPsy Research Coordinator (Ed Baines).

The form will then be forwarded to the Research Ethics Coordinator, who will arrange for the proposal to be considered by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). The committee may request further information from the student or his/her supervisor.

The Research Ethics Coordinator will report the FREC's decision to the DEdPsy Programme Administrator (Lorraine Fernandes), who will inform the student and his/her supervisors.

## Completing the form

### Section 1: Summary of research

Please provide information about the aims of the research, the background to it and the study design (including data collection and analysis methods) to assist the relevant persons in understanding the project. You may wish to attach the answer to this question as a separate document. If so, please indicate in the box that you have done this, and ensure that the attachment is clearly labelled.

### Section 2: Specific ethical issues

Please consider the issues that may arise in this research and how you will manage them. A checklist of issues to consider is also included in section 3 but also see below. You may wish to attach your answer to this question as a separate document.

If so, please indicate in the box that you have done this, and ensure that the attachment is clearly labelled.

This list is not exhaustive, nor will every issue apply to every project. It is intended to help you think about things which may happen, and to help FREC members to review your proposal.

Provide further information about who you intend to collect data from and how. If any participants are children/young people under 18 or adults classed as vulnerable and whether researchers will have access to them without another adult present, have researchers all been subject to a Criminal Records Bureau check?

Who will benefit from this research? How will participants benefit, now or in the future? Who else might benefit, now or in the future?

What are the risks to research participants? Are there risks to anyone else? Are there risks for the researchers?

How will you inform participants about the research? How will you gain their informed consent to participate? How will you document their consent? Will you need to obtain consent from participants on more than one occasion, or only at the outset of the project? Note that you are required to attach copies of information leaflets etc. which you intend to use – if you do not intend to use information leaflets, please explain why

If you do not intend to gain informed consent, please explain why

Will you offer participants financial incentives (e.g. shopping vouchers, entry in a prize draw) to take part in the research? How much will you offer? How will you ensure that the incentive does not influence their responses?

Will you offer participants to meet participants' expenses (e.g. travel costs, child care costs) to take part in the research? Will you offer them any form of payment (e.g. shopping vouchers, entry in a prize draw)? How much will you offer? How will you ensure that the payment does not influence decision to take part and their responses to your questions?

Will you be collecting 'sensitive' data under the definition of the Data Protection Act 1998 (that is, data about participants' racial/ethnic origin; political opinions, religious (or similar) beliefs, trade union membership, physical/mental health; sexual life; offences; criminal proceedings, outcomes & sentences)? What steps have you taken to ensure that only sensitive data which is essential to the research is collected? How will you anonymise the data? How will you ensure the safety and security of the data?

What level of anonymity or confidentiality will you promise the participants? How will you guarantee this?

Who will you inform about the findings of the research, and how? Will you tell participants about the results?

If the work involves data collection outside the UK, are there any special issues arising because of the country/ies where the work takes place? Issues might include different values and traditions which affect approaches to gaining informed consent, and making arrangements for speakers of other languages.

**Section 3** provides a further checklist to remind the student to address all issues but also enables those overseeing the process a quick over-view of the project in relation to some common areas of ethical concern.

Please provide information about the age of children participating in the research. Tick all the boxes which apply, and provide more detailed information under section 2. If your research includes adult participants, please describe them briefly (e.g. teachers, parents, adult learners, patients) and provide more information under section 2.

**Section 5** should be signed by student and supervisors involved in overseeing the research