

**A Qualitative Analysis of Social Congruence and Student Engagement in Peer  
Mentoring and Faculty Mentoring: The Perspective of Students**

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### **Abstract**

Peer mentoring is a promising form of peer-assisted learning, recognized for its potential to enhance student engagement and academic achievement (Leidenfrost et al., 2014). However, limited qualitative research investigates undergraduate students' perspectives on this practice. This study aims to shed light on the differences in student experiences between peer and faculty mentorship and examine the role of social congruence in promoting affective and behavioural engagement among undergraduates. Data was collected through interviews with twelve first-year psychology students and revealed that students experienced social congruence with their peer mentors, resulting in a more relaxed and connected learning environment. Participants reported a greater willingness to engage behaviourally and affectively. In contrast, faculty mentorship lacked social congruence, leading to a formal and less comfortable learning atmosphere but unaffected engagement. These results highlight the importance of social congruence in fostering meaningful connections between students and mentors and its role in positively influencing students' affective and behavioural engagement. Understanding the impact of social congruence on peer mentorship can provide valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to enhance student engagement and improve overall academic experiences.

*Key words: social congruence, affective engagement, behavioural engagement, peer mentoring, peer-assisted learning*

## **Exploring Social Congruence, Affective Engagement, and Behavioural Engagement: The Difference Between Peer Mentors and Faculty Mentors**

Peer mentoring, a growing kind of peer-assisted learning, has gotten a lot of attention for its potential to boost student engagement and academic achievement (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schütz, Carbon, and Schabmann 2014). Peer mentoring entails the implementation of student-driven classes wherein individuals who have progressed further in their academic journey assume the responsibility of mentoring and instructing students at an earlier stage of their studies (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). It has been shown to enhance teamwork and collaborative argumentation as well as enable groups to handle complex situations (Harter, O. and Klemenčič, n.d.). A whopping 97% of those who have a peer mentor regard them as extremely beneficial. Furthermore, 55% believe that peer mentorship may greatly assist to their personal and professional success (Peer Mentoring Institute, 2022). Despite rising interest in peer-assisted learning, there is a dearth of qualitative research that investigates undergraduate students' viewpoints and experiences (Alisic, Boet, Sutherland, and Bould, 2016), particularly outside of the field of medical education. This study intends shed light on the difference in student experience of peer mentorship and faculty mentorship, as well as the extent to which social congruence promotes affective as well as behavioural engagement among undergraduate students. We utilised a qualitative approach to get a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between students, peer mentors, and faculty mentors, offering insight on the possible advantages and what influence this has on students' affective and behavioural engagement.

### **Social Congruence**

Social elements in learning and academic success have been shown to be of great relevance and may be shown in how they affect students' motivation, engagement, and

overall academic performance. A student's learning experiences and outcomes may be influenced by their social environment, which may include their family, friends, and more importantly, mentors (Eccles, 2004). Additionally, it has been shown that fostering a healthy teacher-student connection is essential for encouraging academic performance and enhancing students' desire and enthusiasm for learning (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort, 2011).

There are several factors that influence the relationship between student and teacher, one of such being social congruence (Loda et al., 2022). Congruence, as conceptualized in theory, denotes a state wherein an individual is uninhibited in embodying their genuine self within a relationship and adeptly represents their personal experiences with a heightened level of mindfulness (Rogers, 1959). It is regarded as a key component of human connection that can affect social and academic success. Social congruence, a facet of congruence, includes interpersonal characteristics such as proficiency in informal and empathetic contact with students, establishing a favourable learning environment that encourages the unconstrained sharing of ideas (Schmidt and Moust, 1995). In the academic setting it has been associated with several advantageous outcomes, but mostly with improved academic achievement (Schmidt and Moust, 1995). According to this study, people may feel more connected to their classmates and teachers if they believe they share some traits with them, which might increase their feeling of involvement and satisfaction in the learning process.

This is further evidenced by a study conducted by Lockspeiser, O'Sullivan, Teherani, and Muller (2008). Focus groups consisting of medical students were employed to examine students' perceptions regarding the value of peer guidance and education. The findings revealed that students expressed a positive reception towards the opportunity to learn from their peers, particularly when specific characteristics were emphasized. These characteristics often included a strong familiarity with the subject matter and an ability to empathize with the challenges encountered by medical school students. Notably, among these attributes, one

frequently observed element in social congruence was the capacity to sympathize with the academic pressures faced by students, a quality that peer mentors, having recently undergone similar experiences, tended to possess. Consequently, a substantial majority of the participants demonstrated a distinct appreciation for the unique characteristics associated with social congruence, thus underscoring the significance of this concept.

A different study looked at the presence of social congruence in the academic setting. Loda, Berner, Erschens, Nikendei, Zipfel and Herrmann-Werner (2022) examined the association between cognitive and social congruence in an online communication course. Peer mentors who encouraged direct questioning and exhibited empathy and support were perceived as socially congruent, leading to increased motivation and a willingness to ask questions or seek clarification. Furthermore, the shared social roles between students and peer mentors further facilitated social congruence, as they could identify with each other's experiences. Additionally, peer mentors shared their own learning techniques and provided advice, demonstrating their understanding of the difficulties students face. Thus we argue that if these factors are present, social congruence is present.

In the context of mentorship, it is critical to understand that students frequently have higher social congruence with peer mentors than with faculty mentors (Loda et al., 2022). Peer mentors who have recently gone through comparable experiences have a special capacity to connect with their mentees' academic struggles and stress (Lockspeiser et al., 2008). This increased relatability and shared understanding fosters a deeper sense of connection and camaraderie, resulting in a rise in social congruence. As a result of the increased sense of social compatibility and relatability they experience while working with peer mentors, students routinely report enjoying their courses more. Thus, peer mentorship emerges as a potent and successful strategy for promoting social congruence and greatly improving students' overall learning experiences.

The significance of social congruence is underscored by the potential decline in students' enrolment for higher education (Konzelmann, 2000). Recent data from the United States reveals an 8% reduction in nationwide undergraduate college enrolment between 2019 and 2022, and this trend persists even after the resumption of in-person classes following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, the relevance of this topic has never been more pronounced. Similarly, data from The Netherlands indicates a decrease in students pursuing practical education post-high school (Terpstra, 2022). Consequently, the application of the discussed concepts in future educational contexts becomes valuable. This decline may be partly attributed to feelings of tedium or the perceived difficulty associated with selecting a field of study, or even a lack of interest. Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, and Pagani (2009) found that those with low levels of engagement displayed an elevated likelihood of subsequent dropout, making the involvement of engagement a relevant aspect. Therefore, if methods can be identified to enhance the engagement within academia, it could serve as a motivating factor for more students to pursue higher education. One potential approach is through the implementation of social congruence, which represents a learnable social skill (Kang, 2019). Consequently, teaching social congruence within academic settings becomes a viable possibility to enhance engagement.

### ***Affective Engagement***

Affective engagement, also referred to as emotional engagement, describes the emotional reactions associated with being invested in a task. It is influenced by factors such as the student's interest, enjoyment, positive attitude, value perception, curiosity, and sense of belonging, while being inversely related to anxiety, sadness, stress, and boredom (Ladd and Dinella, 2009). Affective engagement is an important part of student engagement since it may have a range of influences in the academic setting. Previous research has shown that affective

engagement is connected with positive future outlooks (Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski and Pryor, 2013) and plays an important role in general adolescent development (Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, and Bradshaw, 2014). It includes the emotional and behavioural factors that contribute to students' overall involvement and satisfaction in the learning process. Students that are affectively engaged feel positive feelings which fuel students' active participation and motivation to persevere in their learning attempts (Li and Lerner, 2013), and the fostering of affective engagement is a key feature of peer mentoring that adds to its efficacy. Further research has consistently shown that peer mentoring is associated with a range of positive outcomes such as increased participation and enhanced positive student perception of mentors (Culpeper and Kan, 2022).

The discussed research has shown that supportive interactions in the classroom can motivate students to become more engaged in their studies, which is ultimately the goal in any educational setting. It also sheds light onto the relevance of peer mentoring in promoting affective engagement, thus it can be argued that affective engagement and social congruence could be related constructs, and therefore relating to the benefits of peer mentoring.

### ***Behavioural Engagement***

How students interact with the teacher, their peers, and the instructional material is referred to as behavioural engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). It includes things like attending classes, completing homework, and taking part in academic discussions. It is found to be positively correlated with academic achievement (Hospel, Galand, Janosz, 2016). In the context of peer mentoring and social congruence, the quality of the student-mentor connection and the amount of social congruence experienced by the students might impact behavioural engagement. A study conducted by Estell and Perdue (2013) found a favourable relationship between peer support and behavioural involvement. Their findings revealed that

the influence of peer support on behavioural engagement was substantially different from that of greater instructor support and enhanced parental support. These findings support the premise that peers, and by extension peer mentors, can play an important role in creating beneficial improvements in behavioural engagement.

### ***Current Study***

This qualitative research aims to explore the specific attributes of social congruence that contribute to a stronger student-teacher relationship and examine its influence on the students' affective and behavioural engagement in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to investigate students' perspectives and experiences with their peer mentors as well as their faculty mentors. By delving into the nuances of the student-teacher relationship, this research aims to identify the key differences of social congruence that foster a positive and meaningful connection between students and their mentors as well as the key components of social congruence that influence the level of behavioural/affective engagement. By utilizing qualitative methods, this study further aims to shed light on the consequences for the student's overall educational journey and how these elements differ qualitatively between faculty mentor and peer mentor.

Based on the existing literature, it is predicted that students will feel a stronger sense of social congruence with their peer mentor compared to their faculty mentor, and this is manifested in their willingness to engage in the classes. It is expected that we find elements of social congruence with the peer mentor, and not so much with the faculty mentor. Based on research by Loda et al. (2021), we predict to find elements such as similarity, trust, and safety to exist as a consequence of social congruence. Therefore, we additionally aim to understand the qualitative difference between the student experience of social congruence and how this can change depending on the mentor.



## **Method**

### ***Design***

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate student perceptions of their mentors. Specifically, the aim is to compare student and faculty mentors in terms of social and cognitive congruence and examine how these factors influence student engagement during class. The phenomenological approach, as outlined by Husserl (1859), focuses on understanding and exploring the lived experiences of individuals. It can provide greater opportunity to uncover psychological processes that can influence engagement (Ring 2017), which might be missed when using a quantitative approach. Additionally, the current method has previously been used in the educational setting to shed light on problems and experiences of the students (Ring 2017).

### ***Method***

Through the utilisation of semi-structured interviews, there is an opportunity to conduct an in-depth exploration of the students' experiences, a task that would prove challenging when employing a questionnaire that restricts participants to predetermined response options considering the limitations associated with questionnaires (Razavi, 2001). Given the capacity of the phenomenological approach to accommodate open-ended questions (Ring, 2017), we opted for a comparable semi-structured format. The questions were divided into two sections, with one section focusing on social congruence and the other on cognitive congruence. Within each section, the latter half concomitantly asked about cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagements. When warranted, follow-up questions were asked. Thus, there was ample opportunity to elaborate and ask follow-up questions, to ensure that we captured the unique, subjective experiences of the students.

### ***Participants***

The study employed a purposive sampling approach. Contact with potential participants was established through a combination of in-person and online methods as part of the meticulous sampling process. Once participants provided their informed consent, interviews were scheduled at mutually agreed-upon dates and locations. To ensure consistency and adherence to specific criteria, we specifically targeted first-year psychology students at the University of Groningen who possessed proficient English language skills and were actively enrolled in the "Academic Skills" course. This particular course provides valuable academic support to students through the provision of both a faculty mentor and a peer mentor. A total of 12 participants were gathered as this has been found to reach data saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). This indicates that the sample size was sufficient to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives and insights relevant to the research objectives.

### ***Data collection***

This research study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Groningen in April 2023. To ensure anonymity of all parties involved the participants were asked not to mention anyone by name during the interview. During the transcribing phase, all names were removed from the text altogether. Second, participants were told that the interview was confidential. Additionally, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form where it was briefly explained to them what the study is about and that the interview would be recorded. Lastly, participants were told they could retract their data from the study within 10 days and that they were entitled to their right to withdraw.

Regarding the research timeline, the initial phase encompassed the formulation of interview questions. Prior to commencing actual data collection, practice interviews were conducted as a preparatory measure. To enhance the validity of the questions, several measures were implemented. The first version of the interview script underwent scrutiny by our supervisor and an external expert well-versed in qualitative research. Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted, involving three practice interviews. In addition to the two designated interviewers, an additional researcher was present to carefully monitor the participants' comprehension of the questions and evaluate whether the questions effectively elicited the desired information. As the researcher's interviewing skills improved and confidence grew, the interview format transitioned from group sessions with three interviewers to sessions conducted by two interviewers. However, it should be noted that one interview was conducted by a single interviewer. These meticulous steps were taken to ensure the integrity and reliability of the interview process, and to continuously refine and enhance the methodology throughout the study. We chose to revise the script after the practice interviews and after the first real interviews due to a lack of response or confusion from the participant. This is a common event in qualitative research as it is a reflexive process (DeCarlo, 2019). The main changes during these revisions consisted of cutting out questions that did not give new information, finding clearer formulations for questions that were confusing to the participants, and adding follow-up questions in places where we did not get sufficient depth of information with our original questions. Thus, the quality of the script was continually improved to ensure that the acquired information fit the constructs the study was designed to measure and had enough depth to answer the research questions.

### ***Procedure***

Before the interviews the participants were informed about the confidentiality of the data and each interview started with small talk and a few easy questions.. The questions were based on previous literature (Schmidt & Moust, 1995; Loda et al., 2020). More specifically, we adopted similar themes in order to better understand the student experience of congruence. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 80 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences. For most interviews a private room could be arranged, but some interviews were conducted in public areas; in those cases, it was ensured no one could overhear the interview. Most of the participants were provided with snacks and/or something to drink in order to make them feel comfortable and relaxed enough to engage in conversation. Furthermore, all the interviews were audio recorded on a device, as well as a second recording to prevent loss of data. Recordings were transcribed and all the participants were given a number from one to twelve to sort the transcripts. Names were only used to keep track of which transcripts were done and kept between members of the research team. Lastly, the names of the mentors of the students were not mentioned in the interviews and otherwise excluded in the transcript.

### ***Data analysis***

After the successful collection and transcription of data, a systematic process was initiated to analyse the data. Predetermined categories, informed by the literature, allowed for a predominantly deductive analytical approach (Brinkmann, 2023; Döringer, 2021). Any instances of inductive analysis followed thereafter, to capture emergent insights or themes not initially considered. Using ATLAS.ti software (version 23.0.6), the transcripts were meticulously coded according to these categories, ensuring the representation of every piece

of information was accurate (G. Tort-Nassarre et al., 2023). Upon conducting a comprehensive deductive analysis, a layer of inductive analysis was carried out (Döringer, 2021; Bingham and Witkowsky, 2022). This facilitated the identification of new themes or patterns that emerged from the data, potentially offering novel insights (G. Tort-Nassarre et al., 2023). To support the results, quotes that accurately reflected the categories and unique findings were carefully selected and extracted from the transcripts (Loda et al., 2020; G. Tort-Nassarre et al., 2023).

### **Results Deductive Analysis**

The obtained results were coded based on distinct categories: positive affective engagement (AE+), negative affective engagement (AE-), positive behavioural engagement (BE+), and negative behavioural engagement (BE-), all in relation to social congruence.

#### ***Social Congruence***

The participants in the study exhibited social congruence with their peer mentors, which was manifested through various elements such as similarity, trust, and safety. Trust was exhibited with the peer mentor, as evidenced by the following statement: “If we had any personal concerns I think we could have gone to him at that time.” Moreover, safety was also found to mitigate social congruence, as participants shared that they felt comfortable to participate. This is evidenced by the following statement: “With the student mentor [...] it just felt like easier to admit that I might have not understood this.” Lastly, similarity was shared with the peer mentor, substantiated by participants' anecdotes, which clearly demonstrated a shared sense of understanding and connection with their peer mentors. For instance, one participant recounted their peer mentor stating, “We've been here. We know what you're going through,” indicating a mutual recognition of their experiences.

Additionally, participants emphasized the ease of relating to their peer mentors due to similar shared experiences, stating that it was “a lot easier to relate to them from like the student experience.” The establishment of social congruence played a significant role in cultivating a positive and supportive relationship between the participants and their mentors. Moreover, this social congruence had implications for student engagement, which will be further discussed in the subsequent analysis.

In contrast, the level of social congruence experienced with the faculty mentor was less noticeable. Although there were occasional instances where participants reported feelings of social congruence with the faculty mentor, the overwhelming majority of anecdotes indicated a lack of social congruence. This lack of social congruence was reflected in the dimensions of trust, safety, and similarity, as previously discussed. Participants expressed a sense of unease and discomfort in classes taught by the faculty mentor, often describing a pervasive “fear of saying something wrong.” This sentiment is further supported by a participant's observation of the classroom atmosphere as being somewhat “weird” or another participant who said: “she just stresses us out, scares us”. Furthermore, participants voiced a hesitancy to seek assistance from the faculty mentor when facing academic challenges, indicating a lack of trust in their ability to provide support, as demonstrated by the following: “she does not seem the most approachable”. Lastly, the element of similarity was not commonly perceived with the faculty mentor unless there was a closer age proximity to the students. One participant emphasized this point, stating, “I don't think he really tries to imagine himself as a student. Maybe it's hard for him to because of that, like the distance from when he was a student.”

### *Affective Engagement*

The analysis of affective engagement encompassed the assessment of participants' sense of belongingness and connectedness to the class environment, as well as the level of personal connection experienced with either mentor. This examination aimed to explore how these factors influenced participants' engagement with the course material and class discussions. Overall, affective engagement was found to be affected by social congruence when interacting with the peer mentor.

### *Belongingness/connectedness and relationship*

Comparing classes taught by the peer mentor and those taught by the faculty mentor, participants consistently reported experiencing a distinct difference in the overall level of comfort. Participants expressed feeling at ease in the classes led by the peer mentor, perceiving them as a friend rather than an authoritative figure. "If you feel seen, you also want to do better for the class". Consequently, they felt inclined to freely express their thoughts and opinions, fostering a higher degree of engagement with the course material. In contrast, classes taught solely by the faculty mentor were described as tense and formal. "It's a little more tense. Like there's like the feeling that you're constantly... like the fear of saying something wrong".

Belongingness was not identified with faculty mentor, "It's very difficult to communicate with the faculty mentor. Just because we don't always feel like he understands what we're saying." As a result, participants reported feeling less engaged in the material. Additionally, there was a heightened fear of making mistakes in these classes, contributing to a reduced sense of comfort within the classroom environment. "We're all just like, scared if we say something wrong, then you know we get like worse grades."

Furthermore, participants consistently expressed a greater sense of connection and rapport with the peer mentor compared to the faculty mentor. One participant explained that she feels connected to the class, which motivates her to engage. “Like when all of us sitting in the same in the same space and heard how the mentor relates to us like in like from his past experiences for example, it makes us feel connected in a way because we're like, OK, we're all students, we all have these struggles like, let's be honest, like we all understand and relate with the mentor”.

### ***Behavioural Engagement***

Behavioural engagement focused on the level of participation/preparedness and rule-following behaviour, and how much the participants felt obligated to do so and why.

#### *Participation and preparedness*

Participants clearly expressed a greater inclination to participate when interacting with their peer mentor compared to their faculty mentor. This disparity was attributed to the stronger sense of social congruence experienced in their interactions with the peer mentor. “You felt able to [...] be yourself as if you were where when you were with your friends, whereas the faculty mentor, the kind of gap difference made you not feel as like comfortable or able to just chat as if you were with your peers or whatever.” Thus, these feelings were not the same with the faculty mentor, “the lack of concern is what separated him from us”. This was manifested through the establishment of a personal connection and an overall preference for the peer mentor. This respect was distinct from the level of respect experienced with the peer mentor, which participants perceived as more akin to friendship. “I don't think like the mentors really affect the attendance in that case. It's more like with the student mentor, it feels more like easier to go.” Additionally, participants exhibited a heightened concern for



preparedness in classes solely taught by the faculty mentor. Conversely, this sense of concern was not evident in classes with the peer mentor, as participants perceived the mentor to be lenient and accommodating.

### *Rule-following*

Individuals who identified the faculty mentor as a source of motivation for following the rules described feeling obligated to do so, driven by a sense of respect for the figure of authority. “The rules set I would usually just oblige by because I found that was the appropriate thing because they were, in a way, the authorities.” However, rule-following was said to be a standard already set, not something that needed any additional encouraging. “I think the course was very rule following like nobody was very outside the range or something everyone was always listening and participating.”

### **Results Inductive Analysis**

Participants expressed a sense of respect towards their teachers in general, and this respect influenced their behavioural engagement. When inquired about their reasons for participating or adhering to class rules, many students mentioned the influence of respect towards their mentors. However, it was noted that this respect was more prominently directed towards their faculty mentor and less towards their peer mentor. One participant when asked the following question: “Was there anything your faculty mentor could have done to improve upon that sense of connection during her lessons?” responded: “I'm not sure. Because she's an authority figure [...] that's why we all behave differently at first.” Which highlights that there was a different level of respect among mentors. This is further demonstrated by another participant, who said that she respected both equally but in dissimilar ways. “The faculty mentor was the authority” and someone she felt she had to “impress”. With “the student

mentor [...] I found [him] very sympathetic". This points to the notion that respect may also play a large role in behavioural and affective engagement, possibly alongside social congruence. Adding on to that, when it came to following class rules, most participants stated that they followed them regardless of their mentor's influence. This suggests that their adherence to rules was not significantly influenced by either mentor.

## **Discussion**

The primary objective of the present study was to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the influence of social congruence on the teaching styles exhibited by peer mentors and faculty mentors, with a specific focus on its impact on the affective and behavioural engagement of students. By centring on the student perspective of social congruence, the study aimed to identify the key elements of social congruence that are pertinent to student engagement within an educational context. The findings highlighted that participants felt more engaged and comfortable in classes taught by peer mentors, which was attributed to a sense of social congruence and personal connection. In contrast, classes with faculty mentors were perceived as tense and formal, however not necessarily leading to reduced engagement. Participants explained that they missed social congruence but did not report a decline in, for example, their motivation or belongingness. Furthermore, peer mentors encouraged participation and preparedness which demonstrated a difference in engagement. Overall, social congruence emerged as a critical factor in fostering engagement.

This difference of social congruence experienced between the students with each of their mentors aligns with previous research that suggests that peer mentors, who have recently experienced similar academic challenges, can better empathize and relate to the struggles faced by students (Lockspeiser et al., 2008), thus experience higher social congruence. The current results also align with those found by Loda et al. (2006), who found social congruence to be of relevance within the academic setting, identifying themes such as

similarity, trust and safety. Especially similarity and sympathy for current problems faced by students was found to be of relevance in the study conducted by Loda et al. (2006), something we recognised within our data analysis as well. However, the current research delved deeper into the impact of social congruence on affective and behavioural engagement. Surprisingly, the absence of social congruence did not lead to decreased engagement.

Drawing from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), it can be explained that peer mentors, with their closer age and experience proximity, provide a supportive environment where students feel free to express themselves, make choices, and take ownership of their learning experiences, aligning with social congruence. In contrast, faculty mentors may inadvertently exert authority or power dynamics, which can affect students' autonomy and social congruence. The differences between peer mentors and faculty mentors explain the variations in both engagements. We theorise that peer mentors' social congruence promotes autonomy, competence, and relatedness, leading to increased engagement, while faculty mentors' authority and potential power dynamics limit social congruence and may result in lower engagement levels. This understanding underscores the significance of creating supportive environments that foster social congruence to enhance student behavioural/affective engagement in mentoring programs and educational settings. This is something to be further explored in future research.

Our findings also align with previous research that emphasizes the role of supportive interactions and positive teacher-student relationships in fostering affective engagement (Crespo et al., 2013). An alternative explanation for this is that students can have stronger relationships with teachers of classes they find less difficult and felt more affectively- and behaviourally engaged (Roorda, Jorgensen and Koomen, 2019). Thus, it might have to do with the difficulty of the class. This is further supported by the notion that, overall, participants found the class not to be useful nor difficult. Further regarding behavioural

engagement, the current study findings support the argument that peer mentoring can have a positive influence on students' active participation in academic activities and discussions (Estell & Perdue, 2013). Students' connection with their peer mentors, characterized by social congruence, creates a supportive and conducive learning environment that encourages students to be more engaged in their studies and trumps the fear of speaking up in class to participate in discussions.

Surprisingly, however, engagement was not found to be affected through social congruence. In some instances participants shared anecdotes where they felt less connected to their faculty mentor, but never explicitly mentioned that this negatively impacted their studies. In general, university students are more autonomous compared to non-university students (Thompson, Pawson and Evans, 2021), thus a lack of negative impact may be attributed to this higher level of autonomy. Therefore it is relevant to look into this with a more focused lens to explore the other factors that influence engagement alongside social congruence.

Upon reflection of the inductive analysis, the influence of respect on engagement emerged as a noteworthy theme. Participants consistently expressed a sense of respect towards their mentors, regardless of their position. However, the level of respect and the underlying reasons for it varied significantly. Respect, which is known to play a fundamental role in fostering successful personal and professional relationships (Marciano, 2010), holds considerable importance within the student-mentor dynamic. Exploring the interplay between respect and social congruence can offer valuable insights. The current findings already indicate that different forms of respect exist depending on the mentor's position. Respect towards peer mentors stemmed from the students' recognition of their novice teaching status or nervousness. In contrast, respect towards faculty mentors appeared to be primarily based

on their authoritative position within the academic institution. Thus, this could be further explored in future qualitative research.

### ***Implications***

The findings of this study have practical and theoretical implications for both peer mentors and faculty mentors. Peer mentors should recognize the significance of social congruence and personal connection in promoting student engagement. They can create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment by fostering rapport and cultivating a friendly atmosphere that encourages students to freely express their thoughts and opinions. This approach enhances both affective and behavioural engagement. Faculty mentors can also benefit from understanding the importance of social congruence and its impact on student engagement. They should strive to establish positive and approachable relationships with students, emphasizing a sense of belongingness and reducing the fear of making mistakes. It is essential to address any discrepancies in social congruence between faculty mentors and Peer mentors through interventions aimed at promoting a greater level of social congruence and enhancing student engagement. By doing so, both student and faculty mentors can contribute to a more supportive and engaging learning environment for students.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that mentorship programs provide training and guidance for both peer mentors and faculty mentors for the purpose of the aforementioned problem, which shows a drop in high-school students continuing into university or college (Konzelmann, 2000). Applying these findings earlier on, such as in high school could potentially combat this problem, and it could be considered to apply peer mentoring programmes earlier in educational settings. Either way, students should be encouraged to share their own experiences and struggles to foster a sense of connection with students as well as creating a supportive learning environment, effective communication, and

approaches to reduce tension and formality in the classroom. By improving their teaching practices and incorporating strategies to enhance social congruence, both student and faculty mentors can contribute to increased student engagement.

These findings could be applied to a wide range of academic settings as it is important to focus on specific behaviours and skills that promote behavioural engagement. Emphasizing active participation, can foster a sense of belongingness and encourage students to freely express their thoughts. Willms (2003) found that those who do not participate as much in class, experienced a decreased sense of well-being, thus it is viable that the opposite is also true. Incorporating opportunities for students to connect with their peers and mentors, such as mentor-led study groups or informal social events, can enhance the sense of community and further promote engagement. Additionally, providing clear guidelines and expectations, along with constructive feedback, can help reduce students' fear of making mistakes and create a more supportive learning environment.

Interventions aimed at improving teaching for both peer mentors and faculty mentors can involve mentorship training programs, workshops, and ongoing professional development. These interventions should focus on, as identified by Yew and Yong (2014), “personality, relating to students, professionalism, motivating students, and learning environment”. More specifically, faculty mentors can benefit from training that emphasizes student-centered approaches, building relationships with students, and fostering an inclusive learning environment. These interventions aim to address the challenges and discrepancies in social congruence teaching styles between peer mentors and faculty mentors. By equipping mentors with the necessary skills and knowledge, they can better support and engage students in the academic skills course.

### *Limitations*

One potential limitation of this study is the presence of interpretation bias. As qualitative research involves the interpretation of data by the researchers, there is a possibility of subjectivity and bias influencing the analysis and findings. To combat this, some strategies were employed. All interviews were analysed at least two times, all themes were previously determined, and a general consensus was made regarding the analysis process. Despite efforts to maintain rigor and objectivity through systematic coding and multiple researchers' involvement, it is important to acknowledge that individual perspectives and preconceived notions may have influenced the interpretation of the data. This could introduce a potential bias in the identification of themes, patterns, and the overall understanding of the participants' experiences. The potential implications of interpretation bias are twofold. Firstly, it could have influenced the identification and categorization of themes, as different researchers may have different interpretations of the same data. At no point were quotes removed from a theme and thus this subjectivity might have introduced a degree of bias into the analysis, potentially overlooking certain nuances or alternative interpretations of the participants' experiences. Secondly, interpretation bias could have affected the selection of quotes to support the findings, potentially leading to a skewed representation of the data.

Furthermore, the study should have acknowledged the limitations of its sample as the issue of generalisability arises. The sample consisted strictly of first-year Psychology students at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. This has significant implications on the external validity of this research. However, it should be kept in mind that achieving a diverse sample within qualitative research is a commonly occurring problem (Trotter, 2012). Despite this, following the suggestions by Guest et al., 2006 we can assume the sample size is adequate to reach data saturation. Aside from that, there may be a difference in university students compared to, for example, non-students in terms of conduct and motivation to follow class rules (Thompson et

al., 2021). It is plausible that individuals who choose to pursue higher education may already possess higher levels of conduct, discipline, autonomy and adherence to rules compared to those who do not pursue further studies (Thompson et al., 2021). As a result, the influence of factors such as social congruence on their motivation and desire to follow class rules may be relatively lower. Recognizing this distinction would have provided a more nuanced interpretation of the findings and allowed for a more accurate understanding of the impact of peer mentoring in student-teacher relationships.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the qualitative examination of social congruence, affective engagement, and behavioral engagement within the realm of peer mentoring in student-teacher relationships has yielded valuable understandings regarding participant dynamics and experiences. By acknowledging these limitations and heeding the suggested recommendations, future research can expand upon these discoveries and deepen our comprehension of how peer mentoring contributes to the development of positive student-teacher relationships.

### ***Conclusion***

The findings of this research emphasize the significance of social congruence in promoting student engagement. Students exhibited positive effects on their level of behavioural and affective engagement as well as comfort in classes with peer mentors, where a sense of personal connection and social congruence was established. In contrast, classes led solely by faculty mentors lacked the same level of social congruence, leading to no perceived change in affective and behavioural engagement as well as increased perceived tension. This highlights the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. The results of this study provide valuable insights for future research in the field of mentorship and student engagement.



Researchers can further explore the dynamics of social congruence and its impact on student engagement in different educational contexts and disciplines. Additionally, investigating strategies to promote social congruence and enhance mentor-student relationships can contribute to the development of effective mentorship programs. Further exploration of the factors influencing behavioural engagement, such as participation and rule-following, can also provide valuable insights for educational practitioners.

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