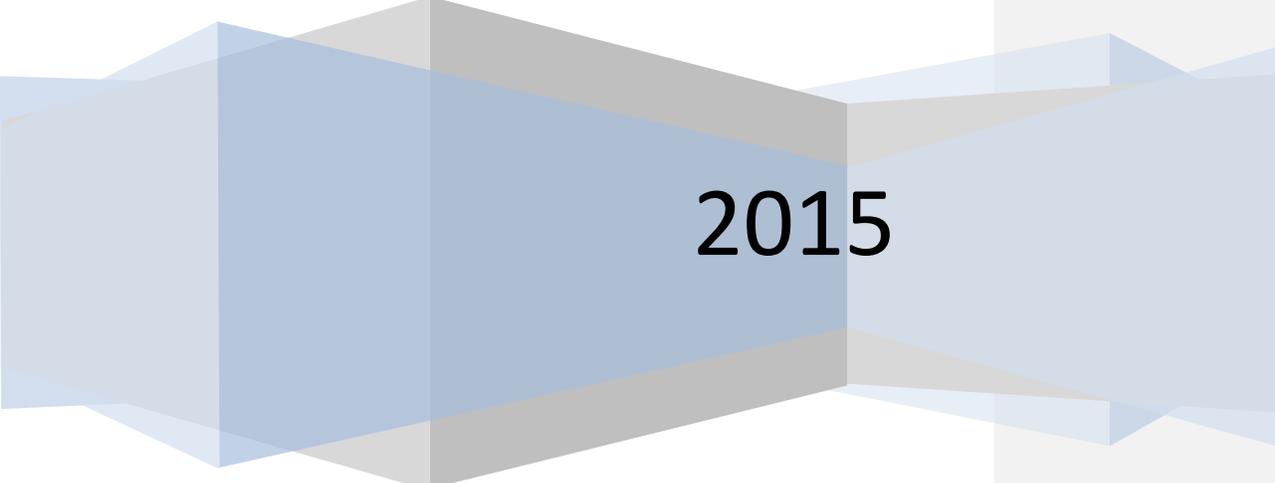


# I CAN NETWORK

## “A travelling second home”

Pilot Mentoring Program Evaluation, Marymede  
Catholic College

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2015

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

Created by people on the Autism Spectrum, the I CAN Network is working at a grassroots level with both the Autistic and the non-Autistic community to “change the way we think about Autism” (Varney 2013). Since its conception, the organization has engaged with schools, businesses, universities, and the wider community to achieve this aim. This evaluation focuses on the pilot mentoring program that has been delivered by I CAN at Marymede Catholic College over the last year to provide mentors to young people (Year 7-10) with Autism. Data for this evaluation has been collected from participants, mentors and teachers through focus groups and interviews. This evaluation explores whether *I CAN Network’s* informal mentoring program has improved outcomes for young people living on the Spectrum. Findings suggest the program has had largely positive effects on participant’s levels of self confidence, ability to think about their futures, and social relationships.

## 2.0 Introduction

### 2.1 Overview

In 2014, the I CAN Network began its pilot informal mentoring program working with students placed on the Autism Spectrum at Marymede Catholic College, South Morang. The program runs for 90 minutes fortnightly with approximately ten participants from Years 7-10. Each session involves a range of interactive activities that have been selected based on the self-stated needs of the participants. The original aim of the sessions was to improve confidence and build social relations for young people on the Spectrum. This evaluation explores the value of the program after one year of operation.

## 2.1 Background

Autism as a diagnostic category has undergone a significant shift over the last 70 years. Originally considered a psychological illness (Kanner 1949), in 1965 it was labelled a neurobiological disorder (Rimland, as cited in Caruso 2010, p. 491). Today, with the rise of 'neurodiversity' as a political movement<sup>1</sup> perceptions on the condition continue to prove fluid. Whilst there is a growing awareness of the "untapped potential" (Heaton, as cited in Happe & Frith n.d) that exists amongst those on the Spectrum, lack of understanding and entrenched stigma still pervades widespread views on Autism. This continues to have a significant impact on the confidence of young people who are labelled with the condition (see Staniland et. al. 2013; Linton 2014; Humphries & Lewis 2008). A review of the relevant literature will consider both the necessity and potential for exploring alternative ways to improve outcomes for young people on the Spectrum.

Autism is known within the medical model as a lifelong neurological developmental disorder that impairs communication and social interaction, as well as cognitive and behavioural flexibility (Hill et al. 2003). There are several categories that have traditionally fallen under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), including Aspergers Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) (Sterm et. al. 2004). The diagnostic statistics on the condition vary significantly. Whilst early studies suggest that Autism affects 4 per 10,000 school aged children (Ritvo & Freeman 1977), more recent studies have found that number to be closer to 50-60 per 10,000 (Chakrabarti & Fombonne, 2005). The reasons behind the shift are a significant point of contention within the relevant literature. It is suggested that environmental

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<sup>1</sup> Neurodiversity is the idea that Autism, among other neurological differences, is but a natural human variation in the human condition. The movement calls for more rights for Autistic individuals, as well as greater acceptance and awareness of the value of neuro-diverse conditions. It has been compared to the homosexuality movement of the 1960's (Jaarsma & Welin 2012)

factors, as well as changes to the diagnostic criteria, are among some of the contributing factors (see Orberle Gotham 2010; Landrigan 2010; Yeargin-Allsopp et. al. 2003).

The rise in diagnosis is often depicted as an impending global crisis that demands medical and social intervention (see Gillberg et. al. 2006; Lainer & Gerhardt 2011). However, this view is challenged by many within the Autistic community. The theory of 'neurodiversity' has led to a very different understanding of autism. Originally coined by Judy Singer in the late 1990's, the term highlights the political nature of the diagnosis and promotes Autism as simply one aspect of human neurological diversity. Singer (1998) compares the Autistic community and other neurally diverse populations with other minority groups that have experienced discrimination based on biological differences (e.g. gender and race). She suggests that:

*“Neurodiversity takes postmodern fragmentation one step further. Just as the postmodern era sees every once too solid belief melt into air, even our most taken-for-granted assumptions: that we all more or less see, feel, touch, hear, smell, and sort information, in more or less the same way, (unless visibly disabled) are being dissolved. (pp 12-13)”.*

The founding principles of neurodiversity have since found a strong presence in much of the literature on Autism (see Cascio 2012; Fenton & Krahn 2007; Kapp et al 2013; Marrero 2012; Shapiro, 2006).

With these two fundamentally different understandings of Autism, both the traditional medical model and the neurodiversity framework present very different ideas on how best to respond to the growing phenomenon. Under the medical model, Autism is a defective disorder that needs to be “treated” with intensive medical intervention. Whereas, through the lens of neurodiversity, the poor outcomes associated with Autism are more often attributed to the inability for society to accommodate neurological human difference (Orsini 2012). Despite the philosophical variations between the two camps, there is general consensus that the Autistic

community needs increased support and resources before genuine inclusion can be achieved (Lainer & Gerhardt 2011; Orsini 2012).

Exploring alternative means for enabling young people on the Spectrum to live full and meaningful lives is suggested to have both a moral and economic imperative. The financial benefits are highlighted by Caruso (2010). Firstly, it is pointed out that the current 'best practice' for responding to an Autism diagnosis is expensive, as it requires excessive resources from adult caregivers. Secondly, Caruso (2010) suggests that society has a lot to gain from empowering people with Autism, as the condition is often the "unavoidable flip-side of the precious coin of genius" (p. 499). Thus, not only is supporting people with Autism considered important for universal values of inclusion (Verdugo et. al. 2012), but it is also considered to be a "wise investment" (Caruso 2010 p. 500).

Whilst the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will go some way to increasing support for young people on the Spectrum, resources for the condition will remain limited in Australia. Many will not receive the necessary funding for current 'best practice' early intervention under the new initiative (Brown 2014). These economic limitations- as well as the philosophical tensions for how best to support those with the condition- prove ongoing issues for both families and government. Thus, there is a growing space to consider alternative avenues for enabling people with Autism to live full and meaningful lives.

### **3.0 Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Mentoring**

Mentoring programs have proven to have a positive effect on students with varying disabilities (see Jones & Goble 2012; McDonald et. al. 2005; Shpigelman 2008). More specifically, Shevitz

et. al (2003) conducted research on a mentoring program with students who were considered both 'gifted' and to have learning difficulties. The study found that "students realize their creative and intellectual potential when paired with mentors who nurture them by increasing their knowledge and skills in an area of interest" (p.1). The importance of mentors for people with Autism is further advocated by autistic scholar Temple Grandin. Grandin (2007) suggests that mentors can play a significant role in developing the interests and talents of young person's on the spectrum. She also promotes a less formal type of mentoring, in which the partnership develops organically.

The benefits of mentoring for young people with Autism have been most recently considered in a study conducted by Curtin et al (2015). The study examined a pilot mentoring program involving university students and high schools students who had all been diagnosed with Autism. The program ran over a 6 month period and aimed to improve outcomes for high school students on the Autism Spectrum through individualized mentoring. The study collected data from participants, parents, mentors and staff. Each group reported improved social connectedness, self esteem and quality of life; and a reduction in social anxiety for the students participating in the program. The study took a pre-post design in which outcomes were measured before the program began and then 3 weeks after the program completed. Quality of life and self esteem scales were used to measure the effectiveness of the program.

Whilst Curtin et al (2015) show the potential for mentoring programs to have an overall positive effect on participants involved, there are several points of difference to the current study. Thus, the findings cannot be easily transferred to the I CAN Networks mentoring program. Firstly, it is important to note the key variation in the program delivery. Where the program examined by Curtin et al (2015) focused on individualised mentoring, the I CAN Network has delivered an informal approach to mentoring. This is based on the philosophy that mentee-mentor relationships develop organically and connections are fluid. Thus, the program runs with two mentors for the group. It is proposed that within this environment, students are able to connect to different mentors at different times without any rigid structure. Secondly, the

method for evaluation differs significantly. Curtin et al. (2015) chose to use quantitative measures to show the benefits of the program. The current study is using qualitative research techniques. The reasons for this are explained below.

### 3.2 Methodological Decisions

Psychometric surveys are commonly used in a variety of quantitative research contexts, however they were not appropriate to use in this research study. The Quality of Life (QoL) scale is considered to be a reliable and valid psychometric measure (Burkhardt & Anderson 2003). The QoL questionnaire aims to gauge different aspects of one's wellbeing, including social life, physical health and emotional health. The results are then tabled to present a score of general wellbeing. Employing questionnaires- such as the QoL scale- was a strategy that was considered for this particular study. Whilst the scale does provide a comprehensive and holistic analysis of a person's health, employing the scale for this particular research project presented a variety of challenges.

The QoL scale has been used to evaluate a variety of Autism interventions in recent years. However, there are differing views on how effective this tool can be for exploring the impact of programs. It is questioned whether the indicators usually used for Quality of Life scales are accurate measures for an Autistic individual (Burgess & Gutstien 2007). Furthermore, there are a range of practical limitations that would present themselves when using this scale for this particular evaluation.

Firstly, it is important to highlight that one of the effects of Autism can be a lack of self-concept (depending on where they sit on the Spectrum), thus some people on the spectrum may have difficulty expressing their own feelings and emotions within a survey format (Millward et al.

2000, p. 26). This has proven a problem for research that has conducted Quality of Life (QoL) scales with people on the Spectrum<sup>2</sup>.

For those who struggle with the surveys, parental reports and proxy reports have gone some way into giving a more holistic understanding of specific areas (Clark et. al 2015). However, due to the scope of the study, it was not feasible to include external reports in the evaluation. Furthermore, the standardised QoL survey is often quite lengthy and convoluted which may not fit in with the limited time frame of a mentoring session. To use a shortened version of the survey would not carry the same validity as the traditional psychometric questionnaires. Furthermore, the sample size of research participants (approx. 10) is too small to collect meaningful data solely by using quantitative instruments.

Importantly there is an overarching limitation that presents itself when trying to measure social impact after such a short time period. Owen (2006) suggests that impact evaluations should only be undertaken on programs that are in a “mature or settled stage” (p.252). Thus, Owen highlights the impossibility of providing any accurate gauge of social impact in the early stages of a program. Considering the program has only been in operation for one year, attempting to quantify the impact of the mentoring program could prove difficult.

It is also important to consider the ethical problems that present themselves when distributing psychometric surveys to young people on the Autism Spectrum. Mainly, psychometric tests should only be delivered by those who have the adequate training to administer and interpret the findings (*Guidelines on the Use of Psychometric Tests* 2013). The I CAN network does not have such expertise. Thus, the use of QoL surveys for this evaluation would make it a ‘high risk’ approach. Identifying alternative data collection methods more suited to both the Autistic population, and to such a new organisation with little expertise in psychometric testing is preferable.

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<sup>2</sup> There has been research into finding more effective ways to gauge quality of life and self-esteem in individuals with Autism, although results have been inconclusive (Burgess & Gutsein 2007). Tavenor et al. (2013) suggests that a new tool for evaluating wellbeing and Quality of Life should be grounded in young people with Autism perspectives of their own lives. The study highlights the importance of actively including the young people and their families in developing a more accurate theoretical framework for Autism-specific measures.

The use of qualitative research methods provide a more in-depth and insightful data in a study of this kind. The information obtained is more descriptive in nature and tends to focus on the experience of the different respondent groups. When analysed together, the collective views of research participants provide an indication of the emerging benefits and shortcomings that have begun to emerge, and contribute useful insights about adjustments that could be made to improve the chance of achieving the desired longer term outcomes.

### 3.3 Developing an Ethics Protocol

A study conducted by Nind (2008) highlights the importance of developing an ethics protocol when working qualitatively with people with learning and communication difficulties. This is especially important for this study as the organisation is new to research and ethical dimension that goes with it. It is widely understood within the field of sociology that research is inherently political (Swain, Heyman & Gilman 1998). The field of disability studies is no exception. As Nind (2008) points out research has the “potential to exploit vulnerable groups and further their disempowerment and oppression” (p.5). Thus it is important to think carefully when it comes to methodological decisions.

Qualitative research differs to more traditional forms of research in which the voices of the oppressed are largely excluded. Nind (2008) highlights how qualitative research has the potential to access the perspectives and the experiences of the oppressed. However, how much voice is given and how this is done is still largely left up to the researcher (Nind 2008, p.5). This evaluation is based on the premise that “people with learning and communication difficulties have something to say that is worth hearing and experiences that are worth understanding”. Furthermore, a study conducted by Tuffrey-Wijjne, Bernai & Hollins (2008) suggests that people with communication and learning difficulties will often want to be heard as it has the potential to help both themselves and others.

## 4.0 Methodology

### 4.1 Overview

This study has taken a qualitative, strengths based approach in order to capture the voices of the program participants whom, under traditional quantitative analysis, would have typically been excluded. The evaluation is centered on five key questions and is formative evaluation in nature. It aims to provide insights about the value of the I CAN Network's mentoring program. The questions were left as open as possible to ensure research participants had the opportunity to express their personal view. Participants, teachers and mentors were all involved in the study to ensure a thorough exploration of the program. A variety of methods were used to ensure that the data collection process was appropriate for each respondent group (*see Appendix B for methodology matrix*).

### 4.2 Aim

To explore the value of the I CAN Network's informal mentoring program after one year of operation at Marymede Catholic College from the perspective of the participants, mentors, teachers and program director.

Questions included:

1. Why do you think the students joined the program?
2. What do you think have been the main effects / benefits of the program?

3. What is it about the program that has contributed to these effects/benefits?
4. Do you think the program has helped participants to think about their goals for the future? If yes, how was this achieved?
5. What have been some of the challenges of the program?

### 4.3 Research Participants

#### Program participants

The vast majority of the nine participants were on the Autism Spectrum; however, there were 3 participants who had other forms of learning difficulties such as Dyslexia. Most of the participants had been involved in the program since it began in June, 2014

#### Program Director

The program director had taken a leading role in the program planning and delivery since it began.

#### Mentors

The two mentors who took part in the evaluation had been involved in the program to varying degrees. Whilst one mentor had been involved in the planning and delivery of the program since it began, the other mentor had been involved on and off since it commenced.

#### Teachers

The three teachers who participated in the evaluation had taken a background role in the I CAN sessions since the program began.

### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

The issue of consent is a key point of consideration when it comes to research ethics. Gaining informed consent is necessary as both a legal requirement and a moral obligation (Nind 2008

p.6). According to Scott et al. (2006, as cited in Nind 2008) there are three factors that need to be looked at in regards to the issue of consent. It is suggested that a person's ability to give consent; how much the research will benefit the individual; and how much the public will benefit from the research are all weighed up before a study is conducted. This study underwent a risk/benefits analysis to address these concerns (see Appendix A). Furthermore, in order to make the concepts of consent accessible to the group a short info-zine<sup>3</sup> was created. The simplification of information into illustrative scenes is recommended by Dunn et al. (2006, as cited in Nind 2008) as a way to ensure information gets across to the participants. Verbal information prior to the study is also encouraged, thus the research team ensured participants were told several times in advance about the research study and their related rights.

## 4.5 Research Methods

### Focus Group

A focus group was held with nine of the program participants during one of the I CAN Network sessions. The group was facilitated by the program director (primary mentor) as he had established a rapport with the participants, which was important to ensure optimum participation. Participants had been made aware of the evaluation several weeks in advance through an info-zine. The small booklet outlined the evaluation process, their rights, and what the evaluation will be used for. On the day, students were again told that the process was entirely voluntary.

Those students who agreed to participate were asked to think about what the I CAN informal mentoring program has meant to them (*Questions 1*). They were encouraged to think about both the positive attributes of the program as well as potential improvements. They were given 20 minutes and a range of materials (e.g. paper, pens, lego, computers) to make something that represented what the program had meant to them (see Appendix C for student creations). After the 20 minutes had passed, students were asked to come back to the circle and talk about their

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<sup>3</sup> A small illustrative booklet that delivers information in a manner that is easy to comprehend

creations. Hand written notes were taken on what participants said. It was made clear to participants that all comments were to be de-identified.

The decision was made to focus on just one of the five questions as there was limited time to involve participants in the study. I chose to ask about the benefits of the program as I believed this would elicit the most valuable information for this study.

The method was chosen as it could be done within one of the I CAN sessions and did not require extra-curricular involvement. It also allowed students an alternative means of accessing their thoughts on the program (i.e. creatively through drawing, lego, writing etc.). This is important considering the communication difficulties that some young people on Autism Spectrum may experience.

### Interviews

Phone interviews were conducted with the program director and two of the mentors where they were asked all five questions (*see above*). The questions were given in advance to ensure they had some understanding of what information was needed. Hand written notes were taken on each mentor's comments. Mentors were informed that the process was voluntary. Phone interviews were chosen due to the difficulty of finding time to meet with these respondents one on one. Interviews also allow for in-depth data to be collected on the program.

Face to face interviews were conducted with the three of the teachers. Again, all five questions were asked to this respondent group and they were given these questions in advance. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

## 4.6 Data Analysis

All data collected was sorted using thematic analysis. The process involves "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 79). Rather than describing the information collected, it allows for themes to emerge out of seemingly unrelated

data. This approach is often used in qualitative research to organize data in a logical and systematic way.

As the data was being collected from all sources it was transcribed into key dot points (i.e. poignant comments, short hand notes) under the headings of each information source (i.e. mentors, teachers, participants). Each dot point was also put under a subheading of which question it related to (i.e. Questions 1-6). After reading over one data source several times, it was then colour coded into emerging themes. Once all the data from one source had been sorted into its appropriate theme using the coding method, the next data source was analysed in the same way.

As each data source underwent the same process, key themes began to emerge. For example, a quote in which a participant explained that the program had allowed “union between all types of people” was coded as ‘social interaction and acceptance of each other’. Another quote from an interview with a mentor where it was said that the program allowed participants to “make friendships” was also coded under this same category. All themes were then listed under each question where some were grouped together even further. For example, the themes ‘positivity’, ‘program delivery and content’ and ‘fun activities’ were combined to create the new category of ‘strength based approach’.

#### 4.7 Limitations

Due to the scope of the study and time constraints there were a variety of limitations that presented themselves whilst conducting this study.

Firstly, the focus group with program participants provided limited data on the challenges of the program. Whilst participants were asked to give their views on both the benefits *and* what they thought could be improved, due to time constraints (only 20 minutes allocated for the evaluation) it was not possible to explore all these aspects of the program. Considering the

public nature of a focus group it was natural that participants may have felt more confident expressing how the program had benefited them rather than how it could be improved.

Given more time, it could have been possible to conduct one on one conversations with participants in which they may have felt more at ease- and had more time- to convey how they thought the program could be improved. Due to the same time constraints, it was not possible to ask participants the other four questions that were put to both the mentors and the teachers. Had it been possible to engage with the participants over a longer timeframe, it is likely that the additional insights gained from this significant respondent group would have provided important information about the true value of the program and how it might be further improved.

Secondly, due to the scope of the study, it was not possible to collect data from parents or guardians. This would have been helpful to provide another perspective on the value of the program. There is research to suggest that proxy reports for those on the Autism Spectrum go some way in providing useful data (David & Henderson 2010; Clark et. Al 2015). Future evaluations may benefit from combining parental views on how the program has affected various aspects of their child's self-esteem and confidence to disclose.

Technological barriers also prevented the interviews with mentors and the program director from being recorded in in-depth fashion. Research notes were typed during the interview process instead of tape-recorded. A more thorough investigation into the value of the program may require more advanced technology.

## **5.0 Research Findings**

### **5.1 Reasons Why Students Joined the Program**

This question was asked to teachers, mentors, and the program director. Therefore, the following responses do not express the views of students.

The program director (Chris Varney) suggested external encouragement from teachers and parents played a primary role in why students initially joined the program. Before the program commenced, Chris consulted with teachers and parents to introduce the curriculum. He noted the positive response that came from these initial meetings, and highlighted that after these early introductions, students were told by parents and teachers that the program would be a good opportunity. The other two mentors and all three teachers agreed that this may have been a significant factor to why students originally became involved in the program.

All three teachers, both mentors and the program director noted that the opportunity for social interaction was another possible reason for students joining the program. It was suggested that making new friends, being part of a group, and connecting with other people on the Spectrum could have been important factors for participation. The prospect of social connectedness is a theme that underlies many of the other potential reasons for participation as noted by mentors.

*“They continued to stay with the group as they felt a sense of connectedness and group belonging”- Teacher*

*“[The program] normalised their experiences that many of them thought they were enduring alone”- Teacher*

Having the opportunity to learn new things was also considered a possible reason for participation by both mentors and the program director. Learning more about Autism, oneself and each other were mentioned across each interview as motivation for student involvement. It was also suggested that students may have seen the program as an interesting alternative to day-to-day class.

*“They wanted to know more about Autism”- Mentor*

There were several additional reasons why mentors, teachers and the program director believed students had joined the program. It was noted by one of the mentors and the program director that the intergenerational mentor/mentee relationship may have played a part in why students engaged with the program. Learning from older people on the Spectrum was suggested to be a positive draw card for student involvement. One teacher also specified that participant enjoyment was another key reason. Lastly, the program director mentioned that the program had a unique ability to build students confidence and raise expectations of themselves. He believed this to be an additional factor as to why students continued to attend the program.

*“They wanted to learn from older people on the Spectrum”- Mentor*

## 5.2 Benefits and Effects of the Program

This question was asked to teachers, mentors and students through interviews (mentors and teachers) and a focus group (participants). Thus, the following provides a holistic understanding of what the benefits and effects of the program are.

The list of perceived benefits and effects produced by the program was in-depth and extensive. Similarly to Question 1, the opportunity for social interaction quickly emerged as a key theme. Participants positively acknowledged the diversity amongst the group; as well as the friendships that had developed throughout the program. The mentors, teachers and the program director further validated the importance of this social element. One mentor noted how participants who had previously been somewhat isolated within the school grounds had started to spend time together. This was again highlighted by the program director when it was pointed out that students had started *“looking out for each other”*. Each of the three teachers also emphasised the importance of the social connectedness that comes out through the group.

*I CAN represents “union between all types of people... (a) coming together no matter what type of personality” - Participant*

*"Kids who had previously been alone in the school ground had started hanging out together" - Mentor*

*"Friendships have formed inside and outside I CAN sessions"- Teacher*

Another key benefit noted by mentors, teachers and participants was that students had begun to feel much more comfortable within themselves. In various ways, participants talked of how the I CAN Network program was a time in which they felt at ease to participate without inhibition. One participant noted that the session allowed him to express himself to others. Others highlighted that it was a place of "trust", "understanding", "freedom", "creativity", "acceptance" and "letting go of doubts". This theme of feeling comfortable and gaining self confidence surfaced again in the interviews with the program director, mentors and teachers. Both mentors and all three of the teachers noted the significant shift in confidence they had seen in the students over the past 18 months; and the program director highlighted that the students had become a lot more comfortable in who they were.

*"The program is "like a travelling second home...the door is always open [and] Chris is driving it"- Participant*

*"The greatest development is how students are presenting much more confidently in other environments'- Teacher*

Each of the four different respondent groups also noted how the I CAN sessions had gone some way in shifting students views on Autism. Both mentors highlighted that the program had helped students recognise their unique skills and abilities. The program director went further to say that the I CAN Network had allowed students to see Autism as a positive, rather than a deficit. This was backed up by one participant who expressed how the program had helped him to "feel happier that he has Autism". One of the teachers also acknowledged how the program had allowed students to feel proud of their Autism.

*"[The program has made me]... feel happier that I have Aspergers"- Participant*

*"Students are proud of their Autism diagnosis"- Teacher*

There were a few other benefits that the participants, the program director and the teachers noted as a result of the program. Some of the participants felt that the program had been a place in which they could think creatively and come up with “*new ideas*”. One teacher pointed out that the program provided a platform for students to share their interests with others. The program director explained how one student encouraged his best friend to attend an I CAN mentoring session. He pointed out that this display of confidence in the program was a key sign that the program was having a positive effect on participants. Lastly, one participant noted how he enjoyed the program because it allows him to “*get out of maths*”.

### 5.3 Contributing Factors to the Benefits of the Program

This question was asked to mentors, program director and teachers. Thus, it does not represent the views of the participants.

All of the mentors, teachers and the program director highlighted a vast range of factors that they believed contributed to the benefits of the program. However, the program director pointed out that the initial critical success factor was the schools trust in the program. He acknowledged that the school had made a significant investment in the I CAN Network and suggested that without the support of Marymede and the teachers involved, the program would not have had the opportunity to achieve its goals.

*Teachers were “extremely open to the program...committed [and] endlessly supportive” – Program Director*

Trust re-emerged as a key theme across responses for Question 3. It was noted by the program director that a bond developed very quickly between mentors and mentees due to the relatable experience of having Autism. He described how they (himself and the mentors) were able to make a lot of progress early on because they were on the Spectrum. Both mentors and two of the teachers also spoke of how participants were able to share relatable experiences,

which in turn had created a level of peer to peer bonding. This participant trust was thought to be another integral element of the success of the program.

*“There was an immediate understanding of each other...Spectrum to Spectrum”- Program Director*

*“Bond developed very quickly”- Program Director*

The strength based approach used to deliver the program was considered a vital underlying factor that contributed to the benefits. The program director pointed to the title of the program as embodying this approach. He highlighted how the ‘I CAN’ message *“did a lot”* as it was *“clearly understood by students”*. Both mentors also spoke of how the I CAN message was strong throughout various aspects of the program. One mentor, one teacher and the program director suggested that the I CAN Talks<sup>4</sup> were also important in focusing on- and promoting- the strengths of the students. More generally, it was suggested by both the program director and one mentor that using this approach to understand one’s self and Autism had had a significant positive impact on students self confidence.

*“The approach has been a massive critical success factor” – Program Director*

*“[The I CAN message] was clearly understood by students”- Program Director*

Other aspects of the delivery were also noted as significant for the success of the program by all three of the teachers, both of the mentors and by the program director. The engaging content, fun activities, casual approach and small group discussions were all considered key factors. Furthermore, the program director spoke of the importance of *‘learn, play, talk, do’* as the basic structure of the program. He noted how this approach encouraged participants to listen to each other stories, and built their communication skills.

*“Emphasis on play” - Program Director*

The social element surfaced as another possible reason why the program had been successful. One mentor suggested that it was this opportunity to spend time *with “other kids that were*

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<sup>4</sup> A short talk on a special interest of participant’s choice

*'weird' like them"* that was also an important factor. Furthermore, one of the teachers pointed out that the process of learning through social interaction was another element for the success of the program.

*"If they see people like them embracing who they are, it enables them to feel more confident in who they are"- Mentor*

Lastly, two of the teachers pointed out the importance of parental involvement. Both believed that giving students the opportunity to report their achievements back to their parents had been particularly enjoyable.

#### **5.4 How the Program has Supported Students to Think About Their Future Prospects**

This question was asked to mentors, program director and teachers. Thus, it does not represent the views of the participants.

It was acknowledged amongst all of the teachers, mentors and the program director that the program had gone some way in supporting students to think about their future. There were various views expressed about how the program had helped them to be more future focused. The delivery of the program was seen across the board to be a key factor in the program achieving this. Specifically, all of the teachers, both of the mentors and the program director all saw the I CAN Talks as instrumental in motivating students to think about their future prospects. The strength based approach that is embedded within the presentations- and the program more generally- was seen as particularly important.

It was also pointed out that the program had given students the opportunity to learn about different life directions. One teacher highlighted how the program had opened students up to *"pathways that they wouldn't have been open to without I CAN"*. She referred to an example of a student that has recently started a course in media and video design, and another who is set on becoming an animation artist.

The intergenerational connections were also seen as an important factor for enabling students to think about their futures. Two of the teachers emphasised the impact that Chris's achievements has had on student's ability to envision their own successes. One teacher also highlighted the positive effect of having Year 9 and 10 students with the younger participants. She noted that they too have become strong role models. Lastly, it was also noted by the program director that building rapport with young adults on the Spectrum had enabled them to have higher expectations of themselves. It was through this connection that he suggested they *"immediately had a picture of what their young adult life could look like"*.

*"There are so many more conversations being had about future plans, including employment and travel. Most of the students in the program were previously taking it day by day- it's brilliant that they are now future focused"- Teacher*

*"Every child in there has a clear goal of what they want to achieve or what they want to be."- Teacher*

*"[The program has allowed them to see] success is for them too"- Teacher*

*"Within the I CAN Talks, goal setting occurs"- Program Director*

## 5.5 Challenges of the Program

This question was asked to all four respondent groups. However, due to time constraints I do not believe students were given adequate time to answer the question. Thus, the feedback given by program participants is limited.

The different respondent groups identified several challenges faced by the program. Perhaps the most common problem that was recognised by all three teachers and the program director was the issue of content and the structure of the program. The program director suggested that *"I CAN needs to be more organised"*. This was echoed by the teachers when they pointed out that ensuring all the scheduled material was covered in each session was an ongoing issue. It

was later highlighted by one teacher that the students would benefit from having more time to participate in the program. Another problem that was identified across the board was the challenge of behavior management. Keeping participants engaged and motivated was highlighted as a difficult task by one participant and two of the teachers.

*“From a teachers point of view the kids can be very boisterous, but that’s part of their confidence”- Teacher*

*“The kids could definitely do the program more often. Once every two weeks is great but once every week would be better”- Teacher*

There were various other challenges that were identified by different respondent groups. The program director pointed out that I CAN would benefit from developing stronger relationships with parents. He suggested that the positive work achieved by the program could easily come undone if the messages put forth were not reinforced within the home environment. One of the teachers also noted that students who participated in the program leave themselves open to negative stigma. He highlighted that the room where the program operated was viewable by the rest of the school, and suggested that the school may wish to run the program in a more private location in the future. Lastly, one teacher pointed out the potential problem that could occur if the mentees became mentors to the primary school. She was concerned that if this was to happen, the current mentees would have no time for being mentored by the young adults who are currently running the program.

*“It’s very easy for good work to come undone”- Program Director*

## **6.0 Summary of the Main Findings**

It is clear from the above findings that the program is having a largely positive effect on participants. Whilst the initial reason for joining the program was due to external pressures (i.e. teachers and parents encouragement), students remained in the program for a range of

reasons. Mainly it was the social interaction, sense of belonging, and having an opportunity to be themselves that ensured continued participation in the program. However, it was also noted that the intergenerational connection and having a platform to learn more about Autism were also key for students staying involved.

The findings show that there were a variety of positive effects that came with attending the program. Again, social belonging, peer to peer connection and intergenerational connection were highlighted as key benefits. It was also noted across the respondent groups that the program had helped students shift their perceptions on Autism. However, the most widely acknowledged positive outcome of the program was its ability to give students a safe space in which they could feel comfortable to be themselves.

When respondent groups were asked what they believed had contributed to the benefits of the program, there were a wide range of responses. Trust was seen to be a key factor in the success of the program. That is, trust between peers, between mentors and participants, and between the program director and the school staff. Most also saw the strength based approach and underlying positivity of the program delivery as integral to the positive outcomes of the program. The unique delivery of the program was also seen as important by many of the respondent groups.

It was widely acknowledged that the program had a significant positive impact on student's ability to think about their future prospects. The I CAN Talks were seen as an important factor for supporting students to be more future focused. The underlying positivity and the strength based approach that runs through the program delivery were also seen to play a significant role in achieving this.

Whilst feedback from the evaluation was largely positive, there were some challenges that were also highlighted within the findings. It was noted that sticking to program schedules, limited time and behavior management were all issues that were brought up by various respondent groups.

## 7.0 Suggested Actions

There are several suggested actions that have emerged out of the key findings. It was noted by the program director that the program would benefit from building better relationships with parents. This would allow the core messages expressed in the I CAN mentoring sessions to be reinforced within the home environment.

Enhancing the program content was also seen to be important areas for development. A more focused effort on developing the course curriculum is an important next step for the organisation.

The risk of 'negative stigma' for the participants could be reduced by moving the location of the session. Delivering the program in a classroom that has more privacy would go some way in reducing this risk.

It was also highlighted that students may benefit from having more time in the program. Increasing the sessions to 90 minutes per week instead of 90 minutes per fortnight may result in increased benefits for participants. Furthermore, ensuring current mentees still get adequate time for being mentored once they become mentors for the primary school students will be important in order to see sustained benefits for current participants.

Future evaluations should attempt to include participants more extensively within the research process. Ideally all five questions should be asked directly to participants instead of using proxy reports. This would provide a more insightful analysis of the effect the program has had on different areas of participant's lives.

## 8.0 Conclusions

This study suggests that the I CAN Network's pilot mentoring program at Marymede Catholic College has been largely successful in achieving positive outcomes for young people on the Autism Spectrum. Whilst it is not possible to draw definite conclusions about direct program impact at such an early stage, the findings strongly suggest that the program has had an overall positive effect on participant's wellbeing. The study highlights how the program has been instrumental in enabling participants to feel more comfortable to be themselves, develop positive peer-to-peer and intergenerational relationships, and build general self-confidence. It also appears that the program has positively shifted some participant's views on what it means to be autistic and enhanced students ability to think about their future prospects.

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# I CAN NETWORK

## Appendix A)

### Mentoring Program Evaluation: Marymede Catholic College July- November, 2015

#### RISK MANAGEMENT PLAN

BASIC INFORMATION			
Study name	I CAN Network informal mentoring program evaluation	Date(s)	July- November, 2015
Investigator	Nikki Wemyss		
Sub-investigator	James Ong		

All activities assessed according to the following Likelihood & Consequences table

Likelihood of Risk Occurring	Consequences Of Risk Arising				
	<i>Insignificant</i>	<i>Minor</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Extreme</i>
Very Likely (expected)	Medium	Medium	High	Critical	Critical

Likely (probable)	Low	Medium	High	High	Critical
Possible (maybe)	Low	Medium	Medium	High	High
Unlikely (unexpected)	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Rare (exceptional)	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium

## RISKS

Risk assessment					
<b>Activity</b>	Getting informed consent directly from the participants and their parents/guardians				
<b>Specific possible risk</b>	Participants/parents/guardians do not fully understand the informed consent information sheet and/or what the student contributions will be used for				
<b>Likelihood</b>	Possible	<b>Consequences</b>	Moderate	<b>Risk evaluation</b>	Medium
<b>Risk management strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One page summary will be sent home with the participants. Summary will be in plain English.</li> <li>- Nikki available to be contacted in case participants/parents/guardians have any questions on the study (and if this is unresolved escalate that to James)</li> </ul>				
<b>Responsibility</b>	I CAN Evaluation team	<b>Post-risk evaluation</b>	Low		

Risk assessment					
<b>Activity</b>	Completing contribution on time/ having follow up conversation with main researcher				
<b>Specific possible risk</b>	Participant may experience stress episode, "melt-down", or mental health crisis Participant may experience high level of anxiety at not getting it in on time				
<b>Likelihood</b>	Unlikely	<b>Consequences</b>	Moderate	<b>Risk evaluation</b>	Medium
<b>Risk management strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I CAN Mentors will be available to answer any questions about the project and student contributions</li> <li>- Participants will be given written and verbal information on what type of questions will be asked during the conversation; and the rights of the participants at least 1 week prior to the day of completion. This will be verbalised to participants again on the day</li> <li>- I CAN Mentors will have access to individual management plans for</li> </ul>				

	"melt-downs" or anxiety episodes - Participants cannot have a conversation with the evaluator until they have gone through the consent process with their parents/guardians and they have signed the consent form		
<b>Responsibility</b>	I CAN Evaluation Team	<b>Post-risk evaluation</b>	Low

Risk assessment					
<b>Activity</b>	Publishing report for I CAN Expo				
<b>Specific possible risk</b>	Stakeholders (i.e. participants; parents; schools; Autistic community) do not want the findings of the evaluation being made public				
<b>Likelihood</b>	Unlikely	<b>Consequences</b>	Moderate	<b>Risk evaluation</b>	Medium
<b>Risk management strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stakeholders will all be emailed a copy of the report once it is completed. There will then be one week for stakeholders to raise any concerns regarding the report to I CAN Evaluation Team</li> <li>- I CAN Evaluation Team will work with concerned parties to relieve any concerns</li> <li>- Report will only be made public if there are no longer any concerns</li> <li>- All stakeholders will be provided with evaluator's contact details from the beginning of the study</li> <li>- All private information (i.e. participant names) will be de-identified for the publication</li> <li>- All stakeholders will be made aware of the possibility of publication before evaluation begins</li> </ul>				
<b>Responsibility</b>	I CAN Evaluation Team	<b>Post-risk evaluation</b>	Low		

## BENEFITS

Benefits assessment	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	I CAN Network
<b>Potential benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining direct insight into how participants believe the program has affected different aspects of their lives</li> <li>- Delivering higher quality services to young people on the Spectrum in the future</li> <li>- Present findings to the wider public and add to the research on how best to support young people on the Spectrum</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empowering the participants by validating their opinions</li> <li>- Helping to change the perception that young people on the Spectrum are incapable of providing information on their own experiences</li> <li>- Develop evaluation skills and resources for the future</li> </ul>
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Benefits assessment	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	Participants
<b>Potential benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunity to reflect on their personal experience of participating in the program</li> <li>- Increased confidence that their experience is being heard and considered valuable</li> <li>- Satisfaction that the information they provide may help other young people with Autism</li> <li>- Receiving better quality I CAN Network services in the future</li> </ul>

Benefits assessment	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	Parents
<b>Potential benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining direct insight into how students believe the program has affected different aspects of their lives</li> <li>- Children receiving better quality I CAN Network services in the future</li> <li>- Children receiving high quality support for low cost</li> <li>- Satisfaction that their children's experience is being heard are considered valuable</li> <li>- Satisfaction that the information their children provide may help other young people with similar issues</li> </ul>

Benefits assessment	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	Schools
<b>Potential benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gain direct insight into how children believe the program has affected different aspects of their lives</li> <li>- Increase the quality of support for students on the Autism Spectrum</li> <li>- Enable I CAN Network to develop skills in the program evaluation process</li> <li>- Highlight evidence that the program is working in their schools, enabling additional funding from the schools to the I CAN Network</li> </ul>

Benefits assessment	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	Wider Autism community
<b>Potential benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gain direct insight into an alternative approach for supporting young people on the Spectrum</li> <li>- Receive information on how to build confidence in young people on the Spectrum</li> <li>- Increased confidence knowing that the direct experience of people on the Spectrum is valuable</li> <li>- Receive higher quality I CAN Network services in the future</li> <li>- Better understanding of what I CAN Network aspires to achieve in the future</li> </ul>

Benefits assessment	
<b>Stakeholder</b>	Wider non-Autistic community
<b>Potential benefits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gain direct insight into an alternative approach to supporting young people on the Spectrum</li> <li>- Better understanding of the capability of young people on the Spectrum to voice their opinions</li> <li>- Better understanding of what I CAN Network aspires to achieve</li> <li>- Greater desire to 're-think' how Autism is perceived</li> </ul>

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**Appendix B)**

Appendix C)

Jackson  
Mansell



Positive

Lukas, S

Negative

- communication
- ideas
- fun activities
- positivity
- creativity
- friendship
- honesty
- Energy
- Trust
- experience

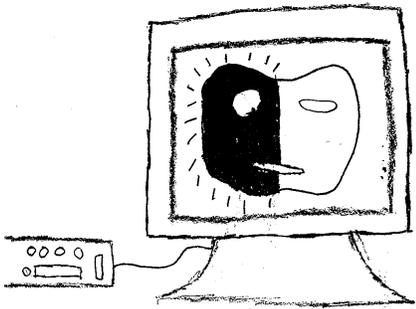
- arguments
- unintended



POSITIVE +	NEGATIVE -
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Dandy people</li><li>- Good environment</li><li>- Fun activities</li><li>- Miss out on maths.</li><li>- Kinda-sorta learn things...</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- </li><li>- Yah, this place is dandy.</li></ul>

What  
the <sup>has</sup>  
ICAN  
Network  
meant to  
me?

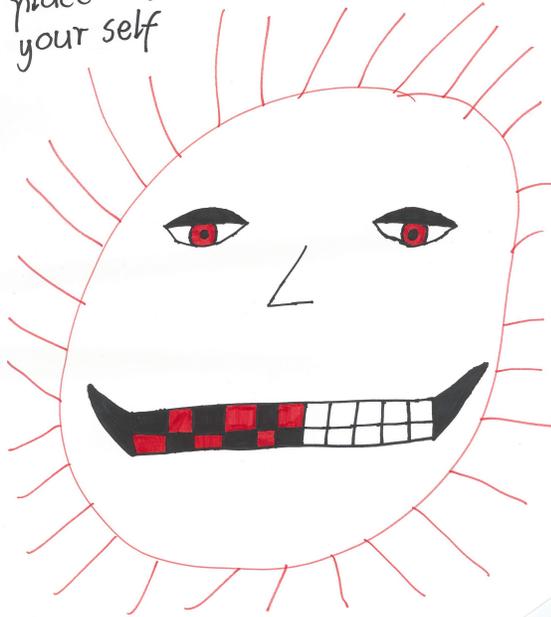
SCP-079



I can is cool like SCP-079

# WHAT I CAN MEANS TO ME

I can means to me is a place where you can express your self



Time to let  
go of my doubts

