

My Pre-Doctoral Fellowship Journey: Exploring the impact of HAVEN – A change in direction to support social experiences of neurodivergent secondary school students.

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Background and Aims



'Neurodiversity' is an umbrella term for differences including Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, etc.

Neurodivergence is commonly associated with differences in social communication and difficulties maintaining relationships (Cordier et al, 2023).

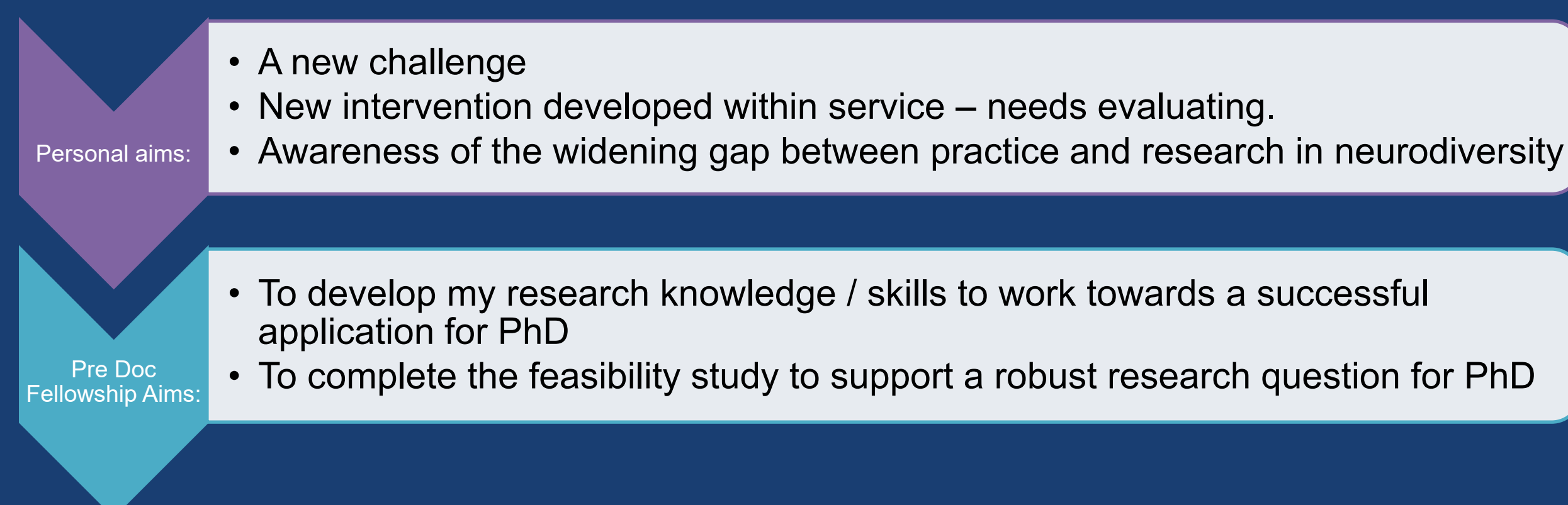
Neurodiversity movement brings a shift in thinking, towards a more affirming in support for neurodivergent individuals, however the evidence base for these approaches are limited (Parsons et al., 2017).

HAVEN - Hearing, Accepting, Valuing Every Neurotype:

A new neuro-affirming intervention, developed by our team of Speech and Language Therapists, aiming to create positive social spaces where students can naturally build friendships.

Research Question (Feasibility and Acceptability Study)

- What are the experiences and impact of HAVEN from the perspectives of students and group facilitators.



Research Results

Semi-structured interviews, reflexive thematic analysis with neurodivergent researchers.

Student interviewees
15 students: 6 female, 8 male, 1 'other'
3 different schools
Years 7-11 (aged 12-16yrs)



- "I've built social connections and made friends"
- I feel more accepted and socially confident
- I enjoy and value the sessions
- HAVEN helps me to regulate at school
- The environment is neurodivergent friendly
- Conflicting academic pressures

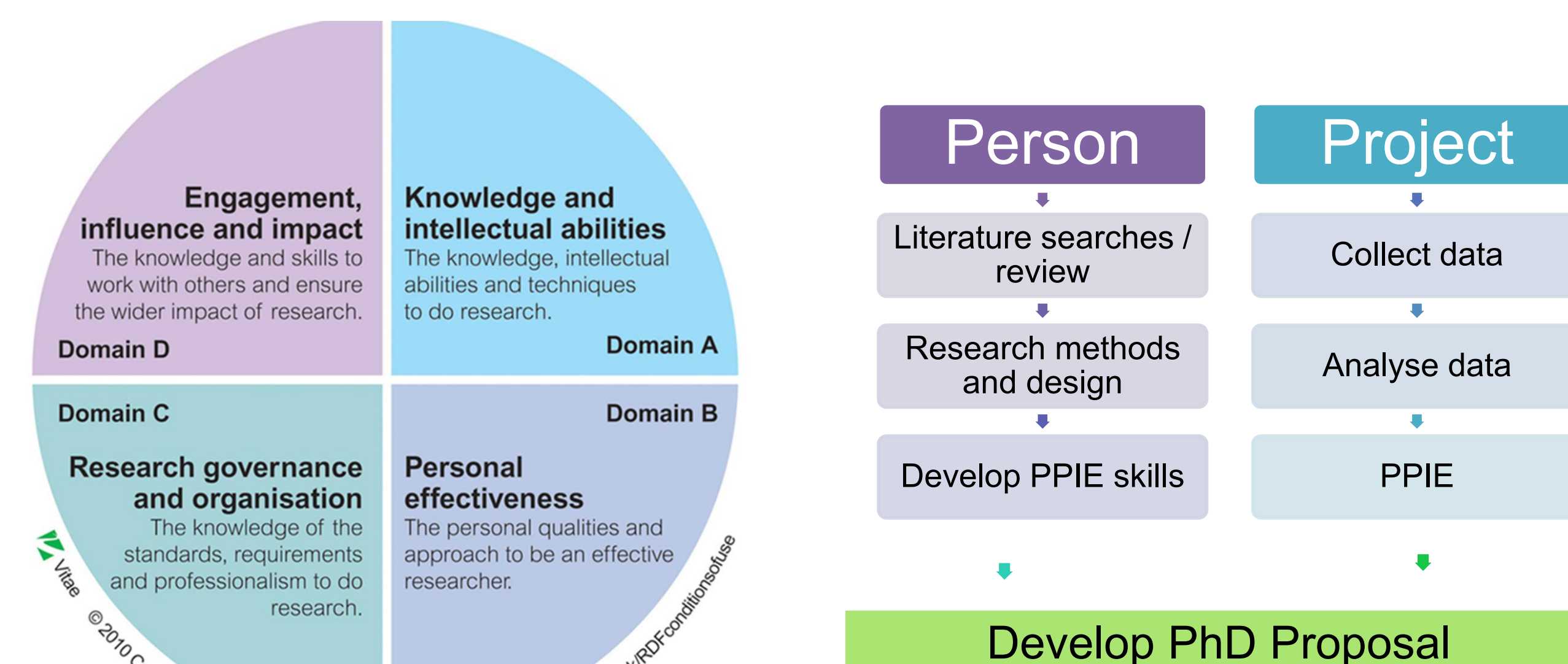
Facilitators interviewees
Working in a mainstream secondary setting
11 facilitators
6 schools



- Positive views o the training
- Benefits to students: building friendships, increase in confidence and school attendance
- New skills to support students
- Benefits across the school

Learning and Progress

Goals:



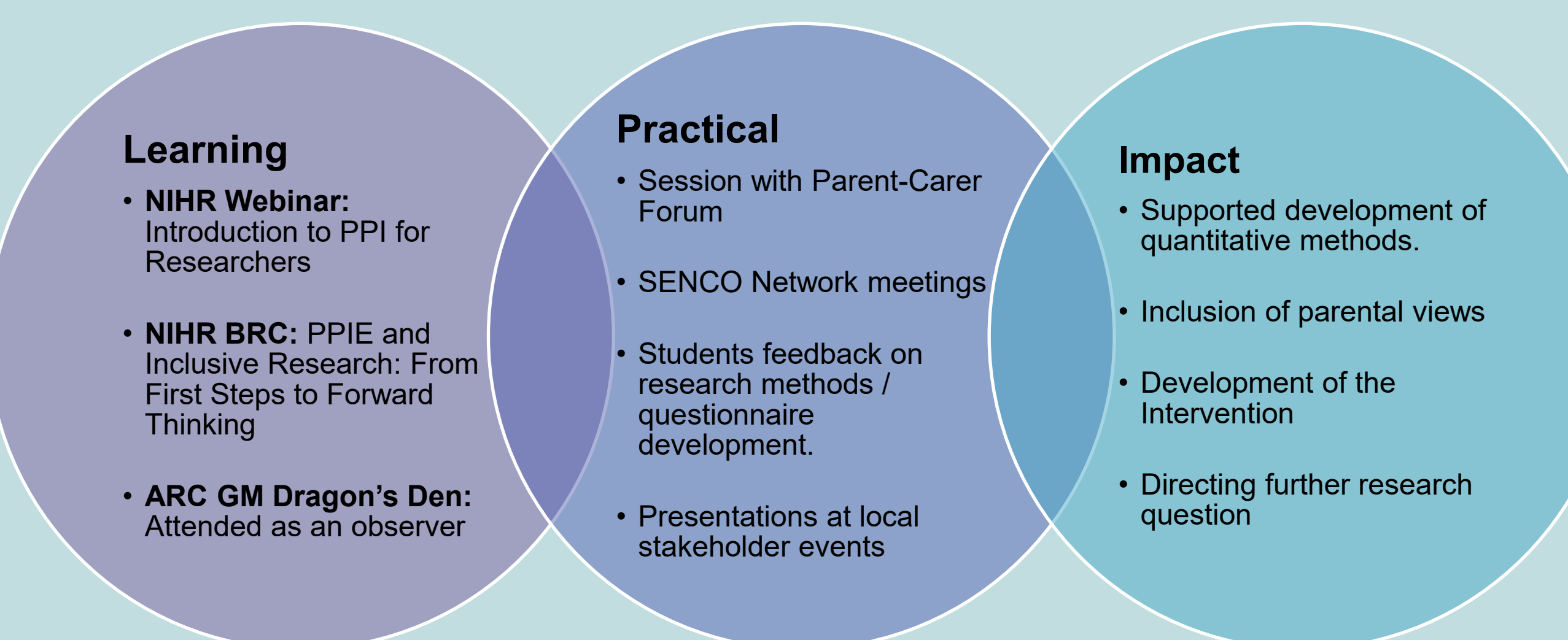
Literature searches and review:

- MRes Clinical Research Modules (Audited):** Critical Appraisal and Evidence Synthesis
- Library Workshop:** Information Evaluation and Synthesis for literature Reviews workshop (in person workshop)
- CAHPR Workshop:** Writing for Publication

Research Methods and Design:

- MRes Clinical Research Modules (Audited):** Research Methods, Qualitative Research Design and Analysis
- Social Research Association (SRA):** Building and Using a Theory Of Change
- Practical Data collection:** Semi-structured interviews
- Practical support from supervisors:** Reflexive Thematic Analysis
- NIHR RSS Research Methods Academy:** Stepped-Wedge Designs
- NIHR RSS Fellowship Application Day**

Public and Patient Involvement



Outputs

Publications:

- Co-author of an editorial 'Autism' Journal
- Students' experiences – 'Autism' [submitted]
- Facilitator's perspectives – [in preparation]

International Conference Presentations:

- London International Conference on Inclusive Education 2025
- Autism Europe Congress, Dublin 2025.

Local Presentations/Networking:

- MFT AHP Day Symposium 2024
- GM Neurodiversity in School Celebration Event
- BSc Speech and Language Therapy, 1st Year Clinical Research module
- Café Autistique, October 2023

Impact



Next Steps / Reflections

- Team Application for Nuffield Foundation Grant:
 - Stepped-Wedge trial for HAVEN implementation and effectiveness

- A gift of time / learning / experience of clinical academia
- Challenges of juggling clinical and academic demands
- Steep learning curve – meaningful impact

References

Cordier, R., Parsons, L., Wilkes-Gillan, S., Cook, M., McCloskey-Martinez, M., Graham, P., (2023) Friendship interventions for children with neurodevelopmental needs: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE* 18(12): e0295917. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0295917>

Parsons, L., Cordier, R., Munro, N., Joosten, A., & Speyer, R. (2017). A systematic review of pragmatic language interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder. *PLoS one*, 12(4), e0172242. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172242>

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